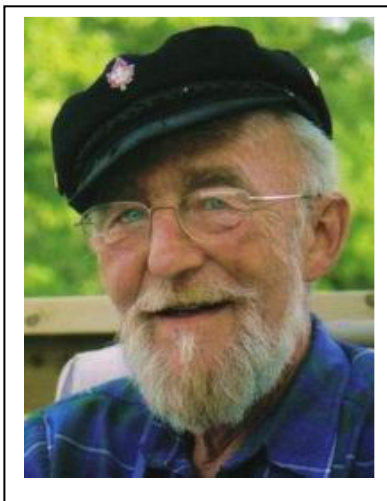


The Family Historian

Patrick Wohler

Column #30

Military Records



Many of us have ancestors who served in the armed forces, and this can provide another source of documentation for our Family History.

Library and Archives Canada has extensive files on the military but some are more helpful than others. If an ancestor served in the local militia, generally the only files that would show this are the muster rolls and pay lists but these rarely contain any additional personal information. Detailed personnel files of the militia are a 20th Century phenomenon in Canada. If the ancestor was an officer, and you know the regiment, there may be more detailed information in the officers' registers in Record Group (RG) 9.

Participation in a major conflict (War of 1812, Rebellions 1837-1838, Fenian Raids 1866 and 1870, Red River Rebellion 1870, North West Rebellion 1885, South African War 1899-1902) certainly produced more and more detailed records. Medal Registers, Pay Lists, Service Files and others are available and some are on microfilm which can be borrowed on inter-library loan.

The personnel service files for the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the First World War are in RG 150 and they can be very helpful. You can go to the website at <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/genealogy/index-e.html> and select <Databases>, then <Soldiers of the First World War>. On the new page that appears select <Search the Database>. A name or, more likely, a list of similar names will appear with their Regimental numbers and the reference for their file. Click on the icon beside the name you want and on the new page there is a hot link for instructions on how to arrange to see or obtain a copy of the file. Most importantly, there is a page icon and if you click on this you will see a digitized copy of their Attestation Papers.

This form, which is a sort of application to enlist, contains vital data about the individual and is absolutely essential if there were several people with same name. I found ten Charles Hickey's.

The opportunity to obtain a photocopy of the whole file is attractive, but the ones I have seen were fairly large and, if you need several, it could be somewhat costly. I prefer to see the original first if that option is available. I once bought a copy of a service file from the Public Record Office in Britain at a fairly hefty price only to find that it was for someone else with the identical name to my ancestor.

The information in the service file usually contains the attestation papers, pay records, information on transportation overseas, movements of the individual to different bases and units, medical reports, treatments for injuries, demobilization data, and, sometimes discipline for serious infractions.

The files do not have a complete record of campaigns, battles, or engagements nor do they necessarily document all injuries. Considering the conditions under which much of the documentation was produced and the possibility of some of it being lost or destroyed in action, this is hardly surprising. What you do get, however, is usually very worthwhile.

Once you know what units your ancestor was with at which time, a little bit of research into military history can show where they saw action.

Records from the Second World War are not quite as accessible. If you want a copy of a military personnel file from after the First World War, you will have to apply under the Access to Information Act. The veteran must have been deceased for more than 20 years and you have to prove that (unless they died on active service).

If the veteran has been dead less than 20 years, you will likely have to also prove that you are a member of the immediate family. Of course, if the veteran is still alive, they can provide written permission for you to see their file.

The archives is very sensitive to its responsibilities under the Privacy and Access to Information Acts, so it is best to talk to staff there before trying to gain access to these more recent documents.