

Studies in Documents

Amateur Photography by Soldiers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force

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At the outbreak of war in 1914, governments and military authorities in both Canada and Britain gave themselves very wide powers of control over publications and photography, the stated fear being that the enemy might learn valuable information through photographs. This fear was so exaggerated in Britain that, under the Defense of the Realm Act, photographers even found themselves “in conflict with authority for innocently portraying a peasant at work in the fields, or a fishing boat at sea.”¹ Moreover, military personnel were ignoring the General Routine Orders prohibiting “the taking of photographs and the sending of drawings and photographs to the Press.” Shortly after the Canadian Expeditionary Force arrived in France, Routine Order 189 ordered that “all cameras are to be sent home, each camera being examined by the censor before the parcel is passed by him, to ensure that there is no film in it.”²

This desire of the military authorities to limit access to photographic imagery was in basic conflict with the desire of newspapers and magazines to publish compelling photos, and the average citizen’s desire to see something of the conflict in which his country was involved. Canadian newspapers did not lack patriotism: soon after the declaration of war, they were filled with photographs of the young army pitching its tents at Valcartier, marching, drilling, and finally sailing off to war. There were also, early in the war, a number of views from the German side. Newspapers in Canada could rely on their own photographers, on free-lancers, or on commercial photographers such as the Panoramic Camera Company. Many of these photos were published in the rotogravure sections of the newspapers. Once the soldiers were overseas, however, the newspapers’ supply of photographs relating specifically to the CEF depended increasingly on what was sent back by individuals. Where, then, was the press and public to get photographic images of the armies and the war?

It should be understood that neither the British nor Canadian governments systematically exploited photography as a means of propaganda until 1916, when official war photographers were first assigned. This vacuum was partly filled by speculative commercial photography, evidently practised by both small and large firms. Knowing that the soldiers would want to send their friends and relatives photographs of their doings, many photographers issued postcards — most probably on speculation — of various units and groups of soldiers publicly doing soldierly activities. Pictures of route marches,

inspections, and the like were frequently purchased by soldiers and eventually came to Canada, where many were published in the illustrated newspapers.

And there was the soldier-amateur photographer. World War One was the first major war whose combatants included many soldiers who were also amateur photographers. Other wars had been photographed by professionals: Fenton in the Crimea in the 1850s; Brady and his team in the American Civil War in the 1860s; Keystone, and Underwood & Underwood, in the Boer and Russo-Japanese Wars. But World War One was the first major conflict to occur after the widespread democratization of photography wrought by Kodak. The war provoked a boom in photography. Kodak advertised its Vest Pocket model as "The Soldier's Kodak," advising "Make your own picture record of the War," and sales of this camera alone expanded fivefold in Britain between 1914 and 1915.³ Many soldiers took photographs related to their wartime activities: training camp, friends in uniform, shipboard photographs, the sights in Britain - all these subjects are commonly found in archival collections. Theoretically, Canadians could be presented with a view of war unlike anything they had previously experienced.⁴

In one respect, photographs by soldiers who were amateur photographers more closely reflect actual life in the army than do commercial photos, at least in those places where the soldier could use his camera. They often show the more personal and intimate side of men living in groups, the side not generally shown in publications. On the other hand, there is relatively little in the subject matter of amateur photographers which cannot be found in the official photographs.⁵

Photographs by amateurs seem to reflect the official line about the war, showing an optimism — or rather, not revealing a pessimism. Possibly the attitude of soldiers in taking certain photographs and not others was akin to that seen in letters sent home from the Front. Often soldiers wrote formulaic letters, stating only "I'm in the pink" or "We're bearing up well"; one officer complained that one of the burdens was having to censor such repetitious bromides.⁶ According to literary critic Paul Fussell, "the main motive determining these conventions was a decent solicitude for the feelings of the recipient. What possible good could result from telling the truth?"⁷ Would not the same solicitude have governed the taking of photographs? In what way — even if it were possible to photograph — would a picture of an actual attack, of a night work party or of a trench cut through three years of battlefield, help those at home to understand what the situation actually was at the Front? The Front was not just a place; it was an assault on the senses of smell, hearing, feeling, and taste, and on the battlefield of slowly-rotting, waterlogged bodies, constantly being churned up by fresh artillery explosions, the dominant senses were smell and hearing, not sight. Sight was the airman's sense, a fact which may explain why so many collections of World War One photos come from airmen.⁸

Virtually all photographs by amateur photographers overseas in World War One are now found as prints. Many of them are anonymous, and even if they bear identification, it is often very modest: "Me and the boys 'somewhere in France'" might be typical, and little further appears. Supporting information doubtless was written in the letters — now lost — accompanying the photos. These photos are orphans, detached from their origins, and their historical documentary value is minimal.

Most of the photographs taken by soldier amateurs depict events in Canada or England, whereas those taken in France seem generally to have been the work of commissioned officers. Enough material taken by private soldiers in England exists to



"About July 25, 1915. A working party on S.125 near Ploegsteert Woods." Photo by Horace Brown. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, Documentary Art and Photography Division, PA-107255.

point up the absence of similar material from France. Why? Did soldiers photograph different subjects than did officers? Was there an unofficial point of view which might have found expression in soldiers' photographs? Do photographs by soldiers reveal facets of life in the trenches which the censor removed from the official record?

The Horace Brown collection of negatives and prints contains some answers.⁹ It is a truism that the value of records depends in part on determining the reason why those records were created in the first place, who created them, and under what circumstances. The majority of Brown's images were made in 1917 and 1918, most probably in Britain. They concern the life of a young subaltern in the Royal Naval Air Service: outings with various companions in England, and occasional shots of some of the air training establishments with which he was connected. But these images are of scant interest for two reasons: they have no identification and are seemingly unidentifiable, and they do not deal with life at the Front. It is the photos Brown took during training in 1914 and during active service in 1915 and 1916, which are unusual: for they are some of the very few existing photographs known to have been taken by a soldier rather than an officer at or near the Front.

There are 116 negatives and 39 prints in the Horace Brown collection. All of the negatives are from roll-film, and all of the images have been cut apart rather than being left joined as a roll; all appear to be on a nitrate cellulose base. Over the course of time a number of the negatives have darkened, and making prints from some of them is difficult. The darkening might suggest poor processing rather than just poor subsequent storage. It is impossible to say where the negatives were processed, but on 3 April 1915 Brown wrote to his family, "I have got a couple of films developed and am sending you twelve exposures."¹⁰ There are, however, only eight negatives in the collection which are clearly



"C.E.F. Grenadier Guards 87th Battalion, C.E.F. in trenches together at Armentieres, Feb. 1915." Photo by Horace Brown. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, Documentary Art and Photography Division, PA-107237.

from 1915; and of these seven can be butt-jointed at the points where they were cut apart, giving two sequences of two images and one sequence of three images. Without knowing the kinds of cameras used, it is impossible to know the order in which these photos were taken, for that would depend on whether the film travelled from left to right or in the reverse direction.¹¹ Brown may have used his own camera, or a succession of them, or used other peoples' equipment. At any rate, three distinct film sizes were used, with the largest being used at Valcartier in 1914, and the smallest, evidently using a film which had become available only shortly before the war, used for a brief time in 1915. The remaining photos were taken on 127 size film, a film size used in so many different cameras (including the Kodak Vestpocket) that it is one of the few roll-films still being produced.

The front page of the Montreal *Standard's* Illustrated Supplement of August 28, 1915, displayed five photographs entitled "St. Julien, Where the Blood of Our Brave Canadians Was Outpoured For Honour of Country and Weal of Humanity." According to the *Standard*, the photographs were "reproduced from snap-shots by W. Hammond, of Carleton Place." This somewhat ambiguous credit line — Hammond had for years been a professional photographer at Carleton Place — covered the fact that probably all but one of the photographs were by Horace Brown. The exception, bearing the caption, "In the Canadian Trenches in Flanders — Corp H. Brown, of the 2nd Battlion CEF, firing out of a loophole at the Germans 100 yards away," shows Brown taking aim while standing on what appears to be a fire step, so it possibly was taken in a front-line trench. This photo was doubtless taken by another soldier, possibly his commanding officer, Captain William Hooper, who appears in another photograph apparently taken in the same trench. Brown is the only individual identified in the five photographs; the captions of the other four carry little identification, using captions like "the boys who won imperishable glory at St. Julien." It is thus obvious that the photographs were taken before the gas attack at Ypres on 22 April.

How did the soldier get his photographs home? If he were in England there would be little or no problem in mailing them, but in France the military censorship could remove whatever was held to contravene the rules.¹² Taking them out on leave would be a solution; but soldiers and non-commissioned officers were rarely granted leave, certainly not as often as were officers. Furthermore, when not in the line, private soldiers seem to have had less freedom of movement than did officers. It is probable that officers had more opportunities to take photos, more chances to get negatives out of the fighting zone, and to obtain supplies of film, and were better able to keep their cameras in working order. However, there were soldiers who were exceptions to the rule. George Bell, an Englishman who joined the CEF in Windsor, Ontario, at war's outbreak and who slogged through to the end of 1918, recounts, "My sister mailed films to me from England, and I sent them back by soldiers to London, where they were developed and printed and the prints mailed to my sister who, in turn, mailed them to me, a roundabout method which worked quite successfully."¹³ Another method was to use the green envelopes sparingly supplied to the soldiers, which were not subject to censorship as they were to be used by soldiers who wanted to write about very personal matters. Soldiers were supposed to be discreet in their use, and the penalty for misuse could be fairly stiff; but they might have been useable for smuggling out photographs.¹⁴

From the tone of his letters, it seems that Brown took the most straightforward route and simply sent his photos home in the mail. However, this hypothesis fails to explain the seeming lack of photography by soldiers in France, especially given the relative abundance of images from Canada and England. Were Brown's photos simply not caught, while those of other soldiers were intercepted? Were the Standing Orders applied with great vigour, so that there were few cameras at the Front and therefore few photographs to send home?¹⁶ Or did cameras get to the Front, and then simply fail to survive the rigours of trench life? Were supplies of film difficult to come by? Were soldiers simply not interested in making images of the war while they were experiencing its horrors? We do not even know which questions really ought to be posed, and which are irrelevant: the study of photography in World War One still awaits the attention of both archivists and historians.

Notes

- 1 F.J. Mortimer, "The Year's Work," in *Photograms of the Year 1918* (London, 1919), p. 3.
- 2 RG 9, NARC box 202638, 1st Canadian Division Routine Orders, vol. 1.
- 3 Brian Coe and Paul Gates, *The Snapshot Photograph: The Rise of Popular Photography 1888-1939* (London, 1977), p. 34. The first rollfilm Kodak appeared commercially in 1888, but was far beyond the means of the average person. By the turn of the century prices had fallen drastically for box cameras; by 1914 even relatively complicated folding cameras were considerably cheaper than before.
- 4 The Defense of the Realm Act in Britain led the photographic annual *Photograms of the Year* to complain on several occasions about the apparent stupidity of the Act as it applied to amateur photographers, saying that, among other things, it had led to a concentration on portraiture in Britain during the War.
- 5 A note of caution: because official CEF photography began in 1916, almost two years of training and action in the field were not covered by official photographs. To fill the gap, the Canadian War Records Office began to copy amateurs' work, and this became part of the official record.
- 6 In fact, there was an official Field Service Post Card in which suggested sentences could be crossed out or left in as the sender desired. The suggested phrases were optimistic in tone: "I have been admitted into hospital" could be followed by "and am going on well" or "and hope to be discharged soon."
- 7 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1975), p. 182.
- 8 Two other obvious factors: airmen were generally officers, who had more pay and leave. But they also had barracks well behind the front lines, where they could leave cameras. Furthermore, (emphasizing the visual character of the airman's domain?), aerial reconnaissance work generally included photography.

- 9 National Archives of Canada, Documentary Art and Photography Division, Accession 1977-135. Horace Brown, brother of the well-known airman A. Roy Brown, had joined the militia well before the war, when he was only 15 or 16. In August 1914 he joined the 2nd Battalion of the First Canadian Division, trained at Valcartier and then on Salisbury Plain in England during the winter of 1914-15. In February, 1915 the 2nd Battalion went to France, where it fought at Neuve Chapelle and then moved to Belgium. Horace was ill in hospital during the German's 22 April gas attack on the Ypres salient; his company commander, Captain William Hooper, was taken captive. The battalion, after several moves, was again in the Ypres salient when on 13 June 1916 Brown tripped on his rifle, sending the bayonet deep into his chest. After hospitalization, he was invalided back to Canada where he successfully passed an officer's training course, and remained for much of 1917 as a recruiting officer in and around Carleton Place, Ontario. In the autumn, he enlisted in the Royal Naval Air Service, and returned first to England, then to training at Vendôme and then back to England. In October 1918 he had a cycling accident and developed pneumonia. He caught influenza early in 1919 and died on 18 February, aged 22.
- 10 From letter extracts kindly given the author by Horace Brown's brother, Mr. Howard Brown, of Carleton Place. The author would like to thank Mr. Brown for his donation of the Horace Brown collection to the National Archives.
- 11 Illustrations in Brian Coe's *Camera* indicate that there was no consistency in camera design, at least on this point. Brian Coe, *Cameras: From Daguerreotypes to Instant Pictures* (London, 1978). See in particular Chapter 9.
- 12 Harold Peat, author of *Private Peat*, includes as the second of the Ten Commandments of A Soldier While on Active Service: "Thou shalt not send any engraving nor any likeness of any airship in Heaven above or on any postcard of the Earth beneath, nor any drawing of any submarine under the sea, for I, the Censor, am a jealous Censor, visiting the iniquities of the offenders with three months C.B., but showing mercy unto thousands who keep my commandments." In the frontispiece to the book Peat is shown holding a camera, and there are various photos — some taken in France — included in the book. But the sources of these photos are not identified — although some are known official images — nor does he discuss photography in his book. But his comments might indicate that he had had problems because of his camera, or knew of some who had. Harold Peat, *Private Peat* (Toronto, [1916 ?]), p. 232.
- 13 George Bell, "Back to Blighty". Typescript manuscript in National Archives of Canada, MG 30, E 113.
- 14 "(I wondered last night if I am taking too many liberties with green envelopes. In Orders were four battalions who had lost the privilege through one man being indiscreet. The name of the individual one was published. I think I'd sooner be shot than have my battalion lose through me, — I guess I would be, anyway, — I must be very careful.)" "R.A.L." *Letters of a Canadian Stretcher Bearer* (Boston, 1918), p. 140.