



How to trace family WW2 service records

By Dr Phil Judkins

So many of us never asked our parents and relatives the question 'What did you do in the war? We hope this information sheet will help you to get started and help find some answers.

The information is taken from a podcast first broadcast 10th February 2021 and which is available here: <https://bit.ly/2MukQt8>

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Where to start?

1. Set out on a sheet of paper what you already know, or what you think you know, because you may find 'facts' you've been told turn out to be wrong – even very personal ones.
2. List details such as all known names including nicknames, dates of birth, date into military service, which service (Army, Navy, Air Force) where your relative worked and when, what rank, names of friends, etc.

Did your relative survive the war?

1. You'll need to know because if they didn't, and sadly died during the war, they will appear on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website, www.cwgc.org – NOT www.cwgc.org.uk which is a commercial site.
2. CWGC gives you a lot of information totally free, and it does cover civilian deaths from, for example, bombing.
3. This next action applies whether your relative died in the war or survived.
4. This is to go to the Government website <https://www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records> to get your relative's Service Record. You'll normally need to be the next of kin or at least have the next of kin's written permission, though you can get limited information without that. Find the set of forms applying to you – Army, Navy or Air Force - fill them in, send them off with £30 – it's not free - and wait, quite likely for weeks or months; they get a lot of enquiries.

What does a Service Record look like – what information can we get from it?

1. It's normally a double-sided card, and you'll get a scan of both sides. One part will contain all the personal details – name, home address, next of kin, date of birth, religion.
2. Another will be a list of all the various units to which the person was sent, or 'posted', usually with the dates.
3. A third section will contain a statement of all the various ranks a person held, like 'Private', 'Corporal', 'Sergeant', or whatever.
4. A fourth area will usually have details of conduct, good or bad, and any punishments; and decorations or awards will often be listed also.

Sounds easy? The problem is that the information will be there, but it will be buried in a sea of initials and military jargon.

Deciphering the jargon

The different handwriting styles on Service Records can be problematic. However, let's make a start by looking at each service in turn.

Royal Air Force

1. The RAF organise themselves into Commands, like Bomber Command, Fighter Command, Coastal Command and so on, and then underneath them into Groups, 60 Group being the one which ran radar stations in the UK.
2. Each Group then had one or more Wings, the radar Wings in the UK being 71, 72, and so on; if you were in a Wing which actually flew bombers, fighters, or maritime patrol, then you were a member of a Squadron or a Flight, so the airmen or WAAF who were radar mechanics servicing, say, 76 Squadron's airborne radar, you were usually part of 76 Squadron.
3. If you were on ground radar, your radar station was called an "Air Ministry Experimental Station" as a cover name, so you might be, for example, at AMES 24, which is Bawdsey. You might, however, be posted to a Mobile Radar, especially after the invasion of Europe, and you would then be part of an MRU, Mobile Radio Unit – 'radio' was used as a cover name for radar, while what we think normally think of as 'radio', radio for communications to talk to people, was called 'wireless', so you do have Wireless Units too.

Did people go straight to a Group, a Wing, a Squadron or an AMES right after they joined up?

1. When you joined up, you were assessed, sometimes by interview, sometimes with a test, to see what you might be best at. You then had to do your standard induction training – collect your uniform and your kit, 'square-bashing' or marching training, saluting, learning about the RAF – and could be given more tests.
2. Sometimes, your trade would be obvious – civilians who worked in a wireless shop or were ham radio enthusiasts were likely to be marked down for radar, Women's Auxiliary Air Force who scored high in tests were likely to be assessed for radar as 'Clerk, Special Duties', again a cover name, and then trained for radar work.
3. You would then get your trade training, which for a radar might be a 6-week course at Bawdsey, for example, or at Yatesbury in Wiltshire, where you would be taught electronics right from the start, even if you were simply going to operate the radar rather than maintain it.

What about people coming from university or people working for manufacturers?

1. They might well join as Officers, and sometimes civilians working on radar research who had to go into war zones were put into RAF uniforms as temporary officers because civilians in war zones, if captured, could be shot as spies.
2. Less dramatically, if you joined the RAF from university as an officer, you'd still have to do initial training, but your trade training might be a longer course at a Radio School before you were posted to a unit, where you'd perhaps be in charge of a radar station.

What did people actually do in their units?

1. Most Units kept a day to day War Diary, called an Operations Record Book or ORB, on a Form 540. Many, but not all, survive at the National Archives in London, at Kew, and if you were on an Operational Squadron, these are available online at £3.50 for each month.
2. Go to their website, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ and look for Documents Online. The ground radar stations' War Diaries, where they exist, aren't online – you'll have to visit Kew, but look up in their online catalogue, Discovery, the file references for your relative's radar.
3. A useful book for UK radars is Colin Dobinson's 'Building Radar' – pricey, so use your library.

Royal Navy

1. The key point to remember about the Navy is that absolutely everything is a ship! That applies to all their buildings on land, so the Portsmouth Navy base is HMS Victory, for example, or Dover is HMS Attentive.
2. It applies to airfields too, so Yeovilton is HMS Heron. What you'll see on your relative's record card is a string of what seem like ships, but in fact are a mixture of ships and land-based units.

Did Navy 'ships' keep War Diaries too?

1. Yes, they did, and they are at Kew also – but only the Diaries, 'logs', for bigger ships were kept. For smaller ships, only records of flotillas survive, so you have to find to which flotilla your relative's ship belonged when they were there – the Internet is usually a big help here.

Does Navy training follow the same pattern as the RAF?

1. Yes, broadly, because the same things have to be learned. A name to watch for is HMS Collingwood at Gosport, which is the shore base where many Navy people learned their radar and which still today maintains the Navy's Historic Collection, with very friendly and helpful staff.
2. The Naval Trust wrote three books – 'Naval Radar' by Kingsley is the best start.

What about the Fleet Air Arm?

1. The best place to go for help here is the excellent Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton where planes and kit are on display.

The Army

Are the Army's radar people much the same?

1. Yes, but keep in mind that most of the Army's radar was for shooting down planes, or coast defence, so keep a lookout in your relative's records for AA Command who mainly used the radar, and for REME, the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, who did a lot of maintenance on it.
2. Both have records at the National Archives. A short book called 'Army Radar' by David Wilcox is helpful, as is 'AA Command' by Colin Dobinson.
3. For the Army, knowing your relative's regiment is very important – that may well lead you to the Regimental Museum, Regimental newsletters, and their veterans' associations who may very well contain people who knew and remember your relative.
4. Act quickly, though, as time is sadly reducing their numbers and the memory recall of those who remain.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission website

1. If your relative sadly died in the war, the CWGC website can give you a lot of information very quickly. Go to 'Find War Dead' on www.cwgc.org, fill in the details you know, and typically you'll get a lot of details of your relative at the time they died. Use that, together with the steps I've outlined, including getting your relative's record of service which will fill in their earlier service, and you can build up a pretty full account of their time in the military.

What about the civilian radar scientists?

1. Your best bet is to go to the websites covering the three main places where they worked – Bawdsey Radar Trust, Purbeck Radar Museum Trust, and Malvern Radar and Technology History Society – and work from there with the helpful volunteers of those groups.

Any other tips?

Lynette Burgess is the contact for Bawdsey Radar Trust, and you can contact her at info@bawdseyradar.org.uk or by phone 07821 162879

You can find out more about Bawdsey Radar and the women and men who developed and used radar technology by visiting www.bawdseyradar.org.uk and follow Bawdsey Radar on Twitter and Facebook.