

# Researching a Second World War Ancestor

The purpose of this guide is to provide some useful sources and addresses to enable you to find out more about your ancestor's service in the armed forces in the Second World War. For reasons of space we cannot list every available source and this can only serve as a basis for further research. There are several books available which cover military research in more depth – check with your local library or book shop. Much of the information written here is similar to our First World War guide – many of the sources are the same, but there are enough differences to warrant a second guide for the later conflict.

The first step in your research is to speak to your relatives. While there are still surviving members of the armed forces from the Second World War, time is not on their side. Speak to them as soon as you can, but remember that their memories may no longer be reliable. However, you cannot beat first-hand information. Other relatives in your family may remember what your ancestor did in the war and can pass on stories which were told to them. Your relatives may also know of documents, medals or photographs held by your extended family which can assist in your research.

Once you have spoken to your relatives, and hopefully have some basic information, it is now time to dig a little deeper.

## Service Records

The service records for the Second World War exist in their entirety, but they are still held by the Ministry of Defence. Access is possible, but not simple.

If the person concerned still lives, then they can make an application for their own service record free of charge. If they have passed away, but their spouse is still living then they can apply for no cost. The next of kin can apply for a service record, but there is an administrative fee of £30. If you are not the next of kin, you can still apply but for the first 25 years after the death of the individual the information you receive will be restricted to the following:

- surname
- forename
- rank
- service number
- regiment/corps
- place of birth
- age
- date of birth
- date of death where this occurred in service
- the date an individual joined the service
- the date of leaving
- good conduct medals (for example, Long Service and Good Conduct Medal (LS&GCM)), any orders of chivalry and gallantry medals (decorations of valour) awarded, some of which may have been announced in the London Gazette

After the 25 year period (which obviously means those who served in WW2) you will also receive the following information:

- the units in which he/she served
- the dates of this service and the locations of those units
- the ranks in which the service was carried out and details of campaign medals awarded

The information in service records can vary depending on which branch of the service they were in – a small number of cases there may be little or no information to be found. Please note that in this instance the administration fee is non-refundable.

The application is made direct to the Ministry of Defence – a link is at the end of this guide.

## Did your ancestor die in the war?

The first, most important resource to check is the Debt of Honour register maintained by the **Commonwealth War Graves Commission** (CWGC for short). Their database can help you locate the actual burial place of your ancestor. Generally each record will contain the following:

- name
- initial(s)

- nationality of the armed service
- rank
- regiment or service
- date of death
- service number
- reference for the grave or place of commemoration as a Plot, Row and Grave reference
- historical details about the cemetery or memorial
- where to find the cemetery or memorial

Records will also occasionally contain other information, such as the individual's age at the time of death. The next of kin were invited to submit some further information at the time the records were compiled, and this can include the names of parents or spouses, place of birth, and sometimes previous employment.

The register has many entries and if your ancestor has a fairly common name it can be difficult to locate your exact individual, so narrowing your search down to a year, or perhaps a regiment or approximate date of death will help.

Scotland has a counterpart to the CWGC register in the form of the **Scottish National War Memorial**. The actual memorial itself is located in Edinburgh Castle, and contains rolls of the fallen for each Scottish Regiment, as well as registers for Scots killed while serving in other regiments. These registers can be searched online and will occasionally provide further information such as place of birth.

All military deaths recorded abroad were registered at the **General Register Office for Scotland**, and these deaths can be viewed online at the Scotland's People website. Entries for servicemen and women killed are fairly sparse and generally only contain name, rank regiment and number and a cause of death.

The wills of Scottish soldiers are now available through the **Scotlandspeople** website. The vast majority of the wills available are for the First World War but some 5,000 are available for the Second World War.

A Roll of Honour for those from the British Army who died is available and can be searched on **Ancestry**. The information is limited to the usual name, rank, date of death etc, but interestingly lists the regiment at time of enlistment and at the time of death – useful information which might provide a lead to aid further research.

Many local Rolls of Honour were published, and these can contain lists of the survivors of a community as well as the fallen. The level of information can vary wildly from the very brief to the incredibly detailed, and unfortunately a number of modern published Rolls tend to concentrate only on the First World War. In some cases the information for the Second World War can often be a lot less detailed and sometimes is little more than a list of names. Some Rolls published very shortly after the war do contained a fair amount of detail so it can be worth looking out for them. As many are still in copyright the best (and sometimes only) place to view them is in local libraries or at the National Library of Scotland.

Almost every community in Scotland erected a war memorial to its fallen, and it is possible for an individual to appear on a number of them, such as memorials for churches, schools, places of work, and places of leisure such as golf clubs. After the Second World War many of these memorials were amended to show the later names, or a new memorial was added.

Many of these memorials can be viewed online thanks to the work of the **Scottish War Memorials Project**, which seeks to document ever military memorial in Scotland or with a Scottish connection outside of the country. It is possible to search for an individual on their website, and you can view photographs of the memorial your individual is listed on as well as possibly finding out some additional information carried out by the members of the Project.

A sister project to the Scottish War Memorials Project is the **Scottish War Graves Project**, which has a similar aim to document every military grave in Scotland. If your military ancestor is buried in Scotland, their grave may be on their website. Those buried abroad may be commemorated on a family grave in Scotland, so it is worth searching in order to locate some additional family information.

### Medals

Unlike the First World War, there is no index to the medal rolls for the Second World War which can be searched. In fact, service medals are not as much use to a researcher as they are for those research the Great War – the medals for WW2 were not inscribed with the name of the recipient, so the information which can be gleamed is limited.

What is it possible to work out is where someone served. The medals a person was awarded varied according to the places they served – someone serving in the Far East would not have been awarded the France & Germany Star, for example. The UK Government have produced a webpage which explains the qualifying periods for all medals, which includes those for WW2.

If your ancestor was lucky enough to be decorated for a gallant action, you may be able to find the citation which describes the actions behind the award. If your ancestor was one of the very few to be awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest award for gallantry, then the information about the circumstances are fairly easy to obtain via the internet or several published books.

Gallantry awards for all branches of military service were published in the London Gazette – many of them including the citation. The Gazette is now available to view online and can be searched. The search function can be difficult to navigate but eventually worthwhile.

Citations for awards of gallantry are also available on the **National Archives** website. These are the original scanned citations so occasionally you will see that the award initially recommended is sometimes not the one which was eventually awarded. **Ancestry** provides an easy to use search facility for these recommendations, but the actual paying for and viewing of images is done with the **National Archives**.

### Other Sources

If you want to know what your army ancestor did during his life in service, it is possible to find out a little more detail. Each battalion in the British Army which served during the Second World War kept a War Diary – this was a written summary of each day's activities. While it is highly unlikely to mention your ancestor by name, it can be useful to trace the movements of the men he served with. It is also possible that it may mention an act of gallantry, or in the case of men killed, it may detail the events that led to their deaths. The war diaries are held at the National Archives in Kew – some have been digitised, but not many. Some regimental museums may have copies which can be consulted.

If your ancestor was taken prisoner during the war, **Find My Past** and **Ancestry** both have Prisoner of War lists which can be searched. The information is very limited but will tell you which camp the person was held at.

**The National Archives** contains a number of series of records which may be useful. The combat reports for the Royal Air Force in particular are now available online and can give details of a particular operation. There are many other sources available and a search of their catalogue, *Discovery*, is recommended.

Survivors of the war can also be found in local sources – local newspapers frequently reported on men from their area that had been decorated for gallantry or had been wounded. Your local library may have historic local newspapers on microfilm or will know where they can be viewed. A few are online at the **Google News Newspaper Archive**, and an ever-increasing number can be found at the **British Newspaper Archive**. The National Library of Scotland has access to some newspapers through its digital archive facility and **The Times** and **The Scotsman** Newspaper have their own archives online at a fee. The amount of information is nowhere near as much as was printed during the First world War, but there may be some useful information to be found.

If your ancestor was an officer, you can trace his career by consulting the Army, Navy, or Air Force List. This was published monthly by the War Office and was a complete listing of every officer in the relevant branch of service. All men were listed in ascending order of the date they were promoted and show the dates they were promoted to each rank. Each volume is indexed so if you do not know your ancestors regiment it is still possible to locate him. Complete sets of these Lists are available at the Imperial War Museum in London and the National Archives at Kew, but many are now available as scanned downloads from the **Internet Archive**.

Regimental histories tend to be fairly general in their scope and don't focus on the individual soldiers, but they can give a flavour of the involvement your ancestor had in particular battles or campaigns. They can be found in libraries or bookshops, and occasionally can be found via regimental museums (either by visiting or downloading from their website).

It can also be worthwhile considering visiting the museum of the Regiment your ancestor served in – it will contain artefacts and information which will help build a picture of what life was like for your ancestor in wartime. Most regiments have a website and may offer research. A quick search should locate the website of the particular regiment you seek. The website of the **Ogilby Trust** also lists all regimental museums in the British Isles. The museum may offer a research service for a fee – this can vary in the amount of information you will receive. It is usually better to do your own research, so find out if they allow visiting researchers – each museum will offer a slightly different service.

Other larger museums include the Imperial War Museum, the National Army Museum and the National War Museum of Scotland – all are well worth visiting and possess extensive libraries but may have restricted opening hours for the libraries.

The **Royal Air Force's** website has short histories of all existing as well as disbanded squadrons which are useful for a very short insight as to what type of aircraft your ancestor would have either flown or maintained and what services they performed.

The "**naval-history.net**" is a goldmine of naval information including casualty lists, and details of ships lost during the Second World War – an ideal starting point for researching ancestors in the Royal Navy.

The **51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division** has an online museum with information on the division's activities, as well as photos and individual accounts.

The **Keep 'Em Moving** site is one man's tribute to his father who served in the Cameron Highlanders during WW2 and is worth viewing.

The **602 (City of Glasgow) Squadron Museum Association** website details the history of the squadron and its service in WW2.

The **BBC** have an archive of 47,000 stories and 15,000 images contributed by the general public the public to contribute their memories of World War Two.

Online discussion forums can be an invaluable source of expertise – many visitors to forums have incredibly detailed knowledge on their specialised subject and are often happy to share that information with others. A useful idscussion forum is **WW2 Talk**. The aforementioned **Scottish War Memorials Project** and **Scottish War Graves Project** also have members willing to assist with queries.

#### Websites and places to visit

##### Main sources

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2 Marlow Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 7DX

Website: [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org)

The Scottish National War Memorial, The Castle, Edinburgh, EH1 2YT

Website: [www.snm.org](http://www.snm.org)

The General Register Office for Scotland, New Register House, 3 West Register Street, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT

Website for online research: [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk)

The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU

Website: <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

##### Other online resources

Ancestry: [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

Findmypast: [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)

Second World War service records: <https://www.gov.uk/requests-for-personal-data-and-service-records>

Regimental War Diaries: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/army-second-world-war-operations.htm>

RAF Combat Reports 1939-1945: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/combats-reports-ww2.htm>

The Scottish War Memorials and War Graves Projects: [www.scottishmilitaryresearch.co.uk](http://www.scottishmilitaryresearch.co.uk)

UK Government medal info: <https://www.gov.uk/medals-campaigns-descriptions-and-eligibility>

The London Gazette: <http://www.gazettes-online.co.uk/>

The British Newspaper Archive: <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

Google News Newspaper Archive: <http://news.google.com/newspapers/>

Naval History: <http://www.naval-history.net/index.htm>

The Royal Air Force: <http://www.raf.mod.uk> (click on "history")

WW2 Talk: <http://ww2talk.com/forums/>

51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division: <http://51hd.co.uk/>

Keep 'Em Moving: <http://www.keep-em-moving.co.uk/>

BBC WW2 People's War: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/>

602 (City of Glasgow) Squadron Museum Association: <http://www.602squadronmuseum.org.uk>

### **Museums**

**The Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London, SE1 6HZ**

Website: [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)

**The National Army Museum, Royal Hospital Road, London, SW3 4HT**

Website: <http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/>

**National War Museum, The Castle, Edinburgh, EH1 2NG**

Website: [http://www.nms.ac.uk/our\\_museums/war\\_museum.aspx](http://www.nms.ac.uk/our_museums/war_museum.aspx)

**Royal Naval Museum, HM Naval Base, Portsmouth, PO1 3NH**

Website: <http://www.royalnavalmuseum.org/>

**The Royal Air Force Museum** has two locations, at Colindale in North London, and at Cosford near Birmingham. The website is <http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/>

There are many Regimental museums, and the best way to find one is to visit the website of the Ogilby Trust, which is described as "the definitive guide to the regimental and corps museums of the British Army spread throughout the United Kingdom". The website address is: <http://www.armymuseums.org.uk/>