

Biography: Ruskin Service Rice (1916–1942)

AND

The Emotional Lifeline of Correspondence: Ruskin Rice's Letters During World War II

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Biography: Ruskin Service Rice (1916–1942)

Ruskin Service Rice was born on October 14, 1916, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, as the fifth child to Reverend Horace G. Rice and Ada Russell Rice.¹ He was raised in a family deeply rooted in faith, interests in Canadian politics, and community service. Rice grew up in Edmonton, where he worked as a farmhand and later made his home, before enlisting in the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War.² The enlistment date is unknown, but it likely occurred before February 15, 1940.³ Following enlistment, he was trained under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, first at No. 1 Bombing and Gunnery School in Jarvis, Ontario.⁴ His surviving correspondence from this period reflects both his devotion to family and his adaptability amid the demanding routines of military life.

Upon completion of his training, Flight Sergeant Rice (Service No. R76534) was posted to No. 202 Squadron, Royal Air Force (motto:

Semper Vigilare: “Ever Watchful”), an operational reconnaissance unit flying Consolidated



Figure 1. Flight Sergeant Ruskin Service Rice. *Canadian Virtual War Memorial*. Veterans Affairs Canada, last modified January 29, 2024. <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/en/remembrance/memorials/canadia>

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Figure 2. Personnel record for Flight Sergeant Ruskin Service Rice. CASPIR (Canadian Aircraft Serials Personnel Information Resource). Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum. Accessed October 29, 2025. <https://caspir.warplane.com/personnel/unit-search/p/600016982/>

¹ “Flight Sergeant Ruskin Service Rice,” *Canadian Virtual War Memorial*, Veterans Affairs Canada, last modified January 29, 2024, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/en/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/1533118>

² “Record No. 29972,” Library and Archives Canada / Recherche dans la collection (LAC), accessed October 29, 2025, https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=kia&idnumber=29972&q_type_1=q&q_1=r76534&ecopy=44486_83024005550_0558-00290

³ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, February 15, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.

⁴ “Flight Sergeant Ruskin Service Rice,” *Canadian Virtual War Memorial*,

Catalina aircraft.⁵ On September 10, 1942, while serving on active operations, Rice was killed in action when his squadron's Catalina failed to return from a mission. Six Royal Air Force crew members, including Sergeants R. Ainsworth, T. Kirkham, W. Law, J. M. Sloan, Flight Sergeant J. W. Pilling, and Pilot Officer J. G. Pope, also lost their lives in the incident; two additional non-Canadian crewmen were listed as missing, presumed killed.⁶

Flight Sergeant Ruskin Service Rice's death is recorded in the Second World War Service Files: War Dead, 1939–1947 (RG 24, Volume 28511), which are held at Library and Archives Canada.⁷ He was 25 years old at the time of his death.

Remembered in official records and family correspondence, Rice's letters from training offer a poignant glimpse into the emotional life of a young airman whose commitment to family, faith, and duty endured until his final mission.⁸

Figure 3. "Record No. 29972," Library and Archives Canada / Recherche dans la collection (LAC). Accessed October 29, 2025. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=kia&idnumber=29972&q_type=1&q_1=r76534&ecopy=44486_83024005550_055

The following essay describes his early involvement. As a soldier, he recorded, in letters he wrote home to his mother and father upon first entering the RCAF, the only letters transcribed to date.

⁵ "Record No. 29972," Library and Archives Canada

⁶ "Record No. 29972," Library and Archives Canada

⁷ "Record No. 29972," Library and Archives Canada

⁸ "Record No. 29972," Library and Archives Canada

The Emotional Lifeline of Correspondence: Ruskin Rice's Letters During World War II

Training for the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II was a demanding and often isolating experience, marked by long hours, strict discipline, and the constant uncertainty of what lay ahead, for many young men, including Ruskin Rice, who was a trainee writing from No. 1 Bombing and Gunnery School in Jarvis, Ontario, during this period, testing not only physical endurance but also emotional resilience.⁹ Amid the rigours of military life, letters served as a vital lifeline, allowing trainees to remain connected to the world they had left behind. Communication with family provided reassurance, comfort, and a reminder of personal identity in an environment designed to suppress individuality. Ruskin Rice's letters reveal that for soldiers in training during World War II, maintaining family ties and social connections provided essential emotional sustenance, illustrating the crucial role of correspondence in sustaining morale and personal identity. Through his letters, Rice not only keeps his family informed but also preserves a sense of normalcy and optimism amidst the challenges of military life.

While family correspondence remained central to Ruskin Rice's emotional well-being, his letters also emphasize the importance of cultivating and sustaining social connections beyond the home front. In Letter Seven, Rice informed his mother of his social engagements outside the Manning Pool, remarking that he had "been over to the Bell's one night" but, after falling ill following inoculation, "had to stay in" and therefore did not "get in touch with them again."¹⁰ Despite this temporary isolation, he sought companionship through the Y.M.C.A., noting, "I've been going to the Y. functions and enjoy them very much. We can have a swim anytime we're

⁹ "Flight Sergeant Ruskin Service Rice," *Canadian Virtual War Memorial*,

¹⁰ Ruskin Service Rice, "Letter to mother and father" (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.

free and it is lovely.”¹¹ The Y, he observed, offered amenities and diversions that alleviated the monotony of training life: “They always have nice warm water for swimmers... tournaments and games every night in the barracks here and supply a moving picture every other night. So one doesn’t feel bad at all.”¹²

Rice’s description of social and recreational life extended beyond institutional spaces to the camaraderie within the Manning Pool itself. In Letter Nine, he illustrated the collective spirit among recruits, writing, “Thanks for the maple sugar. It solved the sweet problem for a... while but there are quite a few sweet teeth around here. Everyone gets... cookies etc. but a big box only lasts about an hour depending on the number who are around at the time.”¹³ This light-hearted observation captures the communal sharing and easy generosity that characterized daily life among trainees.

Collectively, Rice’s references to visiting the Bells, a local family that extended hospitality to servicemen, and to his participation in Y.M.C.A. events reveal the crucial role of community and institutional networks in providing psychological respite and social continuity.¹⁴ Such encounters fostered a sense of belonging and stability within the otherwise impersonal and regimented environment of military training. His reflections on sharing treats with fellow soldiers further illustrate how acts of generosity and camaraderie sustained morale and alleviated the emotional strain of separation from home.¹⁵ These social exchanges, both formal and

¹¹ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940,

¹² Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940,

¹³ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 3, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.

¹⁴ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940,

¹⁵ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940,

informal, complemented the familial support Rice received through correspondence, collectively forming an essential network of care that underpinned his wartime experience.

Beyond interpersonal relationships, Rice's letters also highlight how organized recreational activities functioned as vital morale boosters. In Letters Seven and Nine, he recounts swimming, tournaments, movie nights, and even the possibility of taking passenger flights, in moments that punctuated the routine of training with excitement and relief.¹⁶ These experiences not only provided entertainment but also reinforced a sense of collective identity and personal resilience. Through these social outlets, Rice demonstrates that shared recreation and companionship were integral to maintaining mental health and optimism in the demanding context of wartime service.

If Rice's participation in community and recreational life offered external forms of connection, his correspondence itself provided an inward means of self-preservation. Beyond serving as a channel of communication, his letters reveal how writing became a means of sustaining identity amid the regimentation of military life.¹⁷ In Letters Seven and Ten, he records everyday details about meals, routines, and camp life, often interweaving humour and optimism even when describing fatigue or illness.¹⁸ "Well I finished a very satisfying dinner... roast pork, creamed carrots, boiled potatoes, raisin pie, applesauce, soup and tea," he wrote. "There is

¹⁶ Ruskin Service Rice, "Letter to mother and father" (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940,; Ruskin Service Rice, "Letter to mother and father" (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 3, 1940,

¹⁷ Ruskin Service Rice, "Letter to mother and father" (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940,; Ruskin Service Rice, "Letter to mother and father" (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 3, 1940,

¹⁸ Ruskin Service Rice, "Letter to mother and father" (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940,; Ruskin Service Rice, "Letter to mother and father" (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 7, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.

always lots to eat here anyway.¹⁹ They opened up a new mess hall a week ago and we have crockery and stainless steel cutlery to eat off of and with. It makes the meals much more appetizing.”²⁰ These glimpses of personality and domestic appreciation suggest that letter writing enabled Rice to assert an identity beyond that of a uniformed trainee and was an individual with personal tastes, habits, and resilience. By recording such ordinary experiences, he maintained a sense of normalcy and self-continuity despite the transformative pressures of wartime service.

Rice’s correspondence also functioned as a vital source of moral and emotional support, reinforcing the reciprocal nature of family communication. In one passage, he describes the intensity of his workload and the challenges of irregular shifts: “And now it is nearly time to back out to work. There has been so much flying to-night... This 2 on and 2 off stuff doesn’t give one a decent rest so sometimes we have worked 4 and then rested 4.”²¹ Despite frustrations and uncertainty, he reassures his family that the situation “will turn out alright,” demonstrating a persistent effort to protect them from worry while affirming his own adaptability.²²

In Letters Nine and Ten, Rice also candidly acknowledges the strain of service, including fatigue and the cancellation of anticipated leave, yet he consistently tempers complaint with reassurance. His explanation of a temporary ban on Christmas leave was later overturned after negotiations among officers, which reflects both the bureaucratic complexity of military life and his determination to remain positive: “I am on No. 2 Guard and so will get the New Year off...

¹⁹ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940,

²⁰ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940,

²¹ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 3, 1940,

²² Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 3, 1940,

Perhaps one will feel a little more rested after the holiday in that case.”²³ Such passages reveal his reliance on family correspondence as both a space for emotional disclosure and a mechanism for sustaining composure.

Cooperatively, these exchanges demonstrate that correspondence was not merely a one-way act of comfort but an ongoing dialogue that strengthened mutual reassurance and stability. Through writing, Rice was able to articulate vulnerability while also reaffirming strength.²⁴ His letters thus served a dual purpose: as a personal record of endurance within the constraints of military service, and as a bridge that maintained emotional continuity between soldier and home.

Yet, while letter writing provided Rice with an emotional lifeline, maintaining communication was fraught with difficulty.²⁵ His correspondence not only reflects resilience and connection, but also exposes the material and institutional barriers that limited those exchanges.

Although Ruskin Rice’s letters reveal the profound emotional importance of maintaining contact with family and friends, they also unveil the many obstacles that made communication and connection difficult during wartime training.²⁶ In Letters Seven, Nine, and Ten, Rice

²³ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 3, 1940,

²⁴ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, February 15, 1940; Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, February 28, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.; Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, May 12, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.

²⁵ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, February 15, 1940; Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, February 28, 1940; Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, May 12, 1940,

²⁶ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, September 8, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.; Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, October 9, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.; Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, October 18, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.

frequently alludes to the bureaucratic frustrations that complicated his efforts to visit home, including cancelled leaves, unpredictable scheduling, and the need for sergeant approval before securing time off.²⁷ “However all this depends on our returning here and the service police claim we are due for a transfer before that time,” he explained. “In which case there may be no leaves at all... All we can do is wait and hope.”²⁸ Such uncertainty highlights the limited control trainees exercised over their personal lives, despite their longing for the familiar comforts of home.

Physical and environmental conditions compounded these constraints. Snowstorms and blizzards frequently disrupted travel, isolating servicemen from the outside world and heightening the sense of distance between soldiers and their families.²⁹ Rice also endured recurrent health challenges, which included bouts of fatigue, colds, and a hospital stay mentioned in Letter Ten, that tested both his physical and emotional endurance.³⁰ “Well I must add a bit to my letter before I mail it,” he wrote from the infirmary.³¹ “I woke up feeling miserable yesterday so I stayed in bed. When I didn’t turn up for parade they sicked a [medical officer] on me and for the first time in my life I’m in the hospital. I have a cold but that is all that can be said for it... My temperature is nearly down to normal and I feel o.k. so don’t worry.”³² Despite discomfort

²⁷ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 3, 1940; Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 3, 1940; Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 7, 1940,

²⁸ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 7, 1940,

²⁹ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 3, 1940,

³⁰ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 7, 1940,

³¹ Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 7, 1940,

³² Ruskin Service Rice, “Letter to mother and father” (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, December 7, 1940,

and confinement, Rice's tone remains characteristically measured and optimistic. Even while recounting illness and inconvenience, he focuses on reassurance; seemingly, both for his family's sake and perhaps for his own.

What stands out most in Rice's correspondence, however, is his persistence. Despite the disruptions, delays, and discomforts of training life, he continued to write regularly, maintaining a steady rhythm of communication with home.³³ This unwavering dedication demonstrates the essential role of correspondence as a stabilizing force, one that sustained morale, provided emotional continuity, and bridged the physical and psychological distances imposed by war.³⁴ Through the very act of writing, Rice resisted the isolating effects of military life, reaffirming both his commitment to family and the sustaining power of human connection.

Ruskin Rice's letters vividly illustrate that maintaining family and social connections was essential to the emotional well-being of soldiers in training during World War II. Through his detailed accounts of daily routines, Y.M.C.A. activities, friendships, and persistent efforts to secure leave, Rice reveals how correspondence served not only as a form of communication but also as a crucial means of preserving morale and personal identity. His writing captures both the ordinary and extraordinary challenges of military life. Even amid isolation, uncertainty, and hardship, emotional bonds offered him strength and stability. On a broader level, Rice's letters reflect the universal human need for connection, reminding readers that relationships are a vital source of comfort and identity in times of separation and strain. Through Rice's letters, we see

³³ Ruskin Service Rice, "Letter to mother and father" (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 13, 1940, Rice Family Papers, University of Lethbridge Archives, Lethbridge.

³⁴ Ruskin Service Rice, "Letter to mother and father" (unpublished, transcription in progress), letter to mother and father, November 13, 1940,

that even amidst the hardships of military training, the bonds of family and the solace of social connection provided a lifeline that sustained soldiers mentally and emotionally.

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