

Hints and Tips on Finding and Tracing Former Aircrew; Researching an Operational History

Courtesy - Rob Davis

http://www.elsham.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/raf_bc/finding.html

One - Gather every scrap of information about the individual, in particular:- Full name, Service Number (this helps enormously with officialdom), Pre-war town, city, village, or general address, pre-war occupation, wartime service history (Squadron, Unit, or location, with date(s) if possible), Any post-war information (known to have survived, or known to have been killed). It is astonishing how even the most apparently trivial snippet of information can turn out to be the key piece later on, so never throw away anything. Also, read through your notes often, to keep the information sharp in your mind.

Two - write to the Editor of the local paper where the man came from before being called up. If you can't discover the name of the paper, just write to "The Local Evening Newspaper" of such-and-such a place. Try telephoning Directory Enquiries or their website and asking for the location's local evening / morning newspaper. Evening newspapers are better. You can also make an Internet search as you are likely to find local organisations bang in the area you need. Web site for newspaper addresses etc.

In your letter, briefly explain that you are trying to trace so-and-so who was on such-a-Squadron at a particular time. Mention his pre-war occupation and any information you have. If you can supply a photo, this is an excellent idea. Don't write to the national dailies, their coverage is too wide.

All local newspapers are extremely helpful in these cases and will usually print your appeal. Be sure to enclose your daytime telephone number as some papers have a policy of verifying genuine enquiries. However, if you don't want your number published, say so, although you must agree to having your address printed. It's unreasonable to expect newspapers to forward letters to you, if anyone writes in.

Also remember that newspapers like to improve readership and make money in doing so. Be prepared for your "story" to be hyped up a little, or otherwise made more "newsworthy". It's worth bearing mind the newspaperman's great maxim, which is "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story".

Three - (Updated Dec 2008) write, giving as much information as you have, to:- Air Historical Branch (RAF) and Publications Clearance Branch (Air), Building 824, RAF Northolt, West End Road, Ruislip, Middlesex, HA4 6NG. Tel 020 8833 8155 , fax 020 8833 8170.

ahb.rafspam@btconnect.com (Use and remove the SPAM insert.) If they are given enough information to find your subject, they will tell you if the man survived the war or not. If he did not, they will tell you where he is buried.

If you know that he survived the war, write, enclosing all your known information to:- Ministry of Defence, Eastern Avenue, Gloucester, GL4 7PN United Kingdom. Tel 01452 415181. They won't tell you where he is, but they will forward a stamped envelope containing a letter from you to the man, to his last known address which is likely to be 40 or 50 years out of date.

Ensure that your name and address are on the back of the letter. If it reaches your subject, you will probably get a response from him. If it comes back undelivered, you can (with care) see to which postal area it was sent, by the franks or postmarks on it. This gives you another starting point for writing to the local evening paper there.

If you have an address known to be out of date, write to "The Occupiers" asking for help. Can they tell you who they bought the house from? You may be able to work backwards from them and find the person you want.

For Australians, contact:- The Department of Defence, DGPS (Air Force Records), PO Box E33,

Queen Victoria Terrace, Canberra, Australia, ACT2600. For Canadians, contact:- Personnel Records Centre, National Archives of Canada, 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Canada, KIA 0N3.

Four - write to the British Legion (in Australia, the Returned Servicemens' League or RSL); and Royal Air Force (Australia, Royal Australian Air Force; Canada, Royal Canadian Air Force) Association, at his prewar home location. They will almost certainly pin your appeal up on a notice board. It would be courteous to include a small donation for their funds.

Five - contact his Squadron or Unit Association. <http://www.associations.rafinfo.org.uk/>

Squadron and Unit Associations

There used to be a comprehensive list of Squadron, Unit and Miscellaneous Associations here, but In order to avoid unnecessary duplication of information, Frank Haslam and I have agreed that he will maintain the list, which is available from his web page.

Six - at your local main library, find the telephone directory for the area and list all the names corresponding to the one you seek. If it's an unusual or uncommon name, this obviously helps a lot. You can even write to all of them or ring them up; very often you will find a relative.

Public Records Office

Ruskin Avenue, Kew, London, TW9 4DU, UK. Tel 0181 876 3444. This is set in beautiful grounds approximately half a mile south of Kew Bridge, and is signposted. Staff here are invariably extremely helpful, and the security is strict although unobtrusive.

When amassing information, a visit to the Public Records Office at Kew, London, is essential. Using the facilities at Kew is free, but you need to obtain a Reader's Ticket. This is a painless procedure for which you will need some ID such as driving licence, passport etc. Non-UK nationals may also be issued with a Reader's Ticket. In the records you will find details of postings in and out, losses, general info which will help you build a picture of your man and even obtain such information as his Service Number. This latter gem opens many official doors.

On arrival at the PRO, obtain or produce your ticket and make your way upstairs to the first floor. You may only take a pencil and yellow writing paper in, but you may take a laptop computer or typewriter, or dictating machine, as there are special bays reserved for these. All seats have power and comfortable computer type chairs. Appropriate stationery may be purchased from the shop on the ground floor.

Upstairs, turn left and go through the double glass doors, left again and through the automatic door. On the left are a series of wooden counters manned by PRO staff who will issue you with your seat number. Bleepers are no longer issued; you just fetch your documents from the counter after half an hour or so, or you can check the progress of your order by swiping your card at any of the terminals. Discover the documents you want to read by examining the summaries on the first floor lobby, as you exit the reading room these are immediately on the left.

All such documents have a three party reference such as AIR28/1234 which uniquely identifies any book or document set. You may select up to three documents at a time, by swiping your bar coded reader's ticket into one of the many computer terminals, entering your seat number (get this right!) and the three part reference. As soon as your first document arrives, you can select three more. Note that AIR27 (ORBs) are on microfilm for which you don't need to select via computer; just go and help yourself to the film.

The microfilm and microfiche room is along the corridor right at the opposite end. Pick a reader and find the film canister - AIR27 ones are extreme far right as you go in, in the metal filing cabinet trays. Staff now expect readers to place a brightly coloured empty box, marked with their microfilm room seat numbers, in the place of a film taken out for perusal. Such marking boxes are readily obtained from the reception desk in the microfilm room.

I have a database of many RAF PRO references. If any one wants the data I will gladly email it in

delimited form or as an Access table.

All commissioned ranks are listed in the Air Force List (book volumes available off the shelf in the microfilm room), and individual Squadron Operational Record Books or ORBs (held on microfilm under section AIR27) are the full lists of all operations carried out with crew lists and target information. These are in the section AIR27 and are readily available on microfilm. The books detail every operation carried out, crew lists, bomb load, routing, target and miscellaneous information such as postings in and out.

RAF Station Record Books (SRBs) are available on demand from the section AIR28. In such cases, you receive the actual book. These provide invaluable information on the aerodrome itself and to see a full picture of any squadron, both the SRB and the ORB must be taken in conjunction.

The PRO's Catalogue is now on line including the RAF ones. AIR27 covers the Operational Record Books; AIR28 contains the Station Record Books; AIR29 is for the Operational Training Units ORBs.

In either case, don't omit to look at the end-of-month summaries as these often contain vital snippets of information, usually on postings in and out.

Air Intelligence is AIR40.

There is a Café / restaurant at the PRO. Visitors are advised to give this a miss, and walk ten minutes the Coach & Horses pub. (Out of the main gate, to the main road, turn right, through the little tunnel under the underground line, and to the main traffic lights.) Here bar meals are available; an unmissable experience for overseas visitors. Try the traditional bitter beer!

Other useful sources of information:-

Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2 Marlow Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire, SL6 7DX, United Kingdom, tel 01628 34221. They sell a marvellous 40 minute VHS format video on their work; this costs about £8 and is well worth buying. When enquiring at the CWGC, quote as much information as you can, again the Service number is the key. Staff here, like the PRO, have a reputation for knowledge of their subject and for their helpfulness. The web database is quite outstanding.

I am informed that, for a fee of £20, Commonwealth War Graves Commission will run a search for casualties who served with the Royal Norwegian Air Force, including Norwegians who served with the RAF. The contact is Peter Stainthorpe.

There is an excellent Australian Web Resource for all service personnel.

[Intercom Magazine](#) (magazine for all ex aircrew) Raymond Flack, Thornbeck, 64 Langdale Crescent, Grantham NG31 8DF

E-mail editorSPAM@aircrew.org.uk again, use and remove the SPAM insert.

Appeals are received and printed regularly - be prepared for a longish wait as the magazine is a quarterly publication.

[The Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum](#), P.O. Box 1481, Brandon, Manitoba, Canada publishes a directory called "They Shall Grow Not Old" of all Canadian personnel killed on service.

[FlyPast Magazine](#) has a "Help" section which published free appeals. Write to them at PO Box 100, Stamford, Lincolnshire, PE9 1XQ, UK. Tel 01780 755131.

If you find a book on the Squadron or Unit concerned with your research, contact the author, as he may well have established contact with people concerned.

It's also worth a visit to the [Runnymede Memorial](#), that which commemorates those airmen and airwomen lost who have no known grave. This is a tranquil site at Runnymede in Berkshire, near Windsor Great Park, and is clearly signposted. Note however that the site is not lit or illuminated in

any way and the panels are unreadable once daylight fades. No-one can fail to be moved by the many stone panels and the 55,000 inscribed names. If you come away without a lump in your throat, there's no hope for you.

It is worth contacting the [SAGA](#) magazine in the UK which is aimed at people of retirement age, offering holidays and other services. At the back of their monthly magazine there is a section called "Reunions / Tracing" which publicises Services Association, personal appeals, and information. Write to The Editor, SAGA Magazine, the SAGA Building, Middleburg Square, Folkestone, Kent CT20 1AZ. Tel 01303 71111. Fax 01303 220391 or 01303 248622. I believe they make a small charge for this.