

Finding Army, Royal Navy and Air Force service records

Ronnie Scott, May 2013 // www.ronnie-scott.com

[+] Army ancestors

1 – Officers serving 1764-1913

The records of service of officers commissioned before 1901 are arranged by date of commission or by unit (not all records have survived). Officers' records of service are on microfilm, in records series WO 25 and WO 76 in the National Archives (TNA; www.nationalarchives.gov.uk). All officers are listed in the Army List, which was published annually between 1754 and 1879 and quarterly between 1879 and 1922, so you can trace an officer's career using that source.

2 – Officers serving 1914-1921

These records are on microfilm, in series WO 339, in TNA. Territorial Army officers records are in series WO 374. To check whether you ancestor is there, search the TNA catalogue: type in the surname as the keyword, and WO 339 or WO 374 as the series code reference.

3 – Officers serving 1922 onwards

Write to the Ministry of Defence. If the person whose records you want to see is still alive, you need to send a letter of consent, signed by the person; if the person is dead, you must send a letter of consent, signed by the next of kin and (unless the person died in service) proof of death. Enquiries from widows or widowers about their late spouse's service are free, and all other requests cost £30. The address is: Army Personnel Centre, Historical Disclosures, Mail Point 555, Kentigern House, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow G2 8EX.

4 – Other ranks leaving 1760-1913

The majority of records of soldiers discharged between 1760 and 1913 are in the records series WO 97, on microfilm in TNA.

5 – Other ranks leaving 1914-1920

There are pension records in series WO 364 and service records in series WO 363, on microfilm in TNA. They are also available for a fee through Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk).

Most of series WO 363 was destroyed by bombing in 1940.

6 – Other ranks leaving after 1920

Write to the Ministry of Defence, as above.

[+] Royal Navy ancestors

1 – Commissioned officers 1756-1917

Service records are mostly in series ADM 196, on microfilm in TNA. Navy lists can also be used to trace officers' careers. These were published from 1782 to 1987.

2 – Commissioned officers after the First World War

Write to the Ministry of Defence, as above, at the address: RN Disclosures Cell, Room 48, West Battery, Whale Island, Portsmouth, Hampshire PO2 8DX.

3 – Warrant officers 1830-1931

Service records are mostly in series ADM 196, on microfilm in TNA. Navy lists can also be used to trace officers' careers. These were published from 1782 to 1987.

4 – Warrant officers after the First World War

Write to the Ministry of Defence, as above, at the address: RN Disclosures Cell, Room 48, West Battery, Whale Island, Portsmouth, Hampshire PO2 8DX.

5 – Ratings joining before 1853

If you know the name of the ship on which your ancestor served, and when, you can search the ship musters and pay lists. TNA has these from 1668 to 1884 in series ADM 36, ADM 37, ADM 38, ADM 39, ADM 115 and ADM 177. Search the catalogue, using the ship name as the keyword, to check what records are available. If your ancestor received a naval pension, check the service records in ADM 29, which cover 1801 to 1844.

6 – Ratings joining 1853-72

TNA has service registers with name indexes in series ADM 139. These give date and place of birth; physical characteristics at the time of joining; a summary of service; and a parental consent form for those who entered as boys.

7 – Ratings joining 1873-1923

TNA has service registers with name indexes in series ADM 188. These give: date and place of birth; physical characteristics at the time of joining; and a summary of service.

8 – Ratings joining from 1923

Write to the Ministry of Defence, as above, at the address: RN Disclosures Cell, Room 48, West Battery, Whale Island, Portsmouth, Hampshire PO2 8DX.

For the records of people who served in the Fleet Air Arm, Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service, the Royal Fleet Reserve Service, the Royal Naval Reserve, the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve or the Women's Royal Naval Service, see the research guides on the TNA website (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk).

[+] Royal Air Force ancestors

1 – Officers in the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) 1914 to March 1918

Records are arranged by service number in series ADM 273 in TNA. If you do not have your ancestor's service number, the card index to names should help.

2 – Officers in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) 1914 to March 1918

Records are in series AIR 76 in TNA. If you do not have the service number, the card index to names should help. Information is also available in WO 339 and WO 374. You can search online to see if there are records for the person you are interested in.

3 – Officers April 1918 to mid-1920s

Records can be found in alphabetical order in series AIR 76 in TNA.

4 – Officers from mid-1920s

Write to the Ministry of Defence, as above, at the address: RAF Disclosures Section, Room 221b, Trenchard Hall, RAF Cranwell, Sleaford, Lincolnshire NG34 8HB.

5 – Other ranks in the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) 1914 to March 1918

Records are in series ADM 188 in TNA.

6 – Other ranks in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) 1914 to March 1918

If your ancestor was discharged before March 1918, his records will be in series WO 363 or WO 364 in TNA. They are also available for a fee through Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk).

Most of series WO 363 was destroyed by bombing in 1940. If your ancestor continued in service, any records will be in AIR 79.

7 – Other ranks April 1918 to mid-1920s

Records are arranged by service number in series AIR 79 in TNA, along with records for those with service numbers below 329000 (if they did not go on to serve in the Second World War). An index to find the service number is available in AIR 78.

8 – Other ranks from mid-1920s

Write to the Ministry of Defence, as above, at the address: RAF Disclosures Section, Room 221b, Trenchard Hall, RAF Cranwell, Sleaford, Lincolnshire NG34 8HB.

9 – Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) 1914 to 1918

There are no surviving records of WRAF officers from this period. Service records for airwomen are alphabetically arranged in series AIR 80 in TNA.

10 – Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) from 1919

Write to the Ministry of Defence, as above, at the address: RAF Disclosures Section, Room 221b, Trenchard Hall, RAF Cranwell, Sleaford, Lincolnshire NG34 8HB.

TNA has a useful guide to using World War One medal rolls as a source for military service details (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/medal-index-cards-ww1.htm>). You can search for and download digital copies of the index cards for the army campaign medal rolls.

TNA has digitised many of its Army, Navy and Air Force records. Check the TNA website for resources available online. Otherwise, plan a trip to Kew, or employ an experienced researcher.

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