

# Proudly She Served:

## Canadian Women in Uniform, 1885-1945

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### South African War, 1899-1902

The “Soldiers of the South African War, 1899-1902” database at LAC does not include any service records for the Canadian nurses. They were eligible, however, for a grant of Dominion land and the applications have been digitized, but only available on Ancestry, see [Canada, South African War Land Grants, 1908-1910 | Ancestry®](#)

Some additional information about the Canadian nurses may be found the British Army Nurses website, see [The Boer War \(1899-1902\): The birth of Army nursing \(boerwarnurses.com\)](#).

Canada’s first commissioned Nursing Sister, Georgina F. Pope has been the subject of a biography by Katherine Dewar, *Called to Serve: Georgina Pope, Canadian Military Nursing Heroine* (Charlottetown, PEI: Island Studies Press, 2018). Margaret Macdonald, Matron-in-Chief of Canada’s nurses in the Great War, also served in South Africa. Her biography, *Margaret Macdonald, Imperial Daughter* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), by Susan Mann includes a lengthy section on her South African experiences.

### First World War, 1914-1919

#### Canadian Service

Approximately 3200 women served in the First World War, a majority as Nursing Sisters at home and overseas.

1. Personnel Records of the First World War

Service documents from date of appointment to discharge and primarily relate to those nurses who were appointed to the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) as members of the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC). These records are available online at Library and Archives Canada and on Ancestry.

For a link to the personnel records and other archival records relating to First War nurses, see: [Personnel records for nurses, 1914 to 1918 \(canada.ca\)](#)

2. Department of Militia and Defence, Rank, Service and Pay Files

These files vary from one individual to another, but usually include some background information, initial appointment to the Canadian Army Medical Corps, some wartime and post-war service information and occasionally, personal correspondence. The records are not restricted to nurses, but also massage therapists, dieticians and so on. A search by surname on LAC, Collections Search, will provide a microfilm reel number and image numbers for consulting the file on Heritage Canadiana ([Héritage \(canadiana.ca\)](http://Heritage.canadiana.ca))

3. Canadian Nursing History Collection (Canadian Museum of History) [Civilization.ca](http://Civilization.ca) - [Canadian Nursing History Collection Online](http://CanadianNursingHistoryCollectionOnline.com) - [Introduction \(historymuseum.ca\)](http://historymuseum.ca)

### **British Service**

About 300 Canadian nurses initially served with the Queen Alexandra's Military Nursing Service. While many subsequently transferred to the CAMC and the CEF, their British service files are available online at The National Archives of England and Wales, see [British Army nurses' service records 1914-1918 - The National Archives](#). Digitized files can be downloaded free of charge to registered users.

Many Canadian women travelled to Britain in the early days of the war to volunteer their service in hospitals and convalescent homes. These women, over a thousand in number, as well as the 300 nurses mentioned above, were eligible in 1919-1920 for an additional War Service Gratuity payment upon application. These records have been digitized, but are only available in that format on Ancestry. See [Canada, Imperial War Service Gratuities, 1919-1921 | Ancestry®](#)

### **First World War: Further Reading**

Many books have been written about Canada's nursing sisters in the First World War, including diaries, memoirs and many containing biographical information. For a broad overview, see Cynthia Toman, *Sister Soldiers of the Great War: The Nurses of the Canadian Army Medical Corps* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016) and the Susan Mann biography of Margaret Macdonald noted above.

Nurses from the provinces of Alberta and Prince Edward Island have found their way into biographical collections: for Alberta, see Marjorie Barron Norris, *Sister Heroines: The Roseate Glow of Wartime Nursing, 1914-1918* (Calgary, AB: Bunker to Bunker Books, 2002) and for Prince Edward Island, Katherine Dewar, *Those Splendid Girls: The Heroic Service of Prince Edward Island Nurses in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Charlottetown, PEI: University of Prince Edward Island Press, 2014). And Sherrell Branton Leetooze does the same for Durham County, Ontario, in *WW I Nursing Sisters of Old Durham County* (Bowmanville, ON: Lynn Michael-John Associates, 2014).

For the nurses who died during the war, Robyn-Rose May provides biographical information in her *Sacrifice of Angels: The Overseas Deaths of Canada's First World War Nurses* (Ottawa, ON: CEF Books, 2016).

See also the Canadian War Museum, “Canada and the First World War – In Uniform” for a good overview of Canadian nursing in the war ([In Uniform - Nurses | Canada and the First World War \(warmuseum.ca\)](#))

## **Second World War, 1939-1945**

Women’s contribution to the Second World War was very different from that of the earlier war. In 1941, the government decided that women could be enlisted in the three services, especially in occupations where men could be released to serve overseas. Canadian women responded to the call:

Canadian Army Women’s Corps	21600
RCAF Women’s Division	17400
Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service	7100

In addition, about 4500 military nurses served during the war.

All military service files are in the custody of LAC and should be requested using the Access to Information and Privacy Act as explained on the LAC website: [Military history \(canada.ca\)](#), “How to ATIP a Record”. Files for veterans who have been deceased for twenty years or more are generally released without restriction.

A small number of women also served with Canada’s Merchant Navy. Merchant Marine service records, are held by Veterans Affairs Canada and requests for files should be made using the Access to Information and Privacy Act and can be made online: [Access to Information and Privacy \(ATIP\) - Knowing your rights - Veterans Affairs Canada](#)

### Canadian Army Women’s Corps (CWAC)

Administration of the Canadian Army Women’s Corps as well as information on training, deployment and activities can be found in unit war diaries. There are 143 diaries encompassing the Director General of the Corps, administrative units and depot companies, Basic and Advanced Training Centres, bands and HQ London (England) area. These records have been digitized and are online at LAC (reference: R112-6757-1, volumes 16546-16631).

Unfortunately, there are no similar records for the RCAF or the Navy.

### RCAF Women’s Division (WDs)

WDs provided extensive administrative support for the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP). Under the Plan, more than 100,000 airmen and women were trained at more than sixty locations across Canada, flight training schools, navigation, bombing, etc, and all of these wartime bases kept a “war diary” of their activities. These records, RCAF Operations Record Books (ORBs), have been digitized and are available on Heritage Canadiana ([Héritage \(canadiana.ca\)](#)). To narrow the search to a specific location, use “Collection Search” on the LAC website.

Some locations have been immortalized with a website, such as Wings Over Claresholm ([Wings Over Claresholm: The RCAF Service Flying Training School No. 15 in World War II \(communitystories.ca\)](http://communitystories.ca)). The site includes a good description of the work undertaken by WDs at No. 15 Service Flying Training School located at Claresholm, Alberta.

## **Second World War, 1939-1945: Books and Websites**

### *General*

Bruce, Jean. *Back the Attack! Canadian Women during the Second World War at Home and Abroad* (Toronto, ON: Macmillan, 1985)

Gossage, Carolyn. *Greatcoats and Glamour Boots: Canadian Women at War (1939-1945)* (Toronto, ON: Dundurn Press, 1991)

Stacey, C.P. and Barbara M. Wilson. *The Half-Million: The Canadians in Britain, 1939-1946* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1987)

She Also Serves: Jewish Women in the Canadian Armed Forces ([Research - She Also Serves | Home | University of Calgary \(ucalgary.ca\)](http://ucalgary.ca)).

This site includes an extensive list of Jewish women who served in uniform during the Second World War, including biographies and photographs

On Newfoundlanders in the three services, see Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador ([Newfoundlanders and Labradorians in Other Allied Forces \(heritage.nf.ca\)](http://heritage.nf.ca)).

### *Canadian Women's Army Corps*

Arney, Ada. *Here Come the Khaki Skirts, the Women Volunteers: A Pictorial Review of the Canadian Army Women's Corps during the Second World War* (Cobalt, ON: Highway Book Shop, 1988)

Conrod, W. Hugh. *Athene, Goddess of War: The Canadian Women's Army Corps, Their Story* (Dartmouth, NS: 1983)

Roe, Kathleen Robson. *War Letters of the CWAC* (Toronto, ON: Kakabeka Publishing, 1975)

Russell, Ruth Weber. *Proudly She Marched: Training Canada's World War II Women in Waterloo County* (Kitchener-Waterloo, ON: Canadian Federation of University Women, 2006)

### *RCAF Women's Division*

Bryce, Gladys, *First In, Last Out: The RCAF, Women's Division and Nursing Sisters in World War II* (University Women's Club of Toronto, 2010)

Buch, Mary Hawkins with Carolyn Gossage. *Props on Her Sleeve: The Wartime Letters of a Canadian Airwoman* (Toronto, ON: Dundurn Press, 1997)

Johnson, Sara E. *To Spread Their Wings* (Spruce Grove, AB: Saraband Productions, 1990)

Ziegler, Mary. *We Serve That Men May Fly: The Story of the Women's Division Royal Canadian Air Force* (Hamilton, ON: 1973)

RCAF Airwomen ([Welcome to www.rcfairwomen.ca](http://www.rcfairwomen.ca)). Includes a "Last Post" database with name of the service woman (+ maiden name if known), date and location of death and wartime rank, if known.

Silver Hawk Author ([RCAF Women's Division \(RCAF WD\) \(silverhawkauthor.com\)](http://silverhawkauthor.com)). One of a series of short article on women in the military. The site includes a large number of wartime photographs drawn from LAC, the Department of national Defence and elsewhere.

What did you do in the RCAF, Grandma? ([What Did You Do in the RCAF, Grandma? - Elinor Florence](http://www.whatdidyoudointhercaf.com))

#### *Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service*

Greer, Rosamond. *The Girls of the King's Navy* (Victoria, BC: Sono Nis Press, 1983)

Kallin, Anne. *Proudly She Marched: Training Canada's World War II Women in Waterloo County* (Kitchener-Waterloo: Canadian Federation of University Women, 2007).

For Posterity's Sake: A Royal Canadian Navy Historical Project ([Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service \(WRCNS\) - For Posterity's Sake \(forposterityssake.ca\)](http://forposterityssake.ca)). This site is packed with information about the RCN and for the WRENS, photographs, clippings and biographies of those who "crossed the bar".

Plows, Emilie Anne. "Serving their Country: The Story of the WRENS, 1942-1946" Canadian Military Journal, volume 9, no. 2. Available online: [Serving Their Country: the Story of the Wrens, 1942-1946 \(forces.gc.ca\)](http://forces.gc.ca)

CFB Esquimalt Naval Museum ([WRCNS - The Wrens - CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum](http://www.wrcns.ca)).

Includes some good reference material, photographs and biographies of WRENS who died while in service.

#### *Canadian Red Cross*

Cooper, Lois MacDonald. *Wartime Letters Home* (Ottawa, ON: Borealis Press, 2005)

### **Both World Wars**

If researching a woman in uniform from Waterloo County, Ontario, be sure to check out "History in the Making" at the Kitchener Public Library ([Search | History in the Making | Kitchener Public Library \(kpl.org\)](http://www.kpl.org)). Soldier Information Cards were compiled during both world wars for men and women from the County with brief summaries of his or her military service and may include a photograph and, for the

Second World War, relevant newspaper clippings. The cards have been digitized and available online at the KPL.

### **Royal Canadian Legion – Military Service Recognition Books**

Legion Commands, organized by Province, have been soliciting and publishing annually or semi-annually short biographies of those within their Command who have served in uniform. These publications, all digitized, are available on the website of each Command and now total 122 volumes (as of October 2023). The biographies vary in length and often include a photograph, especially those from the Second World War. Those who served in other conflicts are included as well such as the First World War, Korea, Peacekeeping and in one volume, a family member who served in the American Revolution! Some volumes have “war bride” stories, too, especially Saskatchewan. Several Commands have additional historical information in each volume, such as extended biographies, reminiscences and stories.

All are online and freely available with the exception of the first 10 volumes published by Newfoundland and Labrador Command. Only Ontario Command has a Master Index to its nine volumes. Note that Quebec Command does not appear to have participated in this initiative.

As of November 2020, this is the breakdown of volumes by Command:

Newfoundland and Labrador: Lest We Forget Books, 22 volumes (12 online)  
Nova Scotia & Nunavut: Veteran Service Recognition Book, 18 volumes  
New Brunswick: Military Service Recognition Book, 20 volumes  
Ontario: Military Service Recognition Book, 9 volumes and a Master Index  
Manitoba: Military Service Recognition Book, 13 volumes  
Saskatchewan: Military Service Recognition Book, 15 volumes  
Alberta & Northwest Territories: Military Service Recognition Book, 14 volumes  
British Columbia & Yukon: Military Service Recognition Book, 21 volumes

### **Concluding Note:**

This handout is not meant to be definitive in any way. There is almost no end to books and websites dedicated to aspects of the world wars, not to mention the extensive military holdings of Library and Archives Canada. To list all relevant books and websites would be an enormous undertaking, I have left you with a sampling! The usual advice applies – start with what you know, familiarize yourself with the nature of your ancestor’s military service and “go over the top” to explore the many resources that will document the role that Canadians, and women in particular, have played in our military history.

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