History is a compilation of sources that tend to examine or refer to the same event in time. Primary sources are used as the principal footing for this analysis. The First World War, occurring between 1914 and 1918, happened before the lifetime of most people alive today; so we must, as historians, develop accounts of what happened from both primary sources and secondary sources that have been compiled since. The primary document is the most meaningful, as secondary sources can perpetuate mistakes and be heavily biased, whereas primary sources, when reviewed in partnership with other primary sources, can develop a much more vivid picture of the events as they happened. In the study of the First World War, official war diaries kept and filed by units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) are important primary documents that can be used in conjunction with other primary and secondary sources to explore the events of the various campaigns. Focusing on some of the diaries of Battalions, Brigades, and Divisions in 1918 allows in depth analysis of tactical placement, movements and decisions at the time.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, individual primary sources such as this are limited in their scope, their representation of the men, the conditions and the effects of battle, and they are ultimately government documents that may have been monitored, censored or manipulated prior to final publication. Due to this, it is important to use the war diaries as pieces of a greater unit that only become whole upon appraisal of multiple and varying documents related in topic and time.

The use of primary sources in historiographical writing is both important and necessary. History is the collection of data about a time, subject, topic or event that happened in a period prior to today. This can be days, years, decades, centuries, even millennia ago; however, it is only recognized history because it was either logically reasoned from more recent findings, such as the scientific understanding of the creation of the Universe, or because it has been recorded in some form and maintained through time. History takes many shapes, such as storytelling, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, video and audio recordings, photographs and official records. Any historical event that is recorded is either an original primary source or it is developed from a primary source; either way, primary documents are usually compiled around the time of the event, and, although they can be compiled at a later date, they are always built from those first hand experiences and documentation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Primary sources can be mistaken, and they can be biased. They can also be inaccurate or fragmented. This is arguably a limitation to primary sources, but it is not encompassing. These documents are building blocks to creating a bigger picture.

The war diaries as compiled by the Government of Canada in the Library and Archives Canada. Currently accessible online they are a first-hand account of the Canadian Expeditionary Force’s movements in the field of battle. They were daily logs written by officers or clerks on the front line, and sent to the Canadian War Records Office (CWRO) in London, England. Here they were inspected by archivists for completeness and filed as a record of the work and achievements of the Canadian Forces.[[3]](#footnote-3) It was intended that these records would one day publicize the contribution of Canada and form a basis from which to develop a full and complete history at a later date.[[4]](#footnote-4) Today, the records appear in digital form, which make their use particularly straight-forward in regards to ascertaining and comparing the placement and movement of a unit or units at a particular moment in time.

The Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1918 consisted of four full divisions of infantry, field artillery, machine gunners, medical personnel, engineers and signallers, among others. Under each division there were brigades, most notably the infantry brigades which each held 4 to 5 battalions of soldiers.[[5]](#footnote-5) By the end of the war in 1918, these men totalled 110,000.[[6]](#footnote-6) War diaries were kept and recorded based on division, brigade or battalion, meaning that each entry was representative of, at minimum, 1000 men (as per battalion), and reaching much higher numbers further up the chain of organization.

The war diaries were a required record; there were orders handed down from the highest Canadian command, a power force that could not be argued with. The purposes of the diaries are now used for tactical, training and publicity reasons, but it is not known how much about the intention behind the records was acknowledged by the Canadian soldiers. The instructions given to the note takers were lacking, and the stationary provided was simple in format. The document contains only columns for place, date, hour, summary of events and remarks or appendix information. It is possible to see stark differences in the record keeping of different individuals between units. For instance, the war diary kept by the 15th Canadian Infantry Brigade, part of the Canadian 5th division that was to be absorbed into the remaining 4 divisions by March 1918, records each day curtly. Each day opens with a brief description of the weather, followed by one sentence that describes the day’s events. As such, each entry reads similar to, “Thursday January 17th, 1918. Weather Cold & Rain. All Bns (battalions) did 6 hrs Individual Training indoors.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In comparison, the diary kept by the 15th battalion of the 3rd brigade in the 1st division reads more free flowing, and less structured, while providing seemingly more information. For example,

15-1-18. The Platoon which had taken first place in the Divisional Competition, first round, competed again in the second round, but unfortunately missed taking first place: The Lewis Gun crew did excellent work, heading the Division in this respect: The Battalion carried out training in Bayonet Fighting, Wiring, Gas Helmet Drill and Company Drill: The Details carried out their special training:[[8]](#footnote-8)

This is offset by entries such as “17-1-18. Training carried out as above, the flood subsided, communication becoming normal:”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Further differentiation can be seen during periods of direct battle, where the 16th Canadian Infantry Battalion took note of the Battle of Amiens on August 8th with a narrative 3 pages in length, attached as an appendix to the diary entry for that date.[[10]](#footnote-10) The variations in style and organization of these separate diary entries indicate the potential complexities of using these documents. When using them to procure information relating to events, the reader may be faced with limited descriptive and potentially useless material to which they must supply further research, or they may find an in depth overview of the event, almost blow for blow. This is the flaw of a system of documents intended for a purpose outside the realm of the writer, and never precisely clarified.

When noting the fact that the war diaries were to be kept daily it is easy to understand why the recorder would want to keep entries succinct and to the point. The diaries were meant as a record of action in the field, and as a result were not inclusive of periods spent travelling from Canada to Europe, training before deployment, or time spent otherwise outside the scope of battle. When focusing on the year 1918, it is known that every division of the Canadian Corps were active in Europe; therefore, it should be expected that most, if not all diaries should be complete. When looking at the diaries length and the differences in emphasis as noted above, it is apparent that most units adhered to commands to present diary entries, but the level of engagement and focus differed greatly.

When critiquing primary sources it is important to remember that the war diaries, as documents pertaining to military affairs, are categorised as government documents, and as such are considered to be classified material that would not be available to regular citizens, or even soldiers. Due to this, it is important to consider the possibility of censorship in the documents as well as the timing of the release of the files. In the case of the war diaries, the digitized copies show the originals as they would have looked either hand written or typed in 1918. They also contain the signatures of the division, brigade or battalion commanders who authorized them complete and ready to be sent to London. Due to this apparent authenticity, and the inclusion of all dates, place names, and troop movements it is probable that these files are without censorship, but it does not specify when the files became declassified and permissible for citizen viewing. It has been almost 100 years since the events of the First World War, and it would be arrogant to believe that the Canadian government allowed access to such files immediately after the conflict ended. Even historians of the era would have been limited in their viewing if the publications were deemed top secret.

This type of censorship can be seen more precisely in other sources, such as the book by H. M. Urquhart, “The History of the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish): Canadian Expeditionary Force in the Great War, 1914-1919.” This book was published in 1932, just 13 years after the end of the war, and merely 7 years before the outbreak of a second global conflict. The book is an official history of the 16th Infantry Battalion of the 3rd Infantry Brigade in the 1st Division of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. At the beginning of the book the author acknowledges the Department of National Defence for what he describes as “free access to official diaries, orders, messages, maps and other documents.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Despite being an official Regimental history it is important to take in to consideration the fact that the information presented to the author may not have been whole and unedited, and as a result, the history may be blemished or embellished.

Another consideration when using primary sources is the comparison between the size of the data presented and what it represented. Bearing in mind a battalion was composed of over 1000 men, broken down in to companies and below that, in to platoons, it is important to take note of the fact that a diary chronicling the daily action in the field for a battalion, such as the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish), or the 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles of Canada), could not, and does not account for movements of every man, gun or machine. However, it is used to give an overview of the unit, more often referring to them as a collective. This can be seen in examples from the 24th Battalion, “Battalion carried on with Training as per Syllabus,”[[12]](#footnote-12) “Arrived in area 2.30am and bivouaced [sic] in wood and trenches, rested during day.”[[13]](#footnote-13) These statements refer to the units movements either as “Battalion”, or in an implied manner, speaking as the voice of the section. What are consequently missed in these instances are the comings and goings of the smaller groups of men, who undoubtedly had varying experiences with diverse training, varied bivouac locations, and dissimilar activities during periods of rest. As a tactical record, the description of free time is of less importance, but the potential locations for bivouac sites and paths followed en route to the camp are lacking in this primary document. This determination would require extensive extra research by the reader.

Exceptions to this, where the larger battalion is described in a smaller state, can be found in reference to a single officer, most commonly the officer commanding, or a visiting dignitary, for example “… while en route marched past the Corps Commander (Lieut. Genl. Sir Arthur W. Currie, K.C.N., K.C.M.G.,)… as well as Genl. Mewburn and other staffs…”[[14]](#footnote-14). Likewise, this can be seen during a battle, where the location of each company is critical in the tactical decisions made, or is based on an order resulting from said tactical decisions. This is demonstrated during the battle of Amiens on August 8th, when “(t)he 24th Cdn. Battalion attacked with “B” and “D” Companies … with “C” and “A” Companies in support…”[[15]](#footnote-15). In this example, discussing the tactical division of men to attack and support, the dissection is required; otherwise, the battalion remains a single unit, making the use of these primary documents difficult for someone researching individual company movements, or more precise company positions. This information would have to be gathered from other sources, potentially using war diaries if enough detail were provided, or as an overview.

The war diaries are complete day for day, giving at least a mediocre overview of the major activity of the day. There were regulations in place for the war diaries to be handed in at the end of each month. Looking at the digitized copies, it is impossible to tell if the information was added daily, every couple of days or at any available opportunity. Hence, it would be impossible to know whether the daily record was added soon after its occurrence and thus, if the potential passage of time could have caused any missed or distorted information. It is easy to imagine, though not necessarily comprehend the rigours of battle, but it would be safe to assume that with battle raging all day and all night there would be little rest to put down a rifle and begin to write. Even as a junior officer or clerk, the current living battle would supersede the official record. That would account for grouped dating such as “August 8 – 12 inclusive”[[16]](#footnote-16) as seen in the war diaries of the 24th Canadian Infantry Battalion, most likely recorded after the full battle was complete or, conversely the diaries of the 2nd Canadian Machine Gun Battalion which further break down the single day in to times dependent upon discrete orders and the subsequent actions carried out.[[17]](#footnote-17) As a primary source, this disparity in documentation time is not inconsequential; however, it would be negligible considering the reasonable time frame marking it as a primary source, so long as consideration was given by the reader.

Many of the diaries from all different branches refer to places of note, importance or battle. It is important for a reader to carefully study locations listed in the diaries because these are the first line of battle grounds that the soldiers fought on. Most major battles gain a title, typically based on the major location that the fighting occurred or its ultimate objective. However, this does not take in to consideration the outlying areas, the muster points, or sites of smaller tactical advances. The war diaries are comprehensive in their listing of locations due, in part, to the requirement of daily input, allowing for record of each and every village, town or city being passed. Overall, this paints a broader and more detailed picture of the battle ground, and illustrates the three dimensional nature of war. For instance, the diaries of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, dated September 27th – Oct 2nd 1918, the period of time in which troops from the Brigade took part in the capture and crossing of the Canal du Nord on the push to Cambrai, make frequent mention of Marquion, Sauchy-Lestree, Oisy-le-Verger and Epinoy,[[18]](#footnote-18) Sancourt, Blecourt, Bantigny, Cuvillers[[19]](#footnote-19) and Abancourt.[[20]](#footnote-20) These places, readily identifiable on the map,[[21]](#footnote-21) are not instantly recognizable as significant locations, based solely on the focus of battle, identified by its name; however, the use and emphasis of them in the war diaries indicates their importance to the overall battle.

Many of the war diaries are so complete as to contain full typed accounts of battle situations,[[22]](#footnote-22) copies of hand written notes sent by runners to the commanders of companies and battalions,[[23]](#footnote-23) maps of the battle grounds showing intended targets and planned routes,[[24]](#footnote-24) as well as map co-ordinates for locations of heavy artillery,[[25]](#footnote-25) and notes of congratulations from superior officers.[[26]](#footnote-26) Most of these appear as appendices to the main war diary, but the map co-ordinates, for instance, are sometimes included in the ‘Place’ column of the provided diary paper. This is most often the case with the 2nd Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, who frequently refers to their position in ‘Place’ via map coordinates.[[27]](#footnote-27) This decision, although probably wise and useful at the time, most definitely makes reading and understanding the primary source more difficult. To gain a firm understanding of the placement of the battalion during battle it is necessary to have access to the maps from which the coordinates were drawn, and to have the ability to adequately read the map and relate the coordinates to a position.

When considering the use of the War Diaries of the First World War as primary sources, it would be valuable to consider their use in other works. That is, how do they compare to other works, and what kind of information has been previously drawn from them? Furthermore, what kind of information is missing from the war diaries that other sources have managed to gather for their work?

If starting at the largest organizational level, the Canadian Expeditionary Force of 1918 as a whole, works such as Nicholson[[28]](#footnote-28) give a broad summary of Canadian action at major offensive and defensive positions. Depending on the type of battle, Nicholson chooses to highlight the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade and its smaller batteries, as well as each of the 4 Canadian Divisions and Canadian Cavalry. Major action focused on includes general German offensives including Hill 70[[29]](#footnote-29); Amiens, August 8 – 11, 1918[[30]](#footnote-30); The Hindenburg line to Cambrai[[31]](#footnote-31); and what Nicholson terms “The Final Advance, 12 October-11 November.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Nicholson is detailed in his description of events, drawing on personal diaries of regular soldiers and officers, as well as war diaries and official records. However, he is understandably broad in his account of the divisions and units that took part, unless they played a vital role in the events. He rarely organizes down to a level below brigade, and when he does it is brief. In the sense that he is not recounting the exploits of individual battalions of small units, Nicholson has little necessity for the war diaries as they are organized by division or lower.

Alternatively, through Captain J. D. Craig’s account of the actions of the 1st Canadian Division in 1918[[33]](#footnote-33) it is easier to pin point effective brigades and battalions, although the descriptions focus only on Amiens, Arras, Cambrai and the final push to the Rhine. At Amiens, August 8 and 9, 1918, Craig defines the objectives of each Brigade within the division, much as the 1st Division – General Staff war diary describes it: Green line captured by 3rd Brigade, Red line taken by the 1st Brigade and the Blue line captured by the 2nd Brigade.[[34]](#footnote-34), [[35]](#footnote-35) However, what the war diary covers in 2 entries, approximately 26 lines long, Craig covers in 11 pages. This information includes introductory information about the front, objectives and preparations, as well as the attack itself. Both sources make mention of the weather on the morning of battle on the first day of the campaign; Craig claiming it was beneficial[[36]](#footnote-36) and the war diary giving no indication of its role in operations[[37]](#footnote-37). The war diary peculiarly mentions the cooperation of tanks, aeroplanes and artillery, whereas Craig favours descriptions of the tanks and artillery, declining to mention aeroplane support in the battle at all.[[38]](#footnote-38) In this instance, the information provided by the 1st Divisions war diary is significant but vague. In comparison, Craig’s work is still nothing more than a brief narrative, but with the space to include figures, descriptors and background information. On this point the war diary is lost to its purpose: a diary is a summary of current events and needs not delve in to background, as it should be covered in previous pages.

At the divisional level neither Craig nor the war diary focus below Brigade level, and Craig includes data about other divisions’ actions in the same battle. Regardless, it is to be understood than each battalion played its own role in the battle, which primary sources are bound to have on record somewhere.

Focusing next on an individual battalion’s role in the same battle it is noted that of the 1st Divisions three Brigades, the 3rd Infantry Brigade led the attack. The war diary indicates that the 3rd Brigades three leading Battalions were the 13th, 14th and 16th Battalions. The 16th in particular took the right side of the brigade front.[[39]](#footnote-39) The diary associated with the 16th Canadian Infantry Battalion provides a narrative of the battle of Amiens as an appendix to the diary, indicating the large role played and subsequent importance to the battalion.[[40]](#footnote-40) The diary does not, as expected, incorporate personal tales from the battle, although the Officer Commanding, a man by the name of Lieutenant – Colonel Peck, does give a certain introspective look in to the atmosphere among the troops upon completion of the objective. For example, “It is impossible to speak without emotion of our incomparable troops, their enthusiasm, their willingness, their fortitude and high sense of duty.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The narratives included in the appendix following large scale battles are the few instances in which the diary entries appear to be recorded by an officer in charge and, as a result, they do not keep to the same style as most previous and following entries.

A second piece compiled of primary sources dedicates 15 pages to the 16th Battalion’s work at the Battle of Amiens.[[42]](#footnote-42) Although Lt-Col Peck manages 2 full pages of information, the restrictions of diary format and professionalism in official records prevent any kind of a step by step account of battle from all ranks. Urquhart, as official records, diaries and aforementioned authors previously mentioned, indicates the turn in the weather to be difficult to manage,[[43]](#footnote-43) for which the war diary, under Peck, appears to disagree. In this instance, the contribution of the war diary forms a separate opinion that it would seem Urquhart never viewed; the idea that the mist, as thick and rolling as it was, acted as cover for the troops moving in the early morning hours.[[44]](#footnote-44)

In his history, Urquhart dissects the 16th Battalion’s movements down to the platoon, though arguably not in great detail. This is possible as the book is a compilation of different forms of primary sources, intended to give an account of the battles to a civilian. In opposition, the war diaries were intended for military figures whether that is in an intelligence role or commanding, to be transformed and used in the sense that they have since been used in the regimental histories. That is, as publicity for the Canadian Corps accomplishments and as memory of her losses.[[45]](#footnote-45) Arguably what the war diaries lack in detail, emotion and sometimes clarity, they make up for in scope and scale. Very few histories, primary or secondary span a time frame of 4 years with daily entries that encompass the activities of all members of an entire Army Corps. In this sense, the war diaries are an excellent source of first-hand information that has been used by historians to decipher and depict huge events in world history. The diaries are so enormous in their range that a historian or researcher would be forced to narrow down ideas, focus on certain time frames or groups of interest before starting. Otherwise, the information would be overwhelming.

Primary source documents are first-hand accounts of people, events, changes and periods of time. They are most often recorded and dated around the time in question, and provide personal insight into something that, in terms of history, may have otherwise been lost. The Library and Archives Canada collection of War Diaries from Divisions, Brigades and Battalions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (Canadian Corps) in the First World War, is an excellent example of the preservation of unique and primary artifacts from a time that few alive can recall. The importance of these documents should not be lost on an individual and it is apparent that the information provided can still be applicable to people, historians, researchers, students, soldiers today. The integrity of primary sources is occasionally questioned; for instance, they could show bias toward a person, a group or thing. However, there is a certain analysis required of primary sources, to determine any biases and the overall effect they have on the importance of the document. Regardless of prejudice, what is documented in primary sources is fact, to at least the person who recorded it.

As a historical source, the War Diaries of the First World War are useful; they are full of pertinent information and act as a starting point for further research. They were recorded on the front line, and through the eyes of soldiers. Although the potential for distortion and bias still exists, the presence of such documents forms the basis of representation for the officers and soldiers in the war. Their actions are chronicled through the diaries, and the use of them, and the use of other sources similar in nature, is the key to accurate and comprehensive knowledge.

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30. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919*, 386 – 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919*, 425 – 460. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919*, 461 – 484. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Craig, *The 1st Canadian Division in the battles of 1918*. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Craig, *The 1st Canadian Division in the battles of 1918*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. LAC, War Diaries of the First World War, RG9, vol. 4836, File 81, War diaries – 1st Canadian Division – General Staff, August 1918 War diary, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Craig, *The 1st Canadian Division in the battles of 1918*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. LAC, War Diaries of the First World War, RG9, vol. 4836, File 81, War diaries – 1st Canadian Division – General Staff, August 1918 War diary, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Craig, *The 1st Canadian Division in the battles of 1918*, 11 – 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. LAC, War Diaries of the First World War, RG9, vol. 4878, File, 229, War diaries – 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, August 1918 War Diary, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. LAC, War Diaries of the First World War, RG9, vol. 4925, File 397, War diaries – 16th Canadian Infantry Battalion, August 1918, p. 10 – 12, Narrative of Action in Front of Amiens, August 8th, 1918. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion*, 269 – 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion*, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. LAC, War Diaries of the First World War, RG9, vol. 4925, File 397, War diaries – 16th Canadian Infantry Battalion, August 1918, p. 10, Narrative of Action in Front of Amiens, August 8th, 1918. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Library and Archives Canada, “War Diaries.” [↑](#footnote-ref-45)