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“War Diaries of the First World War” 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>.

Like the previous discussion of the “Debt of Honour Register,” this issue’s electronic resource is focused on Canada’s efforts during the First World War. Online material on Canada’s wartime effort is widespread, reflecting the extent of Canada’s involvement in the war, the great interest in the subject, and the fact that restrictions, such as access to information and privacy legislation no longer cover that period.

One of the websites I use often is ArchiviaNet <www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/archivianet>, the “on-line research tool” hosted by Library and Archives Canada (LAC). Within the multitude of sub-sites in ArchiviaNet are the pages devoted to the “War Diaries of the First World War” <www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/archivianet/020152_e.html>.

Canadian military units have maintained official operational diaries of some form or another from the South African War to the present day. Military historians have been using them for decades to help recreate the events of our military past. Like all contemporary accounts, some war diary “authors” are better than others, some diaries are more comprehensive (compare a typical Second World War diary to a typical First World War diary), and the overall usefulness and “trustworthiness” of diaries continues to be debated amongst historians. Often, however, there is little other documentation available covering some periods of time or events.

“War Diaries of the First World War” is primarily devoted to the diaries produced by the units and formations of the Canadian

Expeditionary Force (CEF). The website is quite straightforward. Clicking on “Search the database” takes the visitor to the page where a search can be conducted by “unit name,” “date,” or “year only.” Of particular note here is the active link under the “Unit Name” text. This leads to a “Keyword list for Diaries,” a list of the various types of CEF units and formations as well as several British formations under which Canadian units and formations fought. This list obviously provides keywords which makes searching for a particular type of unit much easier. It also presents many examples of various units and formations which the visitor might not have ever thought to take a look at, like the Estates and Legal Branch, the Canadian School of Musketry, or the Cavalry Brigade Motor Ambulance Workshop.

To ease your search, a non-LAC project, “Grandson Michael’s Guide to the LAC War Diaries” <www.canadiangreatwarproject.com/warDiaryLac/wdLacMain.asp>, hosted on the excellent “Canadian Great War Project” website, provides an alternative means of searching the LAC war diary collection based on the LAC keyword list. This project reorganizes the LAC list into a more straightforward index of corps, divisional, and unit listings, each entry noting what date ranges are available online (and which are not) and providing links to the relevant LAC webpage.

Searches can be made for all references to a particular unit or formation’s war diary, or be limited only to those that have been digitized. In each case, the responses give the formal archival

The screenshot shows the Library and Archives Canada website. At the top, there are logos for Library and Archives Canada and Bibliotheque of Archives Canada, along with the word "Canada". Below this is a navigation bar with links for Français, Home, Contact Us, Help, Search, and canada.gc.ca. The main content area is titled "ArchiviaNet: On-line Research Tool" and "War Diaries of the First World War". There is a search box with the text "Search the database" and a link for "Online Help". A large image of a trench is shown, with the caption "Dug Out on the Somme by Mary Riter Hamilton National Archives of Canada C-104800". On the left side, there are several menu items under "Who We Are", "What We Have", and "What We Do For".

future confusion. Personally, I use an extension for the Firefox web browser called "Scrapbook" to solve this limitation. It allows the visitor to go the results page and capture all the data on that page as well as the linked material (in this case, the scanned war diary pages) and maintains the material in web format on your hard drive for future reference, even when the computer is not connected to the Internet.

To help make sense of the war diary pages (some of which are not easy to read, let alone decipher), "The Matrix Project" of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group <www.cefresearch.com/matrix> is an extremely helpful resource.

reference, including microfilm reel numbers (if the visitor would rather view the diary at LAC or order it through inter-library loan), as well as the name of the unit or formation and the date range for the war diary. Note, that the responses are not necessarily in chronological order and the response list may jump back and forth chronologically, but the entire collection of diaries for the unit or formation should be covered.

Several war diary-related pages form part of the project, including listings of war diaries which have been transcribed by dedicated volunteers.

For those responses containing a link to "Images associated with this entry," clicking on this link will typically lead to a page with a long list of links dated by month and paginated. Clicking on each of these will open a JPG image of that page of the diary. These images are web quality graphics and look good on your computer monitor, but increasing their size in photo software will render them blurry (pixelated) quite quickly.

"War Diaries of the First World War" is a tremendously helpful electronic resource, allowing the visitor to research a wide range of diaries from the comfort of their home or office at their convenience and without having to visit distant archives and spend a lot of time hunched over a microfilm machine.

Each of the electronic images can be saved on your computer for future use. But, be warned, the images are titled "e001018209.jpg," "e001024836.jpg," etc., and bear no reference to the diary from which they originated. Creating folders on your computer for a particular unit and month will help to avoid

The screenshot shows a webpage titled "Canadian Great War Project" and "Libraries and Archives Canada - War Diaries". The main heading is "Grandson Michael's Guide to the LAC War Diaries" by Grandson Michael. The text explains that the Library and Archives Canada has made a wealth of information available to Great War researchers in the form of on-line War Diaries. It notes that the organization of the War Diary references is a mess and that the unit references have been uploaded in a chaotic manner. The author has used the LAC Keyword list to arrange the units and hyperlinks into sections. A list of sections is provided, including: Introduction; General information, links to terms and other stuff; Canadian Corps Diary Entries; 1st Canadian Division Diary Entries; 2nd Canadian Division Diary Entries; 3rd Canadian Division Diary Entries; 4th Canadian Division Diary Entries; 5th Canadian Division Diary Entries; Canadian Infantry Brigades Diary Entries; Canadian Infantry Battalions Diary Entries; Medical Units Diary Entries; Dental Units Diary Entries; and Veterinary Units Diary Entries.