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Canada's Soldiers of the South African and First World Wars at Library and Archives Canada

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>.

A few issues back I wrote about the "War Diaries of the First World War" database on the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) website. This issue's electronic resource returns to that site in order to discuss two military personnel databases hosted there. These databases reflect a wealth of personal information on soldiers serving with Canadian units during the South African and First World Wars.

The start line is the Archival Database page (formerly ArchiviaNet) <www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/index-e.html>, the list of databases available on the revamped LAC website. On that page, scroll down to the "Military and Peacekeeping" section. Our interests here are twofold, "Soldiers of the South African War, 1899-1902" <www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/south-african-war/index-e.html> and "Soldiers of the First World War, 1914-1918" <www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/cef/index-e.html>.

Military personnel files have varied dramatically over time, both in terms of scope and amount of documentation included. Typical

pre-Second World War personnel files are often less than 25 pages in length; since then the size of the typical personnel file has ballooned and is often several folders thick. Nonetheless, the sparser personnel files of the South African War and First World War eras are incredibly useful for the Canadian military historian and often constitute the single best resource available for the individual soldier.

"Soldiers of the South African War (1899-1902)" is devoted to the nearly 7,400 men and women (the latter, nursing sisters) who served in that conflict. These online records incorporate more than just the individual service file, also including medal registers and land grant applications. The service files often incorporate an enlistment (or attestation) form, a service history, a medical report, a discharge certificate and a document describing medals awarded. Unfortunately, personnel files exist for only about 80 percent of service personnel. The medal registers cover the awarding of the Queen's South Africa Medal but they, too, are incomplete and are available for about 60 percent of service personnel.

The land grant applications consist only of references to the applications and to see the documents themselves the visitor needs to research other LAC collections.

Clicking on "Search" in the left-hand column takes the visitor to the search page. Here, a search can be conducted using "surname," "given names," "regimental number" and "regiment" – either individually or in combination. Please note that some given names are entered as initials. Thus, searching for "Johnson" and "Robert," for example, might not find a valid response if he is entered as "Johnson" and "R." A quick search of "Smith" with no given name resulted in 202 responses, not exactly an overwhelming number to sift through. The names of units are written out in full in the search function but I would recommend leaving it blank unless the visitor is intending to search, for example, for every member of the "10th Canadian Field Hospital."

The search results page provides columns of results including "name," "regimental number," "regiment," "type of records" and "digital image." An "X" in the latter column



means there is an online image of the document in question. Continuing with the “Smith” example, clicking on “SMITH, Alexander Fleming” on the result indicating his service file leads to a further description of the record. This also incorporates the LAC record group reference number for the file – useful for a request to view the original document or for a photocopy. Also on this page is a link marked “View Image” which, when clicked, leads to a page with (in his case) seven images online encompassing his service file. It’s a similar situation for “SMITH, F.A.” where clicking on the medals register line provides an opportunity to view the document denoting his medal awards. Each online image is downloadable for future use.

“Soldiers of the First World War (1914-1918)” is a very similar, although obviously much, much larger, project. Currently the home to more than 800,000 images of attestation papers for individual members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), this database is an index to the personnel files of the more than 600,000 men and women who served in the CEF. Note that not all of the 600,000 have attestation papers available online. The attestation papers and enlistment forms typically include information on name and address, next of kin, date and place of birth, occupation, previous military service and physical and medical descriptions. Each

attestation paper can be “right-clicked” and downloaded for permanent reference. The personnel files themselves, none of which are accessible online – usually included two or three dozen forms covering a wide range of subjects from enlistment to training to medical and dental histories (my grandmother was particularly enthralled by the dental records of two of her brothers), hospitalization, discipline, pay, discharge and death information.

Clicking on “Search” in the left-hand column takes the visitor to the search page. Here, just like with the South African War records, a search can be conducted using “surname,” “given names” and “regimental number” (but no searching by “regiment”) – either one at a time or in combination. Truncating the search parameters will result in a greater number of potential results. The visitor might also want to beware any reliance on using only the regimental number search box given the possible difficulty of getting the exact number under which the soldier is entered. For example, early members of the 38th Battalion, CEF, were given serial numbers in the 410000-411999 range, but many are listed as A10000-A11999 (an earlier version of the number) or even as 10000-11999.

The search results page, also similar to that of the South African War database, provides a columned series of results including “name,”

“date of birth,” “rank,” “regimental number” and “reference” (the archival record group location of the file). A simple search for “Jones” results in 2,623 responses. Clicking on “Jones, Albert, 19/06/1891, Gnr, 1260413” leads to his individual page. Here the search result data is repeated and the icon links for his attestation papers are available. Also of great utility is a link on this page titled: “How to consult a file on-site or order a copy of the complete file,” which as the title suggests, allows the visitor to order the file for viewing in Ottawa or a photocopy for personal use.

“Soldiers of the South African War” and “Soldiers of the First World War” combine to provide an incredibly useful electronic resource for researchers of individuals who served in these two conflicts, permitting the visitor to get a head start on the soldier they are researching, the location of his or her records, or even the entire file itself through photocopying.

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