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## Hidden in Plain Sight: The Militia and Defence Headquarters Personnel File Series, 1903 to 1938

Paul Marsden

Glenn Wright

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FEATURE

# Hidden in Plain Sight

## The Militia and Defence Headquarters Personnel File Series, 1903 to 1938

PAUL MARSDEN & GLENN WRIGHT

*Abstract: In the late 1940s, the Department of National Defence enthusiastically embraced microfilming technology, undertaking a massive project to microfilm several million files covering the period 1885 to 1948. This article describes the authors' research to trace one particular microfilm job covering Military Personnel Files managed by the Department of Militia and Defence. The authors have unearthed a large cache of unexplored records, comprising tens of thousands of military personnel files, the majority of which deal with military service during the Great War.*

ON 26 OCTOBER 1927, George Desbarats, the Deputy Minister of National Defence, wrote the Dominion Archivist, Sir Arthur Doughty, a short one-page letter. It was straightforward enough; could the Archives please take custody of over a million personnel files that were clogging Department of National Defence (DND) offices in Ottawa?<sup>1</sup> Dumbfounded, Doughty spent the next year looking for the money to take on these records. The Public Archives of Canada (PAC) in 1927 was a very small institution, still collecting pre-Confederation records, and a million files would have at least quadrupled their holdings. In the end, there was no money and it would be another eighty years before researchers would have access to a fraction of

<sup>1</sup> Desbarats to Doughty, 26 October 1927, RG24, Vol. 31994, File 1716-50/6, Library and Archives Canada [LAC].

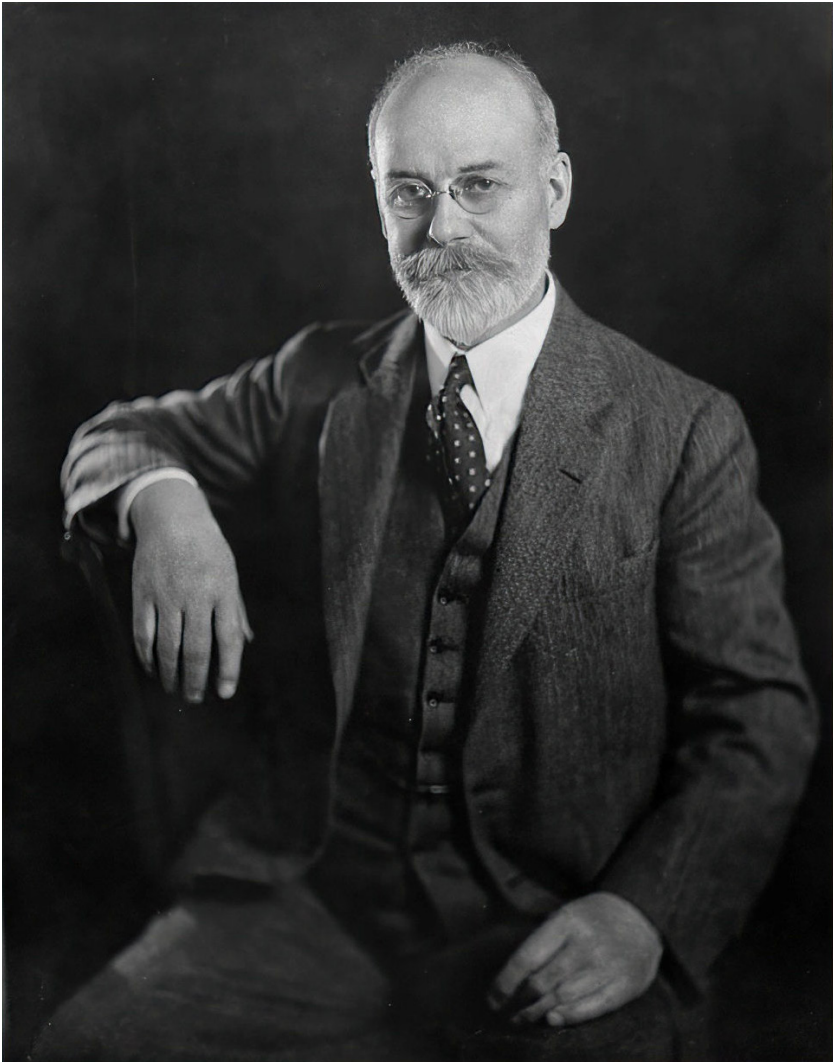


Public Archives of Canada Building, 1925, showing the new wing to house war trophies  
[Library and Archives Canada (LAC) PA-043771]

these files. What were the files and what became of them? And to be clear, these million files were not the “CEF Service Documents” that Library and Archives Canada (LAC) now has online under the title “Personnel Records of the First World War.”<sup>2</sup>

The intent of this article is to answer these two questions and to highlight some of the individuals and history documented in these records. To date, the authors have indexed over 6,000 files and discovered numerous files which provide a wealth of further details on the recruitment, support and demobilisation of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), as well as details on hundreds of individuals who served as officers in the Permanent Force and Militia prior to the Great War. However, in order to explain what these records are and how they became overlooked and forgotten,

<sup>2</sup> Although they are described on the LAC website as personnel files, these records were never files in the conventional sense. They were individual forms, cards and ledger sheets pulled together from many different offices and sources in late 1918 and 1919 and were first used to conduct the demobilisation of the men and women of the CEF. They were consistently referred to by M&D officials, and later Veterans' Affairs officials, as “Service Documents.”



George J Desbarats, Deputy Minister of National Defence, 1929. [LAC PA-064556]

it is necessary to provide a brief account of record keeping in the Canadian military in the twentieth century.

In 1903, the Department of Militia and Defence (M&D) undertook to modernise its records system, replacing the antiquated letter book and docket system which had dated from the origins of the Canadian Militia in the eighteenth century. The first step was to centralise all record operations in a new division, the Central Registry. This office then proceeded to create a classification system, assigning a unique number between 1 and 9999 to each subject or to each individual member of the Militia and the Departmental staff. For example, 66 for the personnel file of Lieutenant (Lt.) A. W. Jamieson and 67 for the subject file Camp Grounds.

A mere eight years later, the Central Registry had run out of numbers. They had assigned 9,356 numbers to members of the Permanent Force, the Militia, civilian department staff and a handful of other officials—including King George V—and they assigned the remaining 643 numbers to subjects. Once they allocated number 9999 to Lt. Charles Ramsay, the Central Registry needed a new approach. Rather than start assigning five-digit numbers, they decided to re-use numbers, assigning them to groups of individuals, thereby creating “file blocks.” The first block number used was 63 for those with service in the South African War. Soon block numbers were being assigned for every different corps, military trade and group. For the time, it was a positive step towards modern record keeping and what became known as a block numeric classification system.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, the Great War witnessed an immense explosion in the number of records generated by M&D, particularly personnel files. During the war the M&D Central Registry struggled to maintain the paperwork for the 620,000 Canadian men and women who served, as well as all the records of the efforts to equip and sustain them. The challenge was so great that the Adjutant-General in 1918 created a new office, the Directorate of Records, dedicated to managing personnel records.<sup>4</sup> It was a timely decision. At a minimum there were four files for each individual service member who was sent overseas:

<sup>3</sup> “Key to 1903 Correspondence System of the Department of Militia and Defence” lays out the classification system and the individual numbers assigned to each person. The document is part of the documentation provided by DND to LAC in the 1960s and is held in the military records documentation area at LAC.

<sup>4</sup> D Records to Adjutant General, 4 July 1918, RG24, Vol. 1208, File 301-5-99, LAC.



Property Room, Estates Branch, OMFC Headquarters, London 1915-1918. Soldiers are sorting the property of fallen soldiers for return to next of kin. [LAC Item ID no. 3405664]

one in the Military District where they attested; one at the Overseas Military Forces of Canada (OMFC); another at 2nd Echelon at General Headquarters in France; and, of course, one at the Central Registry at Militia and Defence Headquarters. In Ottawa, they started to greatly expand the number of file block numbers, some of which covered very broad categories, such as “Infantry Officers” and “Casualties – European War.” Each of these blocks included tens of thousands of men.

In the eight years after the war, the Directorate of Records made numerous attempts to organise and consolidate these files while responding to requests for service information, pay and pension demands, burial information and other correspondence. When Desbarats’s desperate attempt to pass the problem to the PAC failed, arrangements were made to find alternate storage locations. The PAC did store some records in buildings on the Experimental Farm, but



File Cabinets in the Records Storage Building on the Central Experimental Farm, Ottawa.  
[LAC PA-144872]

they remained in the control of DND. Most of the files were stored in the Daly, Jackson and Hunter Buildings in downtown Ottawa.<sup>5</sup>

In 1939, when war broke out again, the files were mostly forgotten. They were recalled in rare cases of veterans re-enlisting and others offering to assist in the war effort. But there were more pressing problems than what to do with old files from the ‘war to end all wars.’ Ultimately, it was only after the Second World War ended and officials were confronted with another two million files, that a solution presented itself—microfilm. Although the advent of commercial microfilming had occurred in the 1920s, it was only under the exigencies of war that economically viable filming was developed by Kodak. The Public Records Committee (PRC), the senior body advising the Government of Canada on record keeping, recommended the technology and in early 1947 the Cabinet approved it. The catch was that Cabinet did not grant any funds for actual filming and

<sup>5</sup> Meeting of Public Records Committee, May 1948, RG35/7, Vol. 9, LAC.

departments had to justify the investment in microfilm technology by reducing storage costs through destroying records.<sup>6</sup>

Any historian of twentieth century Canada should not consult the records of the PRC unless they have a strong emotional constitution.<sup>7</sup> The lists of records destroyed is disheartening and in some cases the authority to destroy records seems incredibly vague and broad. The only safeguard against rampant destruction was the presence of the Dominion Archivist on the committee and he often acquiesced to his colleagues. In the case of DND records, it is sometimes difficult to follow their requests and determine exactly what is being discussed and sent to the incinerator. Frequently, they refer to personnel files without indicating from which conflict they originate.

The involvement of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) further complicated matters. In 1944, when initially tasked to provide post-service benefits, the new department was entirely dependent on DND to provide access to service records and documents. During this period, there was great reluctance on the part of the latter to provide blanket access, so individual files were pulled and selected papers copied for DVA. Even after an Order-in-Council was passed in 1948 giving the War Service Records Division of DVA responsibility for all service records, there were delays and disputes over what constituted a record of military service.<sup>8</sup>

It was clear though, that both DND and DVA were looking to do whatever was necessary to off load the CEF records, either on each other or, better still, PAC. As a new government department, DVA was loath to take on major new costs and looked for means to rationalise spiralling records storage costs. Their opinion was that only the "CEF Service Documents" were necessary to prove entitlement to pensions and benefits. Whereas, DND had almost thirty years of consulting correspondence on the personnel files and knew that not

<sup>6</sup> Conclusions of Cabinet Meeting, 22 January 1947, RG2, Vol. 2369, LAC.

<sup>7</sup> The Public Records Committee was initially founded to aid in the writing of official histories of the Second World War and to safeguard records needed for those histories. The records of the committee are at LAC and are found readily by searching Collection Search for "RG35/7," its former reference.

<sup>8</sup> P.C. 811-1948, RG2, LAC. The Allied Veterans Benefits Act (1946) allowed for allied veterans resident in Canada to apply to DVA for benefits. Therefore, DVA also was responsible for collecting information from other governments to document service in their armed forces.



all was explained by forms, index cards and ledgers sheets. In the end, despite different views on the value of records, they both reached the decision to use microfilm to reduce storage costs.

By late 1947, DND had put together a list of over a hundred different series of records, including the M&D Personnel Files, and were ready to start filming. Over the next ten years the Departmental Microfilming Unit (DMU) would film an estimated forty-nine million pages and produce 8,919 reels of 35 mm double-sided film.<sup>9</sup> Some of the large “Microfilm Jobs” possessed no long-term archival value; for example, over 2,600 reels of film consisted of Second World War pay records. The department was able to realise savings, eliminating over five kilometres of shelving and reducing the number of storage leases.

Five microfilm jobs were identified for “Militia and Defence Personnel Files, 1870-1938” and the DMU began filming the files in the summer of 1948. They began with two small jobs covering Officers’ Confidential Reports. Then disaster intervened. The filming of the main portion of the CEF Personnel Files was just underway when the basement of the Hunter Building in downtown Ottawa flooded and thousands of files were turned into soggy bricks of paper. Close to a thousand feet of CEF personnel files were damaged and were set aside to dry.<sup>10</sup> Once they were cleared away, the filming resumed, with the DMU producing 210 reels in Job 30 and another forty-four reels in Job 42. These film jobs appeared to be organised according to the file blocks that had been created shortly before the Great War. Once the files were all filmed, the paper records were destroyed.<sup>11</sup> While that answers the question of what happened to the paper files, what became of the reels?

For the next twenty years, it seems the staff of the Directorate of Records consulted these microfilms reels, using them to answer queries of all kinds—from veterans, their families and the Department of Veterans Affairs. But as these men and women began to pass away

<sup>9</sup> The double-sided film means that this is the equivalent of 17,838 reels of 8 mm film. The page figures here are based on average number of images per reel.

<sup>10</sup> A thousand boxes of these files survived until the 1990s, but they were mould infested and the National Archives only had the capacity to preserve ten per cent of them. The preservation treatment took twenty years to complete.

<sup>11</sup> Some files were filmed and then involved in the flood. Therefore, if they were among those selected by LAC for preservation treatment and retention, there is both a hard copy and a microfilm copy of the file. To date, the authors have only identified one such file.

in greater numbers in the 1960s, the films were used less and less. In 1971, when PAC took over the Canadian Forces Records Centre in suburban Ottawa, the microfilms were amongst the millions of dormant military personnel records transferred. Initially, the staff of the new centre included many former War Service Records Division employees, who were aware of the film. However, in the following years as staff at the Records Centre turned over, the films were either forgotten or ignored.

In the 1990s, public interest in the Great War and the CEF went through a remarkable revival. This was in large part fuelled by the 1991 transfer of the CEF Service Documents to the Archives proper, where they became available to the research public. Academic, regional, local and family historians started to use the Service Documents and records such as the Part II Daily Orders and the Courts Martial to look at the war through both the personal and unit experiences. During this period, researchers regularly asked about pre-Second World War personnel records with the hope of finding more details as well as the post-war effects on veterans. The Personnel Records Unit (PRU), which managed access to the files, always responded that the CEF Service Documents were the only surviving personnel records prior to 1939.<sup>12</sup>

The first inkling that this was not entirely accurate came in 1998. In that year it was announced that the PRU would be relocating to the National Archives and National Library main building on Wellington Street. This initiated a two-year process by the Government Archives Division archivist responsible for military records to review the Personnel Records Centre holdings in order to identify any other potential archival records. This turned up a few thousand reels of undocumented microfilm. The only information was that they had been created by DND. Nobody was able to speak to the contents of the films. Nevertheless, the microfilms were accessioned.

Unfortunately, in the early 2000s the challenge was that the National Archives—soon to be rebranded Library and Archives Canada (LAC)—was winding down its micrographic capacity as it attempted

<sup>12</sup> Until the mid-1990s, the Military Archivists in the Government Archives Division had little involvement with military personnel records, which were managed by the PRU. Both authors learned a great deal from the staff of the PRU and were initially told that the CEF Personnel Records were the only military personnel records prior to the Second World War. With the discovery of these microfilm reels, Kevin Joynt, Kristin Fraser, Leslie Bilton-Bravo and Gregg McCooye of the PRU assisted us whenever we sought their help.

to ramp up its digitisation programme. As a result, getting films examined and copied for public use was not prioritised and without copying there was no way to produce a finding aid of the contents. It took several years to get the films copied, after which copies were simply placed on the open shelves in the LAC Main Reading Room. Although finally available to the public, there was still no finding aid and therefore nobody knew exactly what was on the films.

In 2014, the authors started to scan through individual reels and to look for other documentation on DND microfilming. At first, we found many pre-Great War M&D files, with no wartime service. But then we started to find a number of consecutive reels all containing the records of nursing sisters, most of whom served with the CEF. Therefore, we began to concentrate on a small number of reels and to make lists to see if any pattern or logic emerged. This was tedious work on LAC's forty-year-old microfilm readers. The breakthrough, however, came when Canadiana signed an agreement with LAC to put all LAC open microfilm reels on its website. With the digitised reels, the indexing was cut to a fraction of the time spent on the old readers.<sup>13</sup>

From what we have done to date, we can make some observations and conclusions. We have indexed 6,116 files on thirty-nine reels of Job 30 and have found documents ranging from the 1880s up to the late 1940s. If the same proportion of files are found on the remaining reels, there are almost 33,000 files on 210 reels in Job 30. As there are another forty-four reels in Job 42 and ten reels spread across Jobs 22 and 23, there are potentially more than 50,000 personnel files hidden away on these films.<sup>14</sup> They represent a significant proportion of the men and women who served in the Canadian Militia from 1903 to 1939 and a substantial number of these are CEF personnel files.

Having addressed the question 'what became of the records,' we can now turn to the second question, 'what were in these files?' To date, we have only indexed fourteen per cent of the reels and have not had a chance to look at all the file blocks and are unable to fully answer that question. However, we have had the opportunity to systematically index all of those we could find covering nurses,

<sup>13</sup> The main page for the M&D files on Heritage.Canadiana.ca is: [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/occihm.lac\\_mikan\\_3726262](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/occihm.lac_mikan_3726262).

<sup>14</sup> To date, LAC and Canadiana have uploaded the images from Job 30. Job 42, Job 22 and part of Job 23 have not been copied and remain inaccessible to the research public.



Matron in Chief Margaret MacDonald in her office with assistants at Canadian Nursing Services, London during the Great War. [LAC Item ID no. 3382663]

recording both the reel number and the image number range for each woman. We found that File Block 392—Nursing Sisters is very representative of the other records we have so far been able to examine. Therefore, we are using these files to address the question as to what these records are.

Just prior to 1914, the Central Registry reserved File Block 392 for nursing sisters, implementing it as M&D was in the process of creating the Nursing Service Reserve. Like most of the block numbers, 392 was essentially alphabetical in design, with a secondary number according to the first letter of the surname and then, within the letter, a third number by order of date of appointment. For example, 392-3-1 and 392-3-2 are the files for Pearl Irene Courtice and Florence Muriel Church who were appointed in 1912 and 1913 respectively. The very next file created, 392-3-3, was for Gladys Creegan who was appointed to the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) in January 1914. Of the three, only Pearl Courtice served as a nursing sister with the CEF during the war. Nurse Creegan was offered overseas service but decided not to accept the offer. It should be noted that if a nurse was appointed before 1909—Matron-in-Chief Margaret Macdonald being

a prominent example—she was assigned a unique number between 1 and 9999. In Macdonald's case the unique number is 5632.<sup>15</sup>

Within Block 392, 3,179 women were assigned a file number. They include the nurses who served overseas with the CAMC, beginning with those who formed part of Canada's first contingent in October 1914, as well as those nurses appointed during the war who staffed military hospitals in Canada, including the facilities operated by the Military Hospitals Commission and its successor the Department of Soldiers Civil Re-establishment. The records also include files of those nurses who decided not to serve even though accepted for service by Militia authorities.

The size of files varies considerably, as do the contents. M&D referred to the files broadly as Rank, Service and Pay Files, although ironically there is very little about pay. Some files, unfortunately, consist of only a handful of documents, whereas others contain extensive documentation on an individual's service, including a record of service, annual confidential reports, proceedings of medical boards, personal correspondence, correspondence from the family and documents relating to conditions of service, medical treatment, medals and transportation. In some cases, files include offers to serve in the Second World War. The smallest file in Block 392 is a single page and the largest is 273 pages long. The most striking feature is the presence of correspondence, which is completely absent from the CEF Service Documents.

As with numerous Canadian men during the Great War, many Canadian nurses served in imperial and Allied positions outside of Canadian command. In 1916, the Department of Militia and Defence assisted the British War Office in the recruitment of more than 300 qualified nurses for the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS). The nurses were contracted to serve a minimum of one year and while some extended their terms, many others wanted to join the CAMC at the expiration of their service. Block 392 documents the recruitment process of the Canadian QAIMNS and, in most cases, includes an application, letters of reference and information on the training and qualification of the individual nurse.

Transfer to the CAMC had many desirable benefits to Canadian-born nurses working in other services. Nurses with the CEF held

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Macdonald file, reel C-17530, file 5636, Heritage Canadiana. Part 1 is images 3731 to 3535 and part 2 is images 3897 to 3737.

military rank while British nurses did not. Canadians were paid more and, more importantly, it was an opportunity to work alongside fellow Canadians in Canadian hospitals in England and at the Front and, in most cases, provide nursing care to Canadian soldiers. A good example is Ellen Thresher. Born in Coventry, England in March 1874, she came to Canada with her parents and siblings in 1883 and was raised in Hamilton, Ontario. Ellen was almost thirty years of age when she decided to take training as a nurse at St. John's Riverside Hospital in Yonkers, New York. She graduated in May 1909. In 1916, she heard the call for nurses to serve with the QAIMNS and volunteered in December 1916 for a term of one year. Nurse Thresher went overseas in February 1917. In late December 1917, with her term coming to an end, she wrote to Matron Macdonald and inquired about transferring to the CAMC. "I am so very anxious", she wrote, "to work with my own countrymen and women." The two nurses met and on 25 February 1918, Ellen Thresher became a member of the CAMC. She was so anxious to serve with the Canadians that she quietly stroked five years off her age and claimed that she had been born in 1879, not 1874.<sup>16</sup>

The record of Thresher's service while with the QAIMNS, as with other Canadians in Imperial Service, is not documented in the Block 392 files from M&D. However, their service records are available at the National Archives of England and Wales (TNA) in WO 399 and are accessible online.<sup>17</sup> Until now, identifying Canadian nurses in WO 399 was problematic. With the indexing of the Block 392 files, we have identified more than 150 of the Canadian women who served with the QAIMNS.

Outside of the CAMC, the QAIMNS employed the largest number of Canadian nurses, but Canadians also served in significant numbers with other countries. The French Flag Nursing Corps (FFNC) was established in 1915 and administered from London, England. The Corps attracted more than three dozen Canadian nurses for specific terms of service. Not surprisingly, many applied to the CAMC when their initial contracts had been completed. One who did not join

<sup>16</sup> Her personnel file includes her application to the QAIMNS and her subsequent appointment to the CAMC. Ellen Thresher file, reel T-17640, file 392-20-81, images 3136 to 3099, Heritage Canadiana. Her 1917 request to join the CAMC, Thresher to MacDonal, 29 December 1917, RG 9-III-B2, vol. 3777, file 10-11-2, part 1, LAC.

<sup>17</sup> Thresher's QAIMNS service is documented in WO 399/8335, TNA.

**CANADIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE**

**Recommendation for Appointment or Promotion.**

Regiment.		Branch of Service			C.A.M.C.				
Rank	Name in full (in Block Capitals)	Age, Date and Place of Birth	State of Health	Address in full	Occupation Qualification	Present Rank	Rank Recom- mended	Date of Appointment	Remarks
	(1) ELLEN (2) LOUISE (3) THRESHER	39 years March 30, 1879. Coventry Warwickshire England.	Pit	34 Norway Av. HAMILTON, Ont. Canada	Graduate Nurse	Nil	N uring Sister	Feb. 25 1918.	Vice N/Sister J.A. McRae resigned.  1 year with Q.A.I.M.N.S.R.  Lived in Canada thirty years.
<p>I am willing to accept this appointment (Sgd) Ellen Louise Thresher</p> <p>Place London, Eng.</p> <p>Date Feb. 8, 1918.</p>				<p>Recommended (Sgd) H.C. Macdonald Matron-in-Chief Canadian Contingents</p> <p>Place London, Eng.</p> <p>Date Feb. 8, 1918.</p> <p>Forwarded and Recommended (Sgd) G.L. Foster Surgeon-General. D.M.S. Canadian Contingents</p> <p>Place London, Eng.</p> <p>Date Feb. 8, 1918.</p>		<p>Approved</p> <p>Place</p> <p>Date</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 10px auto;"> <p>H.Q. CANADA MILITARY MEDICAL CORPS APR 11 1918 LONDON</p> </div>			

*E. & R. ...*

Recommendation for Nursing Sister Ellen Louise Thresher to be commissioned in the Canadian Army Medical Corps. [LAC Reel T-17640 File HQ 392-20-81]



Canadian Nursing Sister Madeline Jaffray, French Flag Nursing Corps, with recuperating French soldiers during the Great War. [Provincial Archives of Alberta, Madeleine Morrison fonds, PR1986.0054/12]

the CAMC was Madeline Jaffray, who was wounded in June 1917 while serving with the FFNC. With the partial amputation of her left foot, she was now ineligible for the CAMC, although before she volunteered with the FFNC she had qualified for appointment to the Reserve in February 1915. Her Block 392 file documents in part her immediate post-war career.<sup>18</sup>

Most Block 392 files, especially those from the first year of the war, include the MFB 257 form—the Recommendation for Appointment—commissioning the nurse, as well as information on where and when a nurse was trained. To be accepted with the CAMC, only graduate nurses with three years training and who were employed in a hospital with a minimum of one hundred beds were accepted. Many were rejected for not meeting these conditions, but even in some of these cases files were created.

<sup>18</sup> Madeline Jaffray file, reel T-17633, file 392-10-24, Heritage Canadiana. Jaffray was the only Canadian nurse to suffer amputation because of a war injury.



The files also confirm what is well known: that many, if not most, Canadian nurses trained in the United States. At the outbreak of the war, both Harvard University and the University of Chicago supplied doctors and nurses to the Royal Army Medical Corps (British Expeditionary Force) for service in France and Belgium. Aside from Harvard and Chicago, Matron Macdonald received applications from Canadian nurses serving with the American Ambulance Hospital (Neuilly-sur-Seine), the Ambulance de l'Océan (La Panne, Belgium), Hôpital Irlandais (Gezancourt, France), the American Women's War Hospital (Paignton, England) and from non-CAMC staff at the Queen's Canadian Military Hospital, Beachborough Park. Many Canadian-born but American-trained nurses served in these medical facilities and, as in the case of the FFNC and the QAIMNSs, most of them subsequently applied to the CAMC when their terms of service expired.

Canadian nurses unable to secure an appointment to the CAMC or who were consigned to a lengthy waiting list often offered their services to one of several American hospitals in Paris or Belgium. In the spring of 1916, Matron Macdonald reported that her waiting list included more than two thousand names, but she seemed more interested in accepting Canadians who had overseas experience. Like the nurses who had spent a full year with the QAIMNS, many of those who served with the FFNC or with an American hospital were more experienced with wartime conditions than any nurse accepted in Canada. The Block 392 files document the careers of these women too.

Some women who offered to serve and never did are also documented in these files. Many were rejected out of hand because they lacked the required training or were not British subjects. In one case, an American physician, who offered to serve as a nurse, was turned away because of her nationality. Block 392 files were also created for women employed as masseuses, dieticians and at least one x-ray technician.

Honours and awards, an important aspect of military service, are also documented in the files. More than three hundred nursing sisters were recognised with the Royal Red Cross medal: sixty-six received the Royal Red Cross (RRC), four received the Bar to the RRC and 275 nurses received the Associate Royal Red Cross (ARRC) with



Nursing Sisters Alfreda Atrill, Edith Hudson, Amy Howard and Assistant Matron Nella Wilson, 2nd from the right, after awards ceremony at Buckingham Palace. [LAC Item ID no. 3395700]

seventeen of these being elevated to RRC during the war.<sup>19</sup> Eight nurses were awarded the Military Cross, more than fifty received the *Medaille des epidemies* and several were recognised with the Order of the British Empire.

One will often discover a complete detailed service summary in the M&D files, a document that is almost never found in the CEF Service Documents. Occasionally, we have also found photographs. Of course, the files sometimes contain correspondence on mundane or routine matters, such as requests for a War Service Badge, a service record and/or reimbursement for transportation costs. But even the routine often has some interest. Jane T. Ramsay, a native of Montreal

<sup>19</sup> F. J. Blatherwick, *Canadian Orders, Decorations, and Medals*, 4th Edition (Toronto: The Unitrade Press, 1994), 159-61. Royal Red Cross recipients as well as those awarded the Military Medal, French honours and who were Mentioned in Despatches are listed in James Wallace, ed., *Canadian Foreign Awards, Foreign Awards to Nursing Service, Mentioned in Despatches, World War I (1914-1919)* (Calgary: Bunker to Bunker Publishing, 2001).

with extensive nursing experience in Canada and the United States, was sent overseas by the Red Cross in the spring of 1915. While serving at a British hospital in Malta, Ramsay injured herself in an accident. Unable to work, she returned to Montreal at her own expense. Once fully recuperated, she did not apply directly to the CAMC, but appealed to Sir Sam Hughes through influential friends of her late father, including Charles Magrath of the International Joint Commission and Principal William Peterson of McGill University. Assured of acceptance and not willing to wait any longer, Ramsay paid her own way back to England in October 1915 and served out the war with the CAMC.<sup>20</sup>

Without doubt, however, the most striking aspect documented in these files is death. When a nursing sister died on service, the files are large and full of correspondence. The files document in detail the process set in motion by the death of a nursing sister, regardless of whether she died by enemy action, such as the sinking of the HMHS *Llandoverly Castle* or the bombing raids in the spring 1918, or of wounds, accidents or natural causes such as cancer. To satisfy legal requirements, every effort was made to document the death and its circumstances, including medical records. Officials at the Overseas Ministry staff in London and M&D staff in Ottawa contacted family and waded into matters surrounding a nurse's will and estate matters. Sometimes one will find a letter from the Commanding Officer speaking to the qualities of the deceased. For those who died overseas, personal effects were gathered and returned to family in Canada and these files often include an exhaustive list of clothing and possessions. Finally, there is often moving, heartfelt correspondence from parents and relatives about their deceased loved one.

Prior to the discovery of these files, nurses were already one of the better documented populations within the CEF and Imperial service. A thirteen-part file in RG9 III covers applications from women applying to the CAMC.<sup>21</sup> There are a significant number of CAMC files in RG9 III dealing with the recruitment and employment of nurses, as well as the CEF Service Documents for nursing sisters. In addition, the Canadian Nurses Association has its own private fonds

<sup>20</sup> Jane T. Ramsay file, reel T-17638, file 392-18-84, images 4793 to 4730, Heritage Canadiana.

<sup>21</sup> RG9 III-B-2, Vols. 3477-3479, File 10-11-3 pts. 1 to 13, LAC.

at LAC which further documents these women and their service. And these are just a few of the primary sources.

Many books have also explored the contributions of Canada's nursing sisters. G. W. L. Nicholson's *Canada's Nursing Sisters* places the Great War nurses in the context of military nursing in Canada from the 1885 North-West Resistance through the Second World War. Cynthia Toman's more recent *Sister Soldiers of the Great War: The Nurses of the Canadian Army Medical Corps* is essential to understanding the role and contribution of the Canadian nurses in the War. Biographies of Margaret Macdonald and Georgina Pope document two of the most important women in the history of Canadian military nursing. Susan Mann's *Margaret Macdonald: Imperial Daughter* is essential to understanding the administration of the nursing service within the CAMC during the war. Although she had less of a role in the Great War, Georgina Pope, subject of Katherine Dewar's *Called to Serve: Georgina Pope, Canadian Military Nursing Heroine*, served in the South African War and was the first nursing sister appointed in the Department of Militia and Defence. Several collective biographies have also been published, including Marjorie Barron Norris's *Sister Heroines: The Roseate Glow of Wartime Nursing, 1914-1918*, a salute to Alberta nurses who answered the call; Sherrell Branton Leetooze's *WWI Nursing Sisters of Old Durham County* documents nurses connected to Durham County, Ontario; and Katherine Dewar's *Those Splendid Girls: The Heroic Service of Prince Edward Island Nurses in the Great War, 1914-1918*. And nurses who died during the war are the subject of Robyn-Rose May's *Sacrifice of Angels*.<sup>22</sup> All of these books relied on the CEF Service Documents, private archives, letters, diaries and

<sup>22</sup> G. W. L. Nicholson, *Canada's Nursing Sisters* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1975); Cynthia Toman, *Sister Soldiers of the Great War: The Nurses of the Canadian Army Medical Corps* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016); Susan Mann, *Margaret Macdonald: Imperial Daughter* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); Katherine Dewar, *Called to Serve: Georgina Pop, Canadian Military Nursing Heroine* (Charlottetown: Island Studies Press, 2018); Marjorie Norris, *Sister Heroine's: The Roseate Glow of Wartime Nursing, 1914-1918* (Calgary: Bunker to Bunker Publishing, 2002); Sherrell Branton Leetooze, *WWI Nursing Sisters of Old Durham County* (Bowmanville: Lynn Michael-John Associates, 2014); Katherine Dewar, *Those Splendid Girls: The Heroic Service of PEI Nurses in the Great War* (Charlottetown: Island Studies Press, 2014); and Robyn-Rose May, *Sacrifice of Angels: The Overseas Deaths of Canada's First World War Nursing Sisters* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2016).

photographs. Only two, Dewar and May, were aware of the Block 392 files. One cannot help but think of the annoyance that many authors and scholars will feel on discovering the list of names documented in these files, as well as those not yet indexed.

From our research we have determined that there is not a file for every man and women in the CEF on these reels. For instance, we know that there are no Block 392 files for nursing sisters whose surnames began with the letter O or P. These files were damaged in the flood referred to earlier, as were several thousand others for other ranks and officers. We also know that in the mid-1920s there was a rigorous “stripping” process, reducing some files by fifty per cent.<sup>23</sup> It would also appear to be the case that if a man or woman generated no correspondence of any significance during the war, his or her file was not retained. In preserving the remaining files, M&D appeared to be documenting their own actions, as well as those of the individual man or woman named on the file jacket.

We would be neglectful to not warn potential researchers of some of the challenges of using the microfilm or the digitised images. The files were filmed top to bottom and the images are in reverse order on the website. Therefore, researchers have to go to the last page in the file and go backwards to read the file in chronological order.<sup>24</sup> These microfilms were made long before anybody discussed such things as image standards and quality control. Researchers will encounter pages which are all white or all black or documents which appear to be moving when filmed. Occasionally, you will find a corrected image a couple of pages later, but that is the exception. With some effort and image editing software, we were able to make many of the illegible pages legible. Patience is a necessary virtue in using some of these files.

There is, in our opinion, no doubt about the reward and the nursing sisters are just the tip of the iceberg. In the over six thousand files we have indexed, there are 626 South African War personnel files covering both the Canadian Contingent and Canadians serving in the South African Constabulary. Overlapping on some of the nurses’ reels are files from Block 413—British Army Officers’ Numbers. We indexed over 800 of these files, almost all of whom turned out to be


<sup>23</sup> Armstrong to Waterson, 8 May 1926, RG24, Vol. 31944, File 1716-50/6, LAC.

<sup>24</sup> For multi-part files, each file part is listed separately on LAC Collection Search and, therefore, you have to go backwards to the end of the file and then go forward again to find the second file part.

"ESTATES."

LAC HQ 8009-1

SERIAL NO. <b>E.</b>	P.L. 9-H-551	R.L.	NAME AND NAME		REGIMENT NUMBER	
			Hay A.W.			
			REG'T. NO.	PL. COL.	RANK	
			UNIT		52 <sup>nd</sup> BATTN.	
			DATE OF DEATH		Missing, believed killed 3-6-16	
					Presumed Dead	
			ISSUED	REFERRED TO	INITIALS	DATE
			6-17-17	CSPT	To procure 2090c	30-8-17
			11-7-17	Sec 1	With Papers	8-6-17
			26-10-17	Sec 1	Per B.F.	15-6-17
			3-7-18	Sec 1	Per Requisition	24-6-17
			10-7-18	Sec 1	With Papers	24-6-17
			11-7-18	Sec 1	With Papers	24-6-17
			14-11-17	Sec 1	With Papers	24-6-17
			2-1-18	Sec 1	With Papers	24-6-17
			16-7-18	Sec 1	Pa.	24-6-17



LT-COL. A. W. HAY  
(171880).  
Now reported killed last year.

Estates file jacket for Lt-Col. A.W. Hay, Commanding Officer 52nd Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force. [LAC Reel T-17548 File HQ 8009-1]

Canadians who were released from the CEF to take commissions in an Imperial unit. There are at least another ten reels to be indexed covering men who took this path. We have not yet touched the biggest block, Block 602, described as “Officers’ Numbers, Contingents, European War,” which stretches across forty reels. There are also multiple reels for chaplains, veterinarians, medical officers, Permanent Force officers and others.

Prominent Canadians also figure in the files we have already indexed. In addition to the large file for Margaret Macdonald (358 pages), we have found files for William Barker, VC (289 pages), E. B. Worthington (249 pages), Charles “Chubby” Power (232 pages) and many Chiefs of the General Staff from before and after the Great War. We have no doubt similarly famous figures are to be found on the remaining reels.

Nor is Job 30 the only cache of records that has been hidden away. As noted above, Jobs 22, 23 and 42 also appear to contain CEF and Militia records from the pre-1939 period. In our research into the M&D records, we found that the Central Registry assigned File Block 745 for Canadian officers in the Royal Flying Corps and Block 866 for personnel of the Canadian Air Force. The latter records are also on the Heritage Canadiana website without a finding aid.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, Job 57 has not yet been copied and we will have to wait for LAC to make these available.

At this point, we have turned over our data to LAC and they have successfully loaded it into their online search tool. They recognised the merits of providing the image numbers for each file so these too are now found with the file level description.<sup>26</sup> Our hope is that this will make these records accessible to all researchers, who will discover what we have found and more. These records contain a tremendous wealth of detail far beyond what is found in the forms and cards of the CEF Service Documents. In these files we often find personal accounts of the effects of war on the men and women of the CEF. And what better way is there to understand war than through the lives and words of the men and women who fought it?

<sup>25</sup> There are nine reels of File Block 866 at [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\\_mikan\\_3922254](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_3922254). These records appear to contain records for members of Canadian Air Force, precursor of the Royal Canadian Air Force, and date mostly from after 1918.

<sup>26</sup> LAC has arranged the files under the Militia and Defence Headquarters Personnel Files Series, R112-837-2-E (former reference RG24-C-1-a).



Captain Keith Robert Tailyour, Royal Flying Corps, 1920. Tailyour was killed in a flying accident at Camp Borden on 11 April 1921. [LAC Reel T-17648 File HQ 413-20-47]





#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Paul Marsden** is an archival consultant living in Navan, Ontario. He worked for twenty-six years as a military archivist at Library and Archives Canada and was the NATO Archivist in Brussels from 2002 to 2005.

**Glenn Wright** has been an archivist and historical researcher for more than thirty years with Library and Archives Canada and the RCMP. He lives in Ottawa, Ontario.