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Artifact Backgrounder

# Canadian War Photography: Private Photographs



## DEFINITION

Private or amateur war photography consisted of personal photographs taken by soldiers with their own cameras, distinct from official or press photography.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Howard van Allen was born in Nimes, France on May 8, 1895, to Canadian parents Frederick and Mary Van Allen. The van Allens had three other children, all of whom had been born in Europe.

In March 1912, the family returned to Canada and headed west, settling in Saskatchewan. William Van Allen, then 17, joined a local militia regiment, the 29th Saskatchewan Light Horse, and later began working in a Calgary bank. When the war began, van Allen was one of many caught up in the immediate excitement, and on August 23, 1914, he left with Saskatchewan's first contingent of volunteers, bound for Camp Valcartier in Quebec.

Once at Valcartier, van Allen found himself in the 5th Battalion (Western Cavalry) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The battalion sailed for Great Britain on September 29, 1914, and after spending time training on Salisbury Plain, van Allen and his unit arrived in France in February 1915. In late 1915 or early 1916, van Allen

was seriously wounded, and his left arm was amputated at the shoulder. After several months convalescing in England, he returned to Canada.

After the war, van Allen became a reporter, working for papers such as the *Winnipeg Free Press* and the *Ottawa Journal*. In 1926, at age 31, he married Isabelle Murray Walker of Ottawa. In 1929, he joined the federal civil service, becoming the assistant director of publicity for the Department of Trade and Commerce. He would spend the rest of his life working in communications for the government. He died on March 8, 1973, at age 77.

In 1981, Isabelle van Allen donated her late husband's wartime photo albums to the Canadian War Museum, along with some artefacts. The photos are a good example of private or amateur war photography. They document the experiences of a soldier from his own perspective, which can differ from that disseminated by official or even press photographs.

## EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

The First World War was the first major conflict to occur after the development of mass marketed cameras, and thus it was also the first whose participants included significant numbers of soldiers who also happened to be amateur photographers. Since the 1890s, personal cameras had become smaller, cheaper, and easier to use. Action photography would remain difficult until the 35mm camera was developed in the late 1920s, but still shots were easily taken. Kodak even advertised its Vest Pocket camera as 'the Soldier's Kodak,' with advertisements stating that "your Kodak picture record of the war will be a priceless possession in years to come."

First World War photography was either official or private, and while the content of the images can be broadly similar across these two categories, differences did occur. Photos taken for personal reasons – not for publication or propaganda purposes – can reveal a more intimate version of the war than that seen in official images. For the soldier, taking photos in Canada or in England was generally easier, as front-line photography was a bit more difficult. Here, cameras were subject to a variety of security-based restrictions, and the ability of soldiers to take (and disseminate) pictures could be dependent on the attitudes of their superior officers.

# VOCABULARY LIST

**Propaganda:**

The deliberate dissemination of information, both true and false, in order to influence the thoughts and actions of individuals and/or groups. In wartime, nations use propaganda to encourage its citizens to fight, to support the war effort, and also to keep morale from falling. During the First World War, propaganda was spread primarily through posters, newspapers, and pamphlets. Speeches, rallies, and photographs were other ways of promoting wartime messages.