



Tracing Royal Flying Corps and Royal Air Force Ancestry

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide guidance on tracing Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force (RFC/RAF) personnel. More detailed information can be found in our publication *Tracing Your Family History: Royal Air Force* – this can be purchased from the Imperial War Museum online, through mail order or the shop. The Museum does not hold any personal service records or official documentation, but can help the enquirer as long as some basic facts are known. The Department of Printed Books welcomes visitors by appointment and is able to provide useful reading material and advice for finding out more about those who served. Other reference departments in the Museum - Art, Documents, Exhibits and Firearms, Film and Photograph Archives, and the Sound Archive - may also be able to assist.

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Where to Find RFC/RAF Service Records

The most important piece of information is the unit that an individual served with (it is a sad fact that those who died during the world wars will be easier to trace than those who survived, and this information is readily obtainable from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission). The personal service record should be the starting point, but large numbers of these for the First World War were destroyed in a 1940 air raid. Records are located according to an individual's date of discharge.

The National Archives, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU (Tel: 020 8876 3444; Website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) holds surviving First World War service records for officers and other ranks who left the RAF before 1920. Further information concerning the RAF material now held by The National Archives (TNA) can be found in the publication *Air Force Records for Family Historians* by William Spencer (Richmond, Surrey: PRO, 2000).

The records of any member of the RAF who saw service after 1920 or who rejoined after the First World War should still be held by the **RAF Disclosures, Room 221B, Trenchard Hall, RAF Cranwell, Sleaford, Lincolnshire NG34 8HB**. It is the service number that determines where records for other ranks will be, with numbers over 329,000 being stored at RAF Cranwell. Records will be released to proven next of kin for a £30 fee but there may be a lengthy wait for this service.

The ranks and dates of promotion of RAF officers can be traced using the regular official publication the *Air Force List* and the Department of Printed Books (DPB) holds an almost complete set of these from April 1918, when the RAF was established, to date. Before April 1918 Royal Flying Corps (RFC) officers were included in the *Army List* while Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) officers were included in the *Navy List*. The DPB also holds almost complete sets of both from 1914 onwards. It should be noted that, with the exception of some issues from the

period between the two world wars, the *Air Force List* does not include any details of squadrons.

Casualty Records

The **Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2 Marlow Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 7DX (Tel: 01628 507200)** has details of all service personnel who died between the dates 4 August 1914-31 August 1921 and 3 September 1939-31 December 1947. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) may charge a fee for postal enquiries, but the website containing their computerised database, *Debt of Honour*, can be consulted at www.cwgc.org

The new Armed Forces Memorial website has a roll of honour that allows you to search for Army personnel who died after 1948. This can be found at www.forcesmemorial.org.uk

Details of service personnel buried in 'non-World War' graves are available from the **Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre, Service Personnel and Veterans Agency, Imjin Barracks, Innsworth, Gloucester GL3 1HW**. Please mark your enquiry 'Memorials and Graves'.

The **Department of Research and Information Services** at the **Royal Air Force Museum, Grahame Park Way, London NW9 5LL (Tel: 020 8205 2266; Website: www.rafmuseum.org.uk)** holds several series of official casualty records. Although detailed these records are not complete. The **Ministry of Defence, Air Historical Branch (RAF), Building 824, RAF Northolt, West End Road, Ruislip, Middlesex HA4 6NG** holds casualty records for RAF personnel killed, injured, reported missing or taken prisoner from 1919 onwards. The Air Historical Branch will release details of their records to proven next of kin only.

Sources held by the DPB include a complete set of the CWGC's memorial and cemetery registers. Other useful sources are the books *Airmen Died in the Great War 1914-1918: the Roll of Honour of the British and Commonwealth Air Services of the First World War* compiled by Chris Hobson (Suffolk: JB Hayward, 1995) and *The Sky their Battlefield: Air Fighting and the Complete List of Allied Air Casualties from Enemy Action in the First War: British, Commonwealth, and United States Air Services 1914 to 1918* by Trevor Henshaw (London: Grub Street, 1995).

The multi-volume *Royal Air Force Bomber Command Losses of the Second World War* by WR Chorley (Leicester: Midland Counties Publications, 1992-2007) is a useful reference work. The inevitable amendments and additions which come to light as a result of such extensive research were published in successive volumes, but now appear online at www.rafinfo.org.uk/BCWW2Losses/ *Royal Air Force Fighter Command Losses of the Second World War* by Norman LR Franks (Leicester: Midland Publications, 1997-2000) is a similar publication. The DPB's computerised catalogue can now be found on the Museum's website at www.iwmcollections.org.uk Although not everything held by the Library appears on this, it is an excellent starting point for seeing the range of materials available. Books can either be ordered when you make an appointment to visit the Reading Room, or it may be possible to obtain alternative copies of these through your local library.

Rolls of honour for other later conflicts are also held and in addition the DPB has a large collection of published rolls of honour for localities, schools, institutions etc. Squadron histories and periodicals sometimes contain rolls of honour.

The airman's own home area should not be forgotten when researching an individual's service - there may be local war memorial records, a local account of war service may have been published, and contemporary local newspapers can prove very helpful. It is also possible that school, church or workplace records may still exist.

Medal Records

Campaign medals are those given to airmen who are eligible for them because they were in a particular theatre of war within given dates. The First World War Medal Roll, held at TNA, provides a listing of all those who qualified for the 1914 Star, 1914/15 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal, Territorial Force War Medal and/or the Silver War Badge. If an airman's record was destroyed some basic information about his service may be found in this. The index cards can now be accessed on the internet at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline The address to contact for post First World War medal claims is the **Ministry of Defence Medal Office, Building 250, Innsworth Station, Gloucester GL3 1HW.**

Gallantry medals are those medals awarded for an especially heroic deed or action. Records for these are held at TNA, but may not be very detailed. Notifications and citations (if these were published, which was not the case for awards such as Mentions in Despatches) were published in the official journal **London Gazette**. A complete set of this, and the all important indexes, is held at TNA. The **London Gazette Online Archive** at www.gazettes-online.co.uk provides access to First and Second World War entries. The DPB does have some published listings of medal awards for decorations such as the Victoria Cross, Distinguished Flying Cross and Distinguished Flying Medal. Usually you will need to go either to the official unit operations record book (held at TNA) or to a published squadron/unit history to see whether you can find out more about the action for which the decoration was awarded.

Other Sources

The DPB has a good collection of books on the RFC/RAF including a number of squadron histories. The Reading Room is open between 10am-5pm, Monday to Saturday, by appointment. It should be noted however that the number of such histories is relatively small compared with the total number of squadrons that have existed in the RAF. Service and ex-service periodicals and newspapers should not be overlooked. The Royal Air Forces Association produce a quarterly journal called **Air Mail** (RAFATRAD Ltd, Unit 3, 5 Sybron Way, Millbrook Industrial Estate, Crowborough, East Sussex TN6 3DZ). The website address is www.rafatrad.co.uk

Commercial magazines such as **Flypast** (Key Publishing Ltd., PO Box 100, Stamford, Lincolnshire PE9 1XQ; Website: www.flypast.com) and **Aeroplane Monthly** (Blue Fin Building, 110 Southwark Street, London SE1 0SU; Website: www.aeroplanemonthly.com) may also be able to help.

The Royal Air Force website at www.raf.mod.uk is worth a visit as it has very comprehensive links. Other useful websites are www.rafweb.org/Index.htm and www.associations.rafinfo.org.uk

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