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# The Commonwealth War Graves Commission's "Debt of Honour Register"

**Ken Reynolds**

*This note is intended as the first of 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](http://www.cannonsmouth.ca)>.*

During my work on various historical inquiries, investigations into the identification of military remains, and work on unit histories, I have spent a lot of time looking for information on deceased military personnel. One of the greatest online assets I've been able to find is the "Debt of Honour Register" on the website of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission <[www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org)>.

The "welcome message" on the register notes that it is "the Commission's database listing the 1.7 million men and women of the Commonwealth forces who died during the two world wars and the 23,000 cemeteries, memorials and other locations worldwide where they are commemorated. The register can also be searched for details of the 67,000 Commonwealth civilians who died as a result of enemy action in the Second World War."

From the register's menu you can first select to search for a "casualty" or a "cemetery."

Beginning with a casualty search, your options include entering a surname, or a surname and initials. If searching using just a surname, you can choose to truncate the name. For example, entering "a" will give you all names beginning with the letter "a," while entering "Ander" would give you all "Anders," "Andersen," "Anderson," etc. Please note that a search resulting in more than 999 name results will give you an error message (too many responses). If this happens to you, in the above example, you would need to back up and search for all "aa" surnames, then "ab,"

"ac," etc. until you slip beneath the maximum threshold.

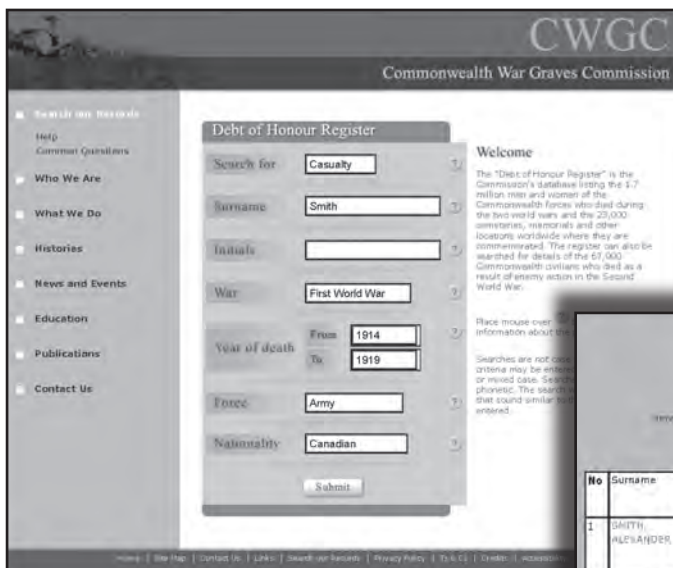
In addition to a surname or a surname and initials, there are several pull-down menu items to help dramatically narrow the search parameters. These menus are "war," "year of death" (1914 to 1947), "force" (navy, army, air force, merchant navy, civilian) and nationality (of the armed force in which the individual served).

Your casualty search results will provide a list of results, 15 items per page, sorted by surname by default. Each entry provides a surname; rank; service number; the date of death; age; regiment/service; nationality; grave/memorial reference; and cemetery/memorial name. One of the greatest things about this format is that any one of those categories can be made the primary mechanism for sorting the list. For example, if you wanted to see all of the lieutenant-colonels killed in the search list, click on "rank" to reorder the list based on rank, then go to the page where "lieutenant-colonel" begins alphabetically (after lieutenant and before major). Note, there can only be one primary sorting category in place at a time.

Please also note that sometimes the "unit" can take a bit of getting used to. For example, if you were compiling a list of the fatalities suffered by the 31st Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, you will not find any in the initial search results. These men will appear under "Canadian Infantry (Alberta Regiment)," the territorial designation adopted during the First World War

as part of the reinforcement process. “31st Battalion” will not appear – nor will 10th or 50th Battalion, CEF, fatalities (all part of the Alberta Regiment) – until the individual casualty pages.

Each individual name in the search results can be clicked on to provide “Casualty Details.” Some entries are fairly basic, others offer more details, including a specific battalion, information on parents or spouse, and a link to the



casualties in the cemetery or listed on the memorial. These pages also link to cemetery reports (links to individual casualty entries for those buried there – but, for some reason, not all of them); cemetery plans (schematics of the cemetery with grave marker references), and photographs of the cemetery.

No	Surname	Rank	Service Number	Date Of Death	Age	Regiment/Service	Nationality	Grave/Memorial Ref.	Cemetery/Memorial Name
1	SMITH, ALEXANDER	Corporal	645817	02/09/1918	28	Canadian Infantry (British Columbia Regiment)	Canadian	II, D, 6.	WANCOURT BRITISH CEMETERY
2	SMITH, #	Private	472633	27/05/1917	Unknown	Canadian Infantry (British Columbia Regiment)	Canadian	X, B, 3.	VILLERS STATION CEMETERY, VILLERS-AU-BOIS
3	SMITH, #	Private	148365	10/04/1917	Unknown	Canadian Infantry (Manitoba Regiment)	Canadian	VII, J, 5.	VILLERS STATION CEMETERY, VILLERS-AU-BOIS
4	SMITH, #	Private	21882	23/05/1915	Unknown	Canadian Infantry (Alberta Regiment)	Canadian	IV, C, 56.	BETHUNE TOWN CEMETERY
5	SMITH, ARTHUR	Private	886449	28/06/1918					
6	SMITH, ALEXANDER	Sergeant	A/20565	09/04/1918					
7	SMITH, ALEXANDER	Private	703663	21/10/1918					

detailed page on the cemetery where the deceased is buried.

A search through the register for a “cemetery” is much simpler and is done alphabetically by full or partial name. Try to keep it simple, as many of the names we associate with cemeteries are not necessarily the formal names given to them by Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Search results will lead you to “Cemetery Details” which provide the country; locality; visiting information (such as wheelchair access); location information (directions); historical information; and the number of identified

