

Hints and Tips on Finding and Tracing Former Aircrew; Researching an Operational History (from an original paper by Rob Davis)

1. 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 i.e. 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.

2. Write to or email 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 look at their website and search under 'businesses' using the word 'newspaper' and the name of the town. Evening newspapers are sometimes better. You can also make an Internet search as you are likely to find local organisations in the area you need.

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".

3. Look at the website for The Air Historical Branch (RAF) which is really good in explaining how to obtain information about the person you are searching for. Or you can write to:

For Records of Service (a £30 fee is payable, if not Next of Kin)

Headquarters Air Command,
ACOS (Manning) 22e2
RAF Disclosures
Rm 221B Trenchard Hall
Royal Air Force Cranwell
SLEAFORD
NG34 8HB
Tel: 01400 268163

Click here to get a copy of military service records:

<https://www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records#2>

For Interpretation and additional Information on Records of Service:

Air Historical Branch
Building 824, RAF Northolt
Innsworth Station
RUISLIP
HA4 6NG

For Medal enquiries (including the Bomber Command Clasp) and additional Information write to:

MoD Medal Office
Building 250, Imjin Barracks
Innsworth Station
GLOUCESTER
GL3 1HW

If you click on this link it will give you lots of contact details for all sorts of UK archives:

<http://www.raf.mod.uk/ahb/sourcesofinformation/ukarchives.cfm>

This link is for those people who want contact details for overseas archives:

<http://www.raf.mod.uk/ahb/sourcesofinformation/overseasarchives.cfm> and

also for Australia: <http://www.defence.gov.au/Records/>

for Canada: <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/services-public/access-documents/Pages/access-documents.aspx>

for New Zealand: <http://www.nzdf.mil.nz/personnel-records/nzdf-archives/default.htm>

4. Contact his Squadron or Unit Association
5. You can also search all telephone directories online for the name of the person you are looking for.
6. You can visit:
The Public Records Office
Ruskin Avenue
Kew
London
TW9 4DU
UK

Tel 020 8876 3444

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

The records office 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 information which will help you build a picture of your relative and even obtain such information as their Service Number, which will open many official doors.

The Mildenhall Register has a member who is willing to undertake research on anyone's behalf. For more details please contact the Mildenhall Register's Secretary – Geoff Reynolds.

7. Other useful sources of information:
Commonwealth War Graves Commission
2 Marlow Road
Maidenhead
Berkshire
SL6 7DX
United Kingdom

Tel: 01628 507200
<http://www.cwgc.org/>

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 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.