



Photography during the First World War

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The First World War was the first major conflict in which large number of soldiers knew how to use a camera—due primarily to the release of the Kodak Brownie in 1900. In 1912, the Eastman Kodak Company introduced the Vest Pocket Kodak camera, and in 1914 it was marketed specifically to soldiers to make photographic souvenirs of their time at the front. Sales of this tiny camera (designed to fit inside a vest pocket) exploded—an estimated one in five Allied officers carried one.

Professional press photographers and journalists had been banned from the front, but individual soldiers could take photographs so long as they agreed not to send them home or to any newspapers. For their own part, the press was anxious to get images from the front. Newspapers such as *L'illustration* and *Le Miroir* in France, and the *Illustrated War News* in London, held photography competitions to encourage soldiers to submit their photographs. Some soldiers even supplemented their income by selling photographs to the press. By March 20, 1915, British and Canadian soldiers were ordered to send their cameras home. Enforcement against soldier photography was carried out to varying degrees depending on commanding officers, although taking photographs was technically punishable by court martial.

By 1916, when it had long since become apparent that photographs would make their way to the home front despite the ban, the Canadian War Records Office (CWRO) was given permission to appoint an official photographer. This way, the photographs made available to the press could be controlled through censorship.



Canada employed three official photographers between 1916 and 1918—Captain Harry Knobel (from April-August 1916); Captain William Ivor Castle (from August 1916-June 1917); and Lieutenant William Rider-Rider (from June 1917-November 1918). Together they produced over 4000 photographs of Canadians at war that were printed in newspapers, sold as souvenirs and put on exhibition. Each of the official photographs has a negative number—usually visible in a corner—that begins with an “O” and is followed by the number it was received by the CWRO (O-1450 was the 1450th photograph received by the organization from the photographers).

The original negatives and prints created by Canada’s official photographers are now housed at Library and Archives Canada. Users can find images online using LAC’s archives search with keywords like “Battle of Vimy Ridge” or “Prisoner of War” or “Canadian War Records Office.” Or, simply follow this link to reach all of the official First World War photographs on the Library and Archives Canada.

Further reading:

- Jane Carmichael, *First World War Photographers* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1989).
- Mark Holborn and Hilary Roberts, *The Great War: A Photographic Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).
- Peter Robertson, *Relentless Verity: Canadian Military Photographers Since 1885* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press/The Public Archives of Canada Series, 1973).
- Ann Thomas, *The Great War: The Persuasive Power of Photography* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions in Association with the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2014).

Library and Archives Canada/PA-001835
Library and Archives Canada/PA-003737