

# Canadian Military History

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Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 9

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4-26-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Dubé, Timothy (2000) "*Per Ardua Ad Astra: A Concicise Guide to Canadian Personnel Records and RCAF Service Information of the Second World War*," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 9.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol9/iss1/9>

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# ***Per Ardua Ad Astra***

## **A Concise Guide to Canadian Personnel Records and RCAF Service Information of the Second World War**

**Timothy Dubé**

**T**he motto of the Royal Canadian Air Force – *per ardua ad astra* – through adversity to the stars – might also serve as an apt expression when beginning research on individual Canadian airmen or airwomen of the Second World War. Without a guiding-hand, the first-time researcher is likely to experience some considerable “adversity” before locating their “stars.”

This note introduces the key records and published sources for documenting those individuals who served with the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War, as well as directions for locating the records of those Canadians who served in related air elements during the conflict. Many archival records and library sources give some information about these individuals; this note is limited to official records, or to those records compiled from official sources, that are held by the major Canadian and Commonwealth institutions which have the mandate to provide such essential wartime documentation.

\* \* \* \* \*

**T**he Royal Canadian Air Force at the commencement of the Second World War in 1939 was the smallest of Canada’s three armed services. By 1945, it had expanded to the fourth largest air force of the Allied powers. In all, more than 232,500 men and 17,000 women served in the wartime RCAF, both in home defence and overseas, and over 18,000 Canadian airmen and airwomen lost their lives on active service during the Second World War.

The most obvious place to begin documenting the wartime service of these Canadians is to locate their military service file. Military service files for the more than one million uniformed men and women who were on active service with Canada’s armed forces during the Second World War are in the custody of the Personnel Records Unit of the National Archives of Canada. Their files occupy more than 20 kilometres of shelf space. Access to the documentation in these personnel files is governed by the provisions of two Federal statutes; the *Privacy Act* and the *Access to Information Act*. Persons seeking access to their own military personnel files can apply under the *Privacy Act*. If the veteran has been dead for 20 years or more, the file is no longer protected under the *Privacy Act* and anyone has the right to obtain copies of the file under the *Access to Information Act*. In these latter cases, individuals requesting access to the records must produce evidence that the person concerned has been dead for more than 20 years.

Typical personnel files for the Second World War can include such documents as: attestation papers, recording name, date and place of birth, permanent address, details of next-of-kin, previous military service, education, etc.; a record of service, showing postings and promotions; pay records; a medal card, recording those medals and honours awarded; casualty notifications, including certificates of death; a will, with estate files; and correspondence.

Requests for copies of the personnel files should be sent to the Personnel Records Unit,

Researcher Services Division, National Archives of Canada, 395 Wellington Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0N3. Fax: (613) 947-8456. Web site: <<http://www.archives.ca>>. Researchers should be aware that the queue is long and a wait of three to four months is not unusual. Additionally, each request is limited to three names. (Statistics for the last year show that the unit answered almost 30,000 written inquiries. This was accomplished with only 14 staff members!)

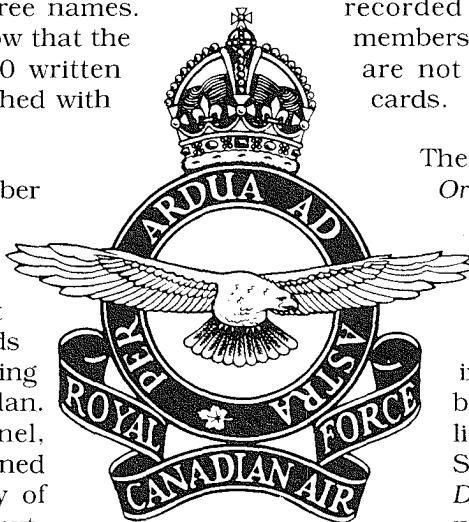
However, a significant number of Canadians enlisted directly with the Royal Air Force before the Second World War or in the early months of that conflict when RCAF recruiting standards were set excessively high pending expansion of the air training plan. Known as CAN/RAF personnel, their service records are retained only by the British Ministry of Defence. Ex-serviceman and next-of-kin may obtain very brief details by writing to RAF Personnel Management, PMA(CS)2A2, RAF Innsworth, Gloucester GL3 1EZ, England.

A number of Canadians also served with the RAF Ferry Command, delivering aircraft around the globe. At the Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Department of National Defence are *Employment Cards* and *Crew Assignment Cards* for the estimated 6,000 aircrew, both military and civilian, who passed through RAF Ferry Command Headquarters at Dorval, Montreal. The *Employment Cards* (Acc. 84/44-2) provide biographical information and dates of service, flying status and rates of pay. The *Crew Assignment Cards* (Acc. 84/44-3) include additional biographical and next-of-kin details, with a photograph of the individual and a list of all flights and aircraft delivered. Located at 2429 Holly Lane, Ottawa (near the convergence of Walkley and Heron Roads), the Directorate of History and Heritage currently provides public access to these and other records on Tuesdays and Wednesdays during regular business hours.

A number of other documents – published and unpublished, original and compiled – serve to complement or supplement the respective service files of Canadian airmen and airwomen of the Second World War.

*Indices to RCAF Personnel Records* (Acc. 76/10) are held as microfilm copies by the Directorate

of History and Heritage. These record: the name, date of birth, religion and marital status at time of enlistment; the date and place of enlistment; service numbers; Canadian postings, with effective dates; and rank and trades with their effective dates. However, overseas service is not recorded and biographical details for members of the RCAF (Women's Division) are not readable on the microfilmed cards.



The published *RCAF Daily Routine Orders* for the Second World War record the granting of commissions, the award of honours, and the transfer of individual officers and other ranks. Information about individual RCAF officers can also be found in the published officers lists. At the commencement of the Second World War, the published *Defence Forces List* recorded the names of all officers of the

Canadian Army, RCN and RCAF, with the dates of their commission and other details. Arrangement was by service and then unit but a nominal index was included. As a result of the rapid expansion of the armed forces this single *List* was quickly superseded by separate monthly lists for each service. The *Royal Canadian Air Force List* is arranged by trade, and includes the name and service number of each officer, with his rank and date of seniority. An appendix includes a list of officers who had retired or died since the previous list. These published *Orders* and *Lists* will be found in major reference libraries across the country.

Early in the war, RCAF authorities obtained lists of the CAN/RAF personnel from RAF authorities and Wing Commander Fred Hitchins, as an RCAF Historical Officer, kept track of many of their careers until about mid-1941. The *CAN/RAF Cards* produced vary greatly in detail. Some give only the sketchiest information, while others are crowded with details gleaned from award citations, *Operations Record Books* and press releases. These cards are currently held by the Directorate of History and Heritage.

For aircrew, the most interesting or informative sources are the *Operations Record Books*. *RCAF Operations Record Books* describe the daily activities of all BCATP schools in Canada, and all RCAF operational squadrons, wings and groups, and their appendices furnish

a record of each operational sortie. One copy of the original RCAF *Operations Record Books* (540 Form) and their appendices (541 Form) are held by the Government Archives and Records Disposition Division (GARDD) of the National Archives of Canada (RG 24, E 7, Volumes 22,495 to 22,850). Microfilm copies of these can be borrowed for personal use by any institution that possesses a microfilm reader and that participates in an inter-library loan arrangement. Requests for loans must be submitted by the borrowing institution, clearly specifying the unit and time period required. Requests should be submitted to the Inter-Institutional Loans Unit, National Archives of Canada, 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0N3. Fax: (613) 995-6274. Web site: <<http://www.archives.ca>>.

Details about the daily activities and operations of those Canadian aircrew who served with Royal Air Force squadrons, rather than in RCAF ones, are not available in Canada. Rather, *Operations Record Books* for RAF squadrons are found in the class Air 27 at the Public Record Office, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU, England. Web site: <<http://www.pro.gov.uk>>. Arranged by squadron and then chronologically, the current *PRO Guide* shows that these total some 3,260 volumes. The services of a professional records agent are generally required.

Information about individual aircraft can be found on the RCAF *Aircraft History Cards* and *Accident Cards*, currently maintained by the National Aviation Museum, Rockcliffe Airport, 11 Aviation Parkway, PO Box 9724, Station T, Ottawa, Ontario, K1G 5A3. For the period of the Second World War, these are limited to aircraft of the Home War Establishment and BCATP; aircraft operated by the RCAF overseas were the property of the RAF. The cards provide details of the assignment and movement of individual aircraft, with a record of any accidents or crashes and the fates of the crew.

*Aircraft Accident Files* – RCAF for wartime aircraft accidents in Canada are held as microfilm copies by the Government Archives and Records Disposition Division of the National Archives of Canada (RG 24, E 14; Microfilm Reels C-5929 to C-5939 and T-12338 to T-12357). These include aircraft with Canadian serial numbers, as well as those with RAF serials used in Canada. Typical files include: a *Flying Accident Signal Report*, with the initial report of the accident, recording the unit and aircraft number, the aircraft occupants,

and the date, place, time, nature and possible cause of the accident; and the *Investigating Officer's Report* or the *Court's Proceedings*, which record additional details of the accident and the findings. The latter reports often include in their appendices, excerpts from the airframe and engine log books, witness statements, maps, plans, photographs and correspondence.

*Combat Cards*, covering members of the RCAF, as well as Canadians enrolled in the RAF, are held by the Directorate of History and Heritage. These cards give service numbers and trade, and list by date, type and location, the victories. For multi-place aircraft, the cards also indicate the navigator / radar operator. However, they deal almost exclusively with claims submitted by units in the United Kingdom and North West Europe. They do not cover aerial claims submitted by gunners in bomber aircraft, nor do they deal with air-to-air combats of fighter crews in No. 100 Group (which was a formation within Bomber Command).

The *Combat Cards* are digests, compiled from the original *Combat Reports*. The original *Combat Reports* occupy some fifteen folders at the Directorate of History and Heritage (Acc. 73/847). Arranged in chronological order, it is first necessary to consult the *Combat Cards* to determine on what dates individual *Combat Report* claims were submitted. The *Combat Reports* include the name of the pilot (and his navigator if a two-seater aircraft was flown), the time, altitude, and estimated location of the action, and the claim being submitted, whether for enemy aircraft "Destroyed," "Probably Destroyed" or "Damaged." A narrative of the action, often varying in length and detail, is also included. In some instances, claims were upgraded or downgraded according to information later received and the *Combat Reports* are so annotated.

Details about the wartime service of RCAF officers and other ranks, both at home and abroad, are also found in the citations or recommendations to honours and awards. An alphabetical file of all the RCAF *Honours and Awards* of the Second World War has been compiled from official records by Hugh Halliday and is available for research within the Manuscript Division (MSS) of the National Archives of Canada (MG 31, G 37). The file consists of 9,200 entries for awards to RCAF personnel, as announced or gazetted from 1940 through 1949, and includes all names, service

numbers and types of honour or award granted, with citations or recommendations for approximately 80% of these. Also included is additional biographical material on most of the individuals listed. The data is now also available on the web site of the Air Force Association of Canada. <<http://www.airforce.ca/citations/wwii/index.htm>>.

The Directorate of History and Heritage holds an index of all members of the RCAF who were held by the enemy during the Second World War (Acc. 90/18). Each index card contains: the name, rank and service number of the individual; his date of birth; name and address of next of kin; promotions; squadron number; and the date of capture. In addition, the prisoner of war camp and any camp movements are recorded, as is the date of safe arrival in the United Kingdom.

Following their return to the United Kingdom, Canadian Bomber Command evaders and prisoners of war were routinely interrogated about the circumstances of their being forced down or captured. About 2,000 such questionnaires and narratives will be found at the Directorate of History and Heritage. Some are very brief; others go into much detail. They are in two sets; one arranged chronologically (181.001 D.23) and the other alphabetically (181.001 D.24).

Another means of documenting the service of Canadian airmen during the Second World War is through the casualty records. Several series of index cards at the Directorate of History and Heritage record RCAF fatal casualties during the Second World War (Acc. 90/18). These include: *RCAF Fatal Casualties Overseas with Graves*; *Overseas Without Known Graves*; *In Canada*; and *In the United States*. Within each index, cards are arranged in alphabetical order with the name, rank, and service number, the date of the fatality, and where known, the place of burial recorded. For those casualties overseas, each card also identifies the squadron in which the individual was serving and the type and serial number of the aircraft. A published record of the more than 18,000 RCAF fatal casualties (and many of the CAN/RAF also) was prepared by the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum. *They Shall Grow Not Old* (Brandon: 1992) provides biographical details with summaries of the particulars of each fatality and includes the final burial site or memorial location.

Registers of the burial site or memorial of all members of the RCAF killed during the Second World War are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Details, including the name, rank, number and service, date of death, the age and next-of-kin (if known), and information on the location of any grave, cemetery or memorial, can be obtained from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 66 Slater Street, Suite 1707, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P4. Telephone: (613) 992-3224 This information is also available in a data base linked to the Commission's web pages. <<http://www.yard.ccta.gov.uk/cwgc/register.nsf>>. Records for all 1.7 million Commonwealth war dead of the First and Second World Wars are provided on the site. But, with more than 600,000 hits per week, response time can often be slow and access can be difficult. Veterans Affairs Canada has mounted the Canadian and Newfoundland portions of this data base on its web site. <<http://vac-acc.gc.ca>>. Response time is much quicker, and maps of the cemeteries are often found, but CAN/RAF personnel are not on the Veterans Affairs Canada site.

Enshrined in the Memorial Chamber of the Peace Tower are the *Books of Remembrance*, recording the names of all those Canadians who lost their lives while serving in one of Canada's armed forces or merchant marine during the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, and with the South African and Nile Expeditions. Newfoundland has its own *Book* recording the names of men and women killed during war service between 1914 and 1949. In the *Book of Remembrance* for the Second World War, the name, rank and service or unit of Canadians who died in each year of the conflict appear. (CAN/RAF personnel do not appear in this *Book*.) A page is turned in each book every day in a ceremony held at 11:00 a.m. Each name in every book appears once in twelve months. Visitors can find out on which page a name appears and the date it can be viewed by asking the constable in the Chamber. Copies of the pages are available by calling or writing the Public Information Office, House of Commons, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6. Telephone: (613) 992-4793 The *Books* are also found on the Veterans Affairs Canada <<http://vac-acc.gc.ca>> and the Schoolnet <<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/books/books.htm>> web sites.

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Before concluding, a few final general comments about the use of military records are appropriate. Archives are not libraries. Information is not often stored according to specific names or subjects. Rather, it is maintained largely in the order in which the records were created. Before commencing a search, an understanding of the organization and structures of the various military bodies is necessary because the types of records created, the means to access them, and their relative survival rate follow directly from the record-creating bodies. Herein lies the challenge of research. Hopefully, these notes will facilitate the task.

And finally, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of: Carl Christie, formerly of the Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence; Canadian Aviation Historical Society member and researcher, Hugh Halliday; and Gregg McCooyee of the Personnel Records

Unit, National Archives of Canada. Their comments and advice were important and appreciated. Any errors are mine alone.

This paper was first presented at the 5th Air Force Historical Conference / 36th Annual Canadian Aviation Historical Society Convention held at 16 Wing Borden, Ontario, 22-26 June 1999. It appears courtesy of the Office of Air Force Heritage and History, 1 Canadian Air Division, Winnipeg, MB.

Timothy Dubé is the Military Archivist within the Manuscript Division of the National Archives of Canada. He is the author of a number of articles and papers on military records and research, including *Canada at War, 1939-1945: A Survey of the Archival Holdings of the Second World War at the National Archives of Canada* (LCMSDS, 1996).

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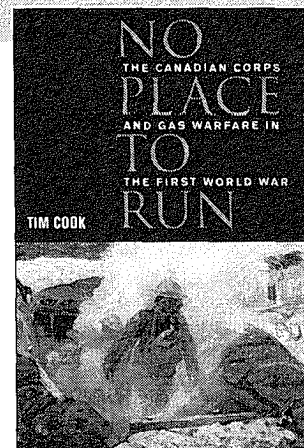
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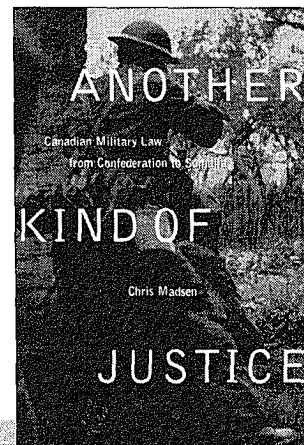
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