



## Tracing Your Ancestry **ROYAL FLYING CORPS** and **ROYAL AIR FORCE**

This free guide signposts key records that will help you trace an individual who served with the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) or Royal Air Force (RAF) during the First and Second World Wars.

Find more information and links to the records at  
**[iwm.org.uk/Research](http://iwm.org.uk/Research)**

## You can research the experiences of an individual by looking at:

- **Service records** – administrative files may record dates and places of enlistment and demobilisation, postings and units, injuries or disciplinary action. Different records exist for airmen and officers
- **Casualty information** – sources recording those wounded or taken prisoner of war as well as the burial and commemoration of those who died
- **Medal records** – medal entitlements can indicate involvement in specific campaigns as well as awards for service or gallantry
- **Unit and operational histories** – resources describing the day to day operational activities of units
- **Social and local history** – church records, local newspapers, school and workplace registers may mention an individual

Start by gathering information from mementoes, medals, letters and documents that you or other family members may still have. Look for clues about which units the person served with, what ranks they held and their service number to help you find and search the right records. Many records are only available online, sometimes on more than one site:

- [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk) – **A**
- [findmypast.co.uk](http://findmypast.co.uk) – **F**
- IWM's Lives of the First World War – **L**
- The National Archives – **T**

Some are free to view but others are available on either a subscription or pay per view basis (£).

## IWM

Visit IWM London, IWM North, IWM Duxford, Churchill War Rooms and HMS Belfast and explore and research the wartime experiences of people from across Britain and the Commonwealth from 1914 to the present.

IWM collections include documents, art, photos, film, sound recordings, printed materials, publications, ephemera and objects ranging from badges, uniforms, equipment and weapons to ships, tanks and aircraft. IWM London has an outstanding research library including over 150,000 books and periodicals.

Research our collections using the online catalogue [www.iwm.org.uk/collections/search](http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/search). Keep the initial search simple, and try a variety of terms. Results can be filtered, for example using 'Category' allows you to select different types of material.

Drop-in to Explore History at IWM London for free, where you can search the catalogues, and use other online resources and multimedia displays to discover treasures from our archives and the personal stories behind them. Appointments are available for you to do more in-depth investigation in our Research Room.

Check [www.iwm.org.uk/research/research-facilities](http://www.iwm.org.uk/research/research-facilities) for more information, opening times and to request an appointment.

Other free IWM signposting guides include:

- Tracing Army Ancestry
- Tracing Royal Navy Ancestry
- Tracing Merchant Navy Ancestry
- Tracing Prisoners of War
- Tracing Home Front Ancestry 1939–1945



Early military aviation was the responsibility of the army who established the RFC in 1912. The naval wing moved to the control of the Admiralty when the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) was formed in 1914. The two organisations combined to create the independent RAF on 1 April 1918. Those who served in the RFC or RNAS and then the RAF may have records in more than one place.

## **RFC/RAF service records**

The National Archives (TNA) holds the service records for men who served up to 1922. Their service, rank and dates determine which set of records you need:

**RFC airman who died or were discharged before 1 April 1918** - British Army service records (see IWM leaflet Tracing Army Ancestry) **L, F, A (£)**

**RNAS ratings including those who served in the Royal Navy before July 1914** - Register of Seamen's Services (ADM 188) on **T, L, F, A (£)**

**RAF airmen (service numbers 1 to 562875) including RFC airmen and RNAS ratings who transferred to the RAF on 1 April 1918** – RAF airmen's service records (AIR 79) on **L, F (£)**

**All non-officer members of the RAF on 1 April 1918** – listed in the *Royal Air Force Muster Roll* in numerical order - at [www.rafmuseumstoryvault.org.uk](http://www.rafmuseumstoryvault.org.uk) (free) and on **L, F (£)**

**RFC officers who served between 1914 and March 1918** - RAF officers service records (AIR 76) on **T, L, F (£)**

**RNAS officers who served before 1918** - RNAS officers' service records (ADM 273) on **T (£)**

**RAF Officers, including those who transferred from the RFC and RNAS on 1 April 1918 and served up to 1922** (most had been discharged by 1919) - RAF officers service records (AIR 76) on **T, L, F (£)**

**Men from the USA and Dominions who served with the British Air Forces** are included in the Roll in AIR 2/219. Some nominal rolls for individual units are in AIR1. Both are available at TNA.

**RAF personnel who served after 1922 and those who served during the Second World War** – service records are held by the RAF 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Disclosure Team. Full records will be released to proven next of kin. Only very basic information about deceased service personnel will be released to other enquirers, with slightly more detail made available 25 years after the date of death. The fee is currently £30 and there may be a lengthy wait for this service. Download the application forms from [www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records](http://www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records)

**Officers' commissions and promotions** are listed in the regular official publications:

**RFC officers** – the *Army List*

**RNAS officers** - the *Navy List*

**RAF officers (from 1918)** - the *Air Force List*

IWM holds an extensive set of these publications. The *London Gazette* also lists commissions and promotions up to the present day on [www.thegazette.co.uk](http://www.thegazette.co.uk)

**Individuals who qualified as a pilot 1910-1950** - Aviators' Certificates, some with photo, issued by the Royal Aero Club on **A (£)**

**Courts martial records from 1918–1986** (AIR 21) are held at TNA.



## Casualty records

Rolls of Honour and other sources may list those who served as well as those who died or were killed in action. IWM holds a large collection of published rolls of honour for localities, schools, institutions and other organisations. Rolls may also be found in Squadron histories and periodicals. For more information about prisoners of war see the *Tracing Prisoners of War* guide.

***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).

***The Sky their Battlefield II: 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 (Fetubi Books, 2014).

**RAF officers deceased from 1916 to 1920** – pensions paid to relatives (PMG 44) at **TNA**.  
**RAF officers invalided from 1917 to 1920** – Officers' pension records (PMG 42/13) at **TNA**.

**RFC, RNAS and RAF casualties 1915 to 1928** - cards record deaths, injuries and illness. Held by the RAF Museum, the cards are available to search on [www.rafmuseumstoryvault.org.uk](http://www.rafmuseumstoryvault.org.uk).

**Second World War Bomber Command aircraft that failed to return from an operational flight** - cards normally showing the names of the crew, their fate, the route taken and bomb load - available in the **RAF Museum Reading Room**.

**RAF personnel missing in combat** (aircraft losses) - RAF Casualty Files are gradually transferred and opened to the public at TNA under the Public Records Act. **Up to August 1940** - (AIR 81) at **TNA**.  
**From 1940 to the present day** - applications can be made to the RAF Air Historical Branch subject to the same restrictions and fees as for service records. The amount of information contained in the records varies and copies may not be made due to the fragile nature of the originals.

***Royal Air Force Bomber Command Losses of the Second World War*** by WR Chorley (Leicester: Midland Counties Publications, 1992–2007). Several volumes. Amendments and additions can be searched at [www.rafinfo.org.uk](http://www.rafinfo.org.uk)

***Royal Air Force Fighter Command Losses of the Second World War*** by Norman LR Franks (Leicester: Midland Publications, 1997–2000)

**Service personnel who died between 4 August 1914 and 31 August 1921 and between 3 September 1939 and 31 December 1947** - the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) are responsible for the graves or official memorials to those with no known grave. Details of the commemoration of each individual are listed on [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org). IWM has a complete set of the CWGC's original published memorial and cemetery registers.

**Military personnel who died in service after 1 January 1948** may have had either a private or a service funeral and headstone. Details of service personnel buried in 'non-World War' graves are available from the Commemorations team at the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre.

**Personnel who have died whilst on duty or as the result of terrorist activity since 1 January 1948** are commemorated on the Armed Forces Memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum. Search the roll of honour on [www.gov.uk/search-armed-forces-memorial-roll-of-honour](http://www.gov.uk/search-armed-forces-memorial-roll-of-honour)

**IWM's War Memorials Archive** records UK war memorials - search [iwm.org.uk/warmemorials](http://iwm.org.uk/warmemorials)



## Medals

Eligibility for campaign and service medals is based on set criteria, usually being present in a particular theatre of war within given dates or carrying out a set number of operational sorties.

**First World War personnel** may have qualified for the 1914 Star or 1914/15 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal, Territorial Force War Medal and/or if they were discharged due to wounds or sickness, the Silver War Badge. The name, rank and number of the individual will appear on the medal. The Ministry of Defence is not able to issue or replace First World War medals under any circumstances.

**RFC officers and airmen who served overseas before 1916** - medals were issued by the War Office. Details are on the First World War Medal Index Cards (WO 372) on **T (£)**. The Medal Index Cards (free) and Rolls (£) are also available on **A**.

**RNAS personnel awarded campaign and long service and good conduct medals** - Naval Medal Rolls (ADM 171) on **L, F, A (£)**. Digital microfilm copies of these rolls can be downloaded from TNA for free.

**RFC personnel who first served overseas in 1916 or later or who joined after the formation of the RAF in April 1918** - there are no records for campaign medals issued by the Air Ministry. The only place you will find details about a medal entitlement will be on a service record.

**Second World War RAF personnel** may have qualified for the War Medal 1939 to 1945, 1939 to 1945 Star, Air Crew Europe, Africa, Atlantic, Burma, France and Germany, Italy and Pacific Stars and/or the Defence Medal: 1939 to 1945. Second World War medals are not named.

The eligibility for each medal is described on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) under *Medals: campaigns, descriptions and eligibility*. The locations and dates of service recorded on an individual's service record will indicate if they are entitled to a particular medal.

The Ministry of Defence Medal Office can confirm if an individual is eligible to receive Second World War or post 1945 medals and issue those previously unclaimed to veterans or their next of kin.

Gallantry medals are awarded for an especially heroic deed or action. Announcements are listed in the official journal **London Gazette**.

For some but not all awards, there may also be a separate citation, which describes the action for which the award was made. Operational records or a published squadron/unit history might provide some details, although the individual may not be named.

A few RAF recommendations for honours and awards between 1935 and 1990 are in WO373 - **T**.

IWM has some published listings of medal awards for decorations such as the Victoria Cross, Distinguished Flying Cross and Distinguished Flying Medal

## Unit and operational histories

Some squadron activities during the First World War are recorded in AIR1 at TNA but coverage is limited. Operations Record Books in AIR27 mostly from the mid-1930s, provide a daily record of events each squadron on Form 540. Some, mainly Second World War are available online - **T**.

IWM has a good collection of RFC/RAF material including squadron histories. However the number of such histories is relatively small compared with the total number of RAF squadrons that have existed.



**Action Stations** (10 volumes by various authors and publishers) provides information on the operational history, squadrons and aircraft types based at each UK military airfield. Each volume covers a different geographical area with one overseas volume.

**The Bomber Command War Diaries: An Operational Reference Book, 1939-45** by Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2014) is a reference guide to Bomber Command's operations during the Second World War.

## Other sources

Service and ex-service periodicals and newspapers can provide background information and may mention individuals. The two most recent issues of The Royal Air Forces Association ([rafa.org.uk](http://rafa.org.uk)) quarterly journal **Air Mail** are available online at [www.rafatrad.co.uk](http://www.rafatrad.co.uk). **Flight** magazine archive issues from 1909–2005 are available at [www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive](http://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive). Commercial magazines such as **Flypast** ([www.flypast.com](http://www.flypast.com)) and **Aeroplane** ([www.aeroplanemonthly.com](http://www.aeroplanemonthly.com)) may also be able to help.

Recent issues of the **First World War Aviation Historical Society** journal are online at [www.crossandcockade.com](http://www.crossandcockade.com) together with a forum. Information on the history of the RAF squadrons is available on the **RAF** website at [www.raf.mod.uk](http://www.raf.mod.uk). Useful details on the **History of RAF Organisation** is on [www.rafweb.org](http://www.rafweb.org) and various RAF related websites are hosted on [www.rafinfo.org.uk](http://www.rafinfo.org.uk)

**IWM's Lives of the First World War** is a digital initiative to create the permanent digital memorial to those who served in uniform and worked on the home front [www.livesofthefirstworldwar.org](http://www.livesofthefirstworldwar.org)

**Air Force Records: a Guide for Family Historians** by William Spencer (Richmond, Surrey: TNA, 2008). RFC/RAF material now held by TNA.

**Tracing Your Air Force Ancestors** by Phil Tomaselli (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2007)

TNA 'Help with your research' guides cover a range of topics, explain how to find and use TNA records and signpost other sources [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/)

## Contact addresses

### The National Archives

Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond,  
Surrey TW9 4DU  
020 8876 3444  
[www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)

### Royal Air Force Museum

Department of Research & Information Services  
Grahame Park Way, London NW9 5LL  
020 8358 4873  
[www.rafmuseum.org.uk](http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk)

### Commonwealth War Graves Commission

2 Marlow Road, Maidenhead,  
Berkshire SL6 7DX  
01628 507 200  
[www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org)

### Ministry of Defence

The Air Historical Branch (RAF), RAF Northolt,  
West End Road, Ruislip, Middlesex HA4 6NG  
[www.raf.mod.uk/ahb/rafcasualties](http://www.raf.mod.uk/ahb/rafcasualties)

### RAF 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Disclosure Team

Room 6, Trenchard Hall, RAF Cranwell,  
Sleaford, Lincolnshire NG34 8HB  
[www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records](http://www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records)

### Ministry of Defence Medal Office

Imjin Barracks, Innsworth, Gloucester GL3 1HW  
[www.gov.uk/apply-medal-or-veterans-badge](http://www.gov.uk/apply-medal-or-veterans-badge)

### Defence Business Services JCCC (Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre)

Commemoration Team  
Room G35, Innsworth House, Imjin Barracks,  
Innsworth, Gloucester GL3 1HW

