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Ken Reynolds

Department of National Defence, militaryhistorian@gmail.com

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Internet Forums and Canadian Military History

Ken Reynolds

This note is the next instalment in a series of short pieces on Internet resources and tools available to researchers, writers and readers of Canadian military history. The author, Ken Reynolds, an historian with the Department of National Defence, also writes "The Cannon's Mouth" blog <www.cannonsmouth.ca>.

In this column I would like to take a look at a specific form of internet resource and lay out its potential usefulness for students of Canadian military history. The resource I've chosen is the internet forum. Basically, a forum is a website dedicated to a specific subject where members can post messages for others to read and comment upon. Internet forums are often referred to as discussion boards, web boards, message boards or bulletin boards.

There are many internet forums dedicated to military history subjects. Some are specifically dedicated to aspects of Canadian military history, others to related subjects. Membership in these forums is almost universally free after providing basic contact information. The composition of the members includes historians and researchers of all stripes and represents an extremely wide range of expertise. The subject matter covered vary just as widely from the largest concepts to detailed discussions of the smallest subjects.

So what's the point? What can the reader gain from following such forums? First of all, they're an incredible source for information. Need to know the rate of fire, calibre of ammunition, and range of an artillery piece? Perhaps one of the forums has discussed this subject and can provide the necessary information. Now, a message on a history forum is typically not a source to be cited, but the individual posting the message possibly

mentioned their source of information. If not, a reply to their post could be submitted asking for the source. Sometimes the visitor just follows a forum, perusing the subjects discussed, and watching for an interesting thread that discusses a new subject, offers recommendations on a new source, or debates an issue in some unique way.

Here are a few examples of current military history forums:

The "www.canadiansoldiers.com Discussion Forum" <www.network54.com/Forum/28173> deals with "issues pertaining to 20th Century military history from a British and Canadian perspective," especially the Second World War. Like many military history forums, this board is the home to much discussion of kit and equipment, but also deals with historic events, current heritage activities, and requests for information and imagery. The format of the forum is straightforward. The newest topic and responses (the "thread") is listed at the top of the page. When a new subject is posted, the older ones move down the page, but can still be added to or read. Within each thread the newest message is posted first, followed by all of the responses. This format is typical of most internet forums.

The Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group <www.cefresearch.com/phpBB2/> is

described as “a group of enthusiasts with an interest in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and their role in the First World War.” The interests here are broad: Family History/Genealogy, Military History, Weapons/Equipment, Tactics, Militaria Collecting etc.” The CEFSG currently has about 1,600 members worldwide and the forum contains approximately 35,000 messages found in numerous categories including individuals, units, battles, Canadians in the navy and air force, equipment, medals, insignia, “recommended websites” and “first person transcriptions.” An offshoot of the forum is the “CEF Unit Matrix” <www.cefresearch.com/matrix>, a compendium of information on Canadian Expeditionary Force units and formations.

Even greater in size and scope is the British-based “Great War Forum” <www.1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums>. Although the posts are predominantly oriented to the experience of the British army, the similarities of the Canadian experience make this an ideal source for the study of Canadian military history.

The “Maple Leaf Up Forum” <www.mapleleafup.org/forums> is an accompaniment to the “Maple Leaf Up” website, “a private Canadian non-profit organization dedicated to perpetuating the memory of the all-volunteer Canadian Army Overseas in World War II.” The forum focuses on military vehicles used by the Canadian army during the war. Given the subject matter it’s not surprising that many of the threads incorporate images or links to photo albums providing even further details about the equipment being discussed.

The “Royal Air Force Collectors/Reenactors Forum” <www.network54.com/Forum/180748/>

is intended as “a common meeting environment to discuss topics relevant to the WW2-era British/Commonwealth Air Forces, with particular emphasis on collecting issues and the challenges facing Living History/Reenactment units.” Like many of the military history forums out there, the focus here is on the “physical” side of military history, such as equipment, weapons, and medals.

The “British Medal Forum” <www.britishmedalforum.com> is subtitled simply “British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, Indian, South African and all Commonwealth Medals,” while its philosophical sibling “The British Military Badge Forum” <www.britishbadgeforum.com> covers “all British Empire or ‘Colonial’ military insignia.” Although these forums are primarily directed at collectors, there is a wealth of knowledge available to the military historian looking for information on these particular subjects.

The “Army.ca Forums” <www.army.ca/forums> is an extremely active website which incorporates a wide range of subjects of interest to Canada’s land forces. This is not a purely historical site, the focus being on current developments within the army. However, there is a specific “military history” subject heading as well as historical material throughout several of the “current” subject headings.

This list barely scratches the surface of the large number of internet forums available to the student of military history. These resources can be very interesting, quite addictive, and without a doubt will expand your knowledge of Canadian military history.

Discussion Forums mentioned in this column:

www.canadiansoldiers.com Discussion Forum – www.network54.com/Forum/28173

The Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group – www.cefresearch.com/phpBB2/

CEF Unit Matrix – www.cefresearch.com/matrix

Great War Forum – www.1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums

Maple Leaf Up Forum – www.mapleleafup.org/forums

Royal Air Force Collectors/Reenactors Forum – www.network54.com/Forum/180748/

British Medal Forum – www.britishmedalforum.com

The British Military Badge Forum – www.britishbadgeforum.com

Army.ca Forums – www.army.ca/forums