



**SUPPLY
LINE**

Artifact Backgrounder

Canadian Official War Photography



DEFINITION

Canada's official photographic record of the First World War consists of the more than 8,000 photographs that were taken by professional photographers and approved by military authorities.

DID YOU KNOW?

In terms of volume and scope, the images taken by the Photographic Section of the Canadian War Records Office comprise one of the most valuable visual records of the First World War to survive anywhere in the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The earliest known **war photography** dates from the Mexican-American War (1846–1847). However, the first conflicts to be widely photographed were the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the American Civil War (1861–1865). During the American Civil War, Mathew Brady emerged as the world's first professional war photographer. Brady led a team of photographers, equipped with mobile dark rooms, to create a visual record of the war.

At the time of the American Civil War, unwieldy cameras and long film exposure times were best suited to photographing static subjects that could be carefully posed or arranged. Action shots were very difficult to achieve. By the time of the First World War, advancements in technology led to the availability of small, portable cameras and flexible film with shorter exposure times. This allowed professional and amateur photographers to carry cameras closer to the fighting than ever before, and even to capture action shots.

EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

Upon the outbreak of the First World War, British Army commanders disapproved of any kind of photography on or near the battlefield, for fear that images might fall into German hands, providing potentially valuable information to the enemy. Although soldiers were forbidden to take photographs in the battlefield area, some ignored the restrictions. The Canadian War Museum holds a small collection of these rare private war photographs.

As far as official photography goes, Canadian authorities saw the value of a photographic record of the national war effort overseas. In January 1916, Sir Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook) received authorization from the government to establish the Canadian War Records Office (CWRO). Its mandate was to document the war through photographs, artwork and motion-pictures.

Captain Henry E. Knobel, Captain Ivor Castle and Lieutenant William Rider-Rider were Canada's official war photographers. They had experience as photojournalists before the war.

Between the summer of 1916 and the end of the war, Canada's official war photographers took nearly 8,000 photographs, showing Canadian soldiers in a wide range of situations, in the forward trenches and in towns and villages away from the fighting. The official photographs capture many aspects of the soldier's experiences, including both work and play. The photographers also took great interest in technology, taking many shots of airplanes, artillery and other weapons used in the First World War.

VOCABULARY LIST

Artillery:

Weapons that use mechanical or explosive (chemical) energy to project munitions over distances ranging from hundreds of meters to dozens of kilometers. Generally speaking, any device that fires a projectile with a calibre (diameter) of 2 cm or greater is considered an artillery weapon.

Forward trenches:

The trenches that were situated closest to the enemy on the battlefield. These would be the starting points for attacks against enemy positions, and the first lines of defence in the event of an enemy attack.