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# Canada and the First World War: A Canadian War Museum Internet Exhibition

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# Canada and the First World War

## A Canadian War Museum

### Internet Exhibition

**Tim Cook and Kathryn Lyons**

Hundreds of images. Thousands of stories.  
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**C***anada and the First World War* is the largest internet resource ever developed by the Canadian War Museum. The goal of this site is to provide visitors across the country and around the world with the most comprehensive and authoritative site for the history of Canada and Canadians in the First World War.

Like our permanent galleries, the site's goal is to tell the story of Canada's role in the First World War at the international, national, and personal levels. While the CWM's collection dictated, to some degree, the extent of the storyline, this will be an important site for researchers, students, and the interested public.

The content of the site includes a richly-layered tapestry of Canada's wartime experience, with 122 separate sections documenting wide-ranging subjects, including, but not limited to, patriotic reactions to the war, weapons and tactics, the experience of soldiers, sailors, nurses, and airmen, communications and command, women and children at war, memory and commemoration, military technology, and a host of other inter-related thematic historical subjects. The site also explores difficult and controversial subjects, such as the execution of 25 Canadians, the sometimes repressive treatment of minorities in Canada, the divisive conscription debate, and the effects of battle stress and mental collapse among soldiers in sustained combat.



Based on the latest Canadian and international scholarship, 122 short essays were prepared for the thematic sections, ranging in length from 150 to 700 words. These essays provide the context – and significant content – for the artifacts that form the core of the site, and the visitor's experience. These artifacts include examples of archival material like letters, diaries, and memoirs; postcards, song sheets, and ephemera; books, training pamphlets, and school texts; visual representations like posters, official and unofficial war art, official and unofficial photographs; and a broad selection of items from the national collection, everything from weapons, trench art, uniforms, medals, commemorative items, and childrens' toys. Each of the 725 artifacts has a detailed caption, ranging in length from 20 to 100 words, with the aim of explaining the relevance of the artifact in relation to the larger thematic grouping, and as a starting point for further exploration into the site's content. The site also allows access to over 6,800 newly-digitized official Canadian Expeditionary Force photographs held in the museum's Military History Research Centre.

Visitors can follow cross-linked essays or search through thematic or artifact groupings which give multiple entry points to delve deeply into the stories of Canada and the First World War.



**Above: Canadian Troops Return from Trenches** – These Canadian soldiers are returning from “up the line.” They are mud-splattered and weary, but look relieved to be marching away from the shelling at the front.

**Left: My Dad Is at the Front** – This button produced by the Canadian Patriotic Fund in Toronto was distributed to children whose father was overseas. The button bears the image of a soldier holding a bayoneted rifle, with the caption, “My Dad is at the Front.”

**Below: Toy Soldiers** – The Fry company sold these toy Canadian soldiers under the title “Sons of the Empire.” Many aspects of children’s lives were affected by the war, including their play.





CWM 19390001-727



**Do Not Stand About Here** – This sign warned soldiers that lingering or being exposed in a trench could attract snipers and shellfire. Even though trenches were below the ground and soldiers were usually out of sight, movement could be tracked by their noise, the stirring of flies, or even the jutting of shovels or rifles above the trench parapet.

One of the most important considerations in building the site was accessibility. To ensure that the historical content and artifacts are easy to find and explore, the site's design and navigation were kept clear, conventional, and consistent. The web site also offers a level of access that is not easily obtained in the museum or elsewhere. A zoom tool allows web visitors to magnify every artifact and explore details that would otherwise be lost. From the engravings on badges to the texture of uniforms and

the personal messages scratched onto souvenirs, each artifact can be explored to an unparalleled level of detail.

The web site is also intended for students and teachers of Canada's involvement in the First World War. There is a dedicated section for educators which includes lesson plans and primary source material packages designed to assist teachers in bringing an additional layer of richness to their units of study. The recommended books and links lists will be of service to students and teachers alike.

The design of the site involved most of the Canadian War Museum staff, including members from the collections, interpretation, education, project management, historical staff, and management.

**Vickers Machine Gun** – The Vickers Mk.1 water-cooled machine gun was the primary heavy machine gun of the Canadian Corps after July 1916. The belt-fed Vickers fired the same .303 calibre cartridge as the infantry's Lee-Enfield rifle. The Vickers' weight made it more suitable for a defensive role, but it could also be used in the attack. By 1916, the Canadians had begun to experiment with indirect machine gun barrages in which, similar to the artillery, machine guns fired on unseen targets, often using only map references to determine their targets. The Vickers could be carried in the attack, but because its team of five needed to drag it forward along with sufficient ammunition and water, it was generally part of the second or third assault wave.



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**Right: Tanker's Helmet** – The crews of early armoured fighting vehicles faced two principal threats: machine gun and artillery fire, both of which could penetrate the hull; and the vehicles' violent lurching and jarring as they traversed trenches or shell-cratered terrain. Leather helmets offered some protection against impact injuries. Armoured shields or chain-mail masks guarded faces from small-arms fire coming through the tank's vision ports, and from "splash," metal fragments sent flying through the crew compartment by the force of shells or other projectiles hitting the steel hull.



CWM 19880212-092 & 093

**Left: Souscrivez a l'Emprunt de la Victoire (Subscribe to the Victory Loan)** – Canada created the War Poster Service in 1916 to produce posters in both official languages. In this poster, a Canadian soldier pointedly asks members of the public to buy war bonds in support of the war effort. The design was based loosely on the popular and mass-produced 1914 poster of Lord Kitchener, the British Secretary of State for War, exhorting Britons to join the British Army.



CWM 19920166-186

**Below: Battle of Courcellette by Louis Alexander Weirter** – Like the observer in the tree in the right foreground, painter Louis Weirter witnessed this Somme battle as a soldier. His painting depicts the chaos and complexity of fighting on the Western Front, and the use of combined arms tactics. The capture of the ruined town of Courcellette, France on 15 September 1916 was a significant Canadian victory. It was also the first time tanks (left foreground) were used in battle.

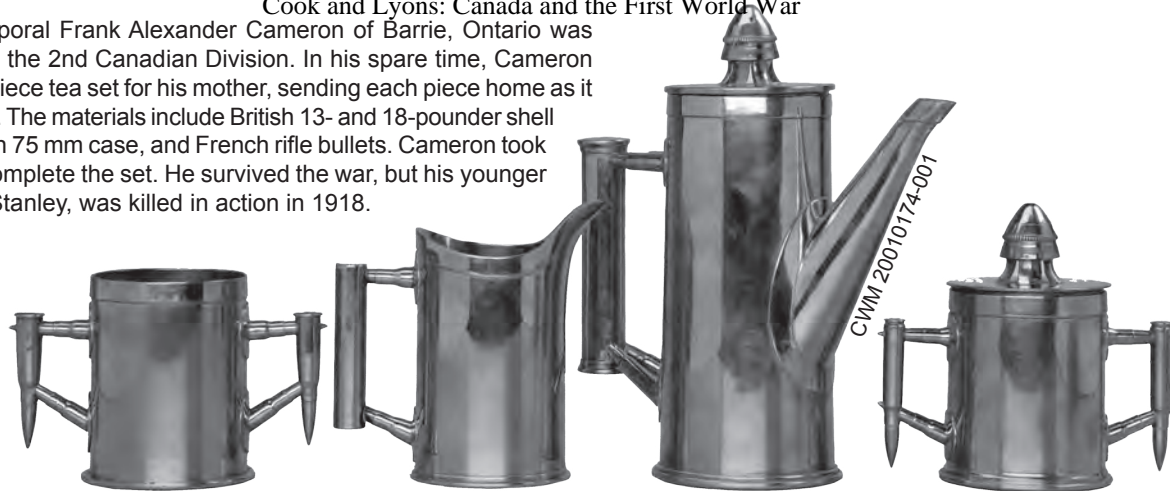


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Cook and Lyons: Canada and the First World War

**Tea Set** – Corporal Frank Alexander Cameron of Barrie, Ontario was a signaller with the 2nd Canadian Division. In his spare time, Cameron crafted a four-piece tea set for his mother, sending each piece home as it was completed. The materials include British 13- and 18-pounder shell cases, a French 75 mm case, and French rifle bullets. Cameron took four years to complete the set. He survived the war, but his younger brother, Allan Stanley, was killed in action in 1918.



*Canada and the First World War* was funded by Canada Culture Online (CCO), a federal program sponsored by the Department of Canadian Heritage. A second online exhibition has begun production, also with the support of CCO funding, and will explore the history of the Royal Canadian Navy. Like the First World War project, the RCN exhibition will involve significant digitization of artifacts, images, and material culture from the CWM's holdings. This project is expected to launch in June 2009.

Tim Cook is the Canadian War Museum's First World War historian. He is the author of four books, including the two volume history of Canadians fighting in the Great War, *At the Sharp End* (2007) and *Shock Troops* (2008).

Kathryn Lyons is a Senior Interpretive Planner at the Canadian War Museum and works on the development of Web projects as well as exhibitions.

Easily navigable and rich in content, we invite you to explore Canada's role in the First World War.



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