

Researching Canadian WW 1 Military Mail

By Wayne Schnarr

Mail to and from military personnel in World War 1 are key components of Canadian history. The Canadian Postal Corps (CPC) received almost 124 million letters for Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) troops overseas and handled almost 72 million letters mailed by those CEF soldiers. I estimate another 25 million were mailed through the British military postal system and at least another 5 million were sent through the GPO system by soldiers in the UK camps. There were also the letters to and from the soldiers at the Canadian militia camps and those sent by the government's Militia and Defence Department.

From over 200 million mail items, there may be about 25,000 covers and cards which still exist (author's estimate), and unfortunately most of the covers do not have the letters inside. There is a story behind every piece of mail and these stories should be researched.

There are 3 components to researching military mail – a research objective, a research strategy, and access to relevant information. The objective could be as simple as identifying the military post office where the item was mailed, or as complex as studying the military history of the soldier, the censor, and their military unit. The strategy will depend upon the information on the mail item, which could be as little as the postal marking and mailing address, or could also include the sender's name, their regimental number, the censor's name, the censor marking, and the message on the postcard or in the letter.

There are many potential sources of information which can help the researcher achieve their objective. Postal history collectors and dealers will know which sources will probably be most useful. Some philatelic organizations have publications and study group newsletters which specialize in military postal history, such as the Canadian Military Mail Study Group of BNAPS, the Postal History Society of Canada, and the UK-based Forces Postal History Society. The internet is an almost endless source, including government archives, independent military writers, and military unit histories.

One government publication titled '*Lest We Forget Information Package First World War*' is available as a downloadable pdf at <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/lest-we-forget/Documents/first-world-war-information-package.pdf>. This publication includes information on assessing personnel files, military abbreviations, and a First World War bibliography.

The usefulness of the mailing address is highly variable. Mail to a 'Miss' could be to a sister, fiancé, potential or actual girlfriend, or a local girl to whom numerous soldiers write. In most cases, it will not be possible to find a link from this person to the soldier sending the mail. Mail to a 'Mrs.' is probably to the wife or mother of the sender and gives the

surname of the soldier. Mail to a 'Mr.' is usually to the father and mail to 'Esquire' is usually to a son or nephew. For each Canadian mailing address, the 1911 and 1921 censuses may be useful, both have been digitized, are searchable, and are available online.

<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/1911/Pages/1911.aspx>

<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/1921/Pages/search.aspx>

Almost every mail item will have a postal marking identifying where the item was mailed. The most complete source for WW 1 Canadian military postal markings is the recently published *BNAPS Catalogue of Canadian Military Mail Markings, Volume 1 – Early Forts to pre-World War 2* (edited by Wayne Schnarr; published in 2023). There are 2 publications which more broadly cover British Army postal markings: Alistair Kennedy & George Crabb, *The Postal History of the British Army in World War I (Before and After – 1903 to 1929)* (George Crabb, 1977), and Edward B. Proud - *History of the British Army Postal Service, Vol. II, 1903-1927* (Proud-Bailey Co. Ltd., 1982). Many soldiers in France took leave in Paris and mail could be posted at the local BEF post office (APO S5) or the civilian postal office. Soldiers at the UK camps and on leave in the UK often used civilian post offices.

The other military marking on all mail from soldiers in the field was the censor marking accompanied by the censor's signature. The legibility of the signatures ranges from very clear to partially legible (most common) to an illegible mess. The most complete source for WW 1 Canadian censor markings is the BNAPS publication *Canadian Military Censor Markings Used In Europe During World War 1* (edited by Wayne Schnarr, published in 2022). A publication which more broadly covers British Army censor markings is by F. W. Daniel, *The Field Censor Systems of the Armies of the British Empire 1914 – 1918* (published by the FPHS, 1984).

The most difficult part of the story for a piece of WW 1 military mail is usually identifying the sender and/or the censor. The full name of the soldier will be found on mail to and from the Canadian militia camps, most Field Service Cards, Honour Envelopes, some postcards, and on mail to soldiers in the field which has been redirected. Whether you have the full name, last name and initials, or a partial name, the key information source is personnel files found at the following site:

<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/personnel-records/Pages/search.aspx>.

- FPO 188 marking is assigned to the 10th Brigade, 4th Canadian Division at the date in the marking April 7, 1917.
- The sender is identified as William S Donald by the signature on the card.
- The soldier can further be identified as Pte. William Stirling Donald (regimental Number 812225) by searching the personnel files at the internet site mentioned above.
- The Attestation Paper in the personnel files shows that he enlisted on July 10, 1916, at Edmonton, Alberta where he was living.
- The Attestation Paper also shows he was born in Helensburgh Scotland, was married and his wife was living in Kilmacolm, Scotland.
- Another document in the files shows they had 2 sons. That document also shows his widowed mother lived at 2 Prince Albert Terrace, Helensburgh, Scotland - the same address on the Field Service Card.
- The files also have records which list events including promotions, transfers, medical treatments, vacation leave, etc. These records show he was with the 50th Battalion, 10th Brigade at the date on this card, consistent with the FPO 188 postal marking.
- Further information on any CEF unit can be found at the following internet site - <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/Pages/units-canadian-expeditionary-force.aspx>. At the bottom of this web page there is a list of unit categories, including Infantry Battalions. Clicking on that tab leads to a 737-page pdf and clicking on the 50th Battalion line leads to a brief history of the battalion and a list of all related documents available in the archives.
- Sadly, the personnel files also show that Pte. Donald was killed-in-action on April 12, 1917, only 6 days after he wrote this card.
- War diaries provide details of a unit's daily activities. Entering 'War Diaries 50th Battalion' in the search function on the following web page <https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/index> will list relevant documents, including War Diaries - 50th Canadian Infantry Battalion for the period August 10 1916 to December 31 1917 (a 285 page pdf can be downloaded).
- Pages 75 and 76 outline the battalion's activities on April 12. The battalion was at Souchez, and the action was part of the battle for Vimy Ridge. The following sentences are from page 76.
 - The enemy put up a good fight but thanks to the snow-storm could not see our men more than 20 or 30 yards away.
 - All objectives were reached at 5:45 AM.
 - Casualties were very light on account of snow-storm.
- The following description from <https://canadiansatarms.ca/battle-of-vimy-ridge/> complements the War Diaries but also provides a more realistic perspective on the cost of capturing Vimy Ridge.
 - The following afternoon, renewed artillery and infantry attacks, with help from 4th Division reserve battalions, finally put Hill 145 in Canadian hands. Two days later on 12 April, the Pimple was also captured after an hour of fierce combat in driving snow.

- The four-day battle was over, and Vimy Ridge was finally in Allied hands – a stunning, but costly victory. The fighting left 3,598 Canadians dead and another 7,000 wounded. There were an estimated 20,000 casualties on the German side. Another 4,000 Germans were taken prisoner.
- Canadian soldiers killed overseas are buried in cemeteries near the battles where they were killed. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission takes care of these graves and the location of the graves for a soldier can be found at <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/>. Pte. Donald is buried or commemorated at Canadian Cemetery No. 2, Neuville - St. Vaast.

I have briefly assessed more than 1,000 covers and cards in editing the 2 BNAPS publications on WW 1 Canadian military and censor markings. While only a few of the soldiers sending these mail items were killed in action, I am sure that most returning soldiers bore physical and mental damage resulting from their participation in WW 1. **There is a story behind every piece of mail and these stories should be researched.**