



Battlefield

The Military History and Battlefield Tour eZine
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In the footsteps of your ancestors

Researching British Soldiers who served in the 1914-18 Great War

INTRODUCTION

At **In the footsteps BATTLEFIELD TOURS** we occasionally receive enquiries about how to trace the records of British soldiers who served in the 1814-18 Great War. We do our best to help when such a request is made, but our resources are limited and we are conscious that our best is often very slow and

not always that conclusive. To help those wishing to research records of British Soldiers who served in the 1914-18 Great War we thought that it would be useful if we put together some notes on the basics of how to research this information.

During the Great War of 1914-1918 Britain's Regular Army was tiny by European standards and was quickly supplemented initially by Reservists and the Territorials. Kitchener's Army of volunteers were rapidly trained and sent to the front and by 1916 it was necessary to introduce Conscription to make up numbers.

The casualty lists continued to grow at an alarming rate largely because of the very nature of trench warfare. The modern military innovations and communications that we know today simply did not exist and the 1914-18 Great War had developed into one of attrition. As a consequence, the British Army sustained massive fatal casualties averaging around 450 officers and men per day.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)

The first place to begin your search is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). They have the most

complete record of soldiers (and others) that died in the 1914-18 Great War. This record is available on-line in their 'Debt of Honour Register' at <http://www.cwgc.org/>.

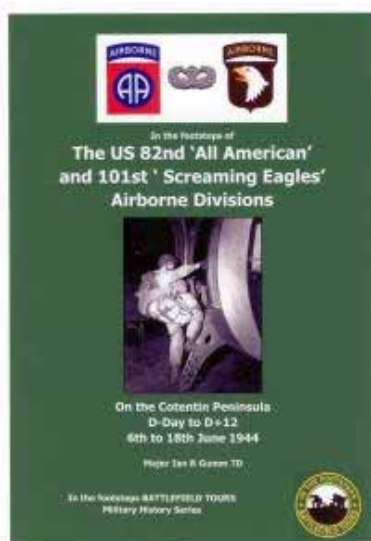
The information contained in the Debt of Honour Register includes the location of the soldier's grave (or his commemoration, if he has no known grave). It will usually give details of his service number, rank, unit, date of death (if known) and place of burial or commemoration. Other information may be available, but this is dependent on material supplied (or not supplied) by relatives during and after the war. It should also be noted that whilst the CWGC make every effort the Register is not entirely free of errors.

The 1921 Compilation – *Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914-19*

An excellent resource for locating those who died in the war is *Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914-19*. Originally published in 1921 the compilations consist of 80 volumes for the soldiers with a separate volume for officers. Each volume deals with individual Regiment or Corps, and lists those who died, giving dates, locations, army number. It is not 100% accurate, but an excellent record

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Airborne Divisions**
On the Cotentin Peninsula
D-Day to D+12
6th to 18th June 1944

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that was based on regimental records.

These volumes give information that the CWGC does not for example, place of birth, place of residence, place of enlistment and any former regiment being the most common.

A full set of the *Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914-19* is available for the general public to reference in the Birmingham Central Library. Other Central and/or Reference Libraries may also hold copies, but check before going as they often only have the volume relating to the local regiment.

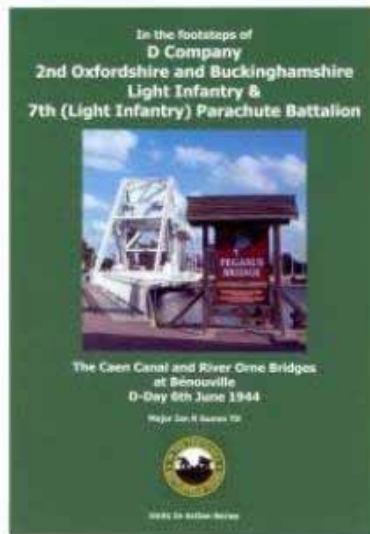
This work can also be obtained from the Imperial War Museum as a searchable CD-ROM and is also available from: <http://www.naval-military-press.com/>. The CD-ROM has the advantage that the casualties can be searched and sorted, which is a great benefit if you are researching a unit or what happened to a group of friends. Inevitably it does contain some transcription errors - but then again the originals have errors too. Overall, this is an excellent though very expensive resource. Many branches of the Western Front Association have a copy, as do some libraries - including the one at the National Archives.

Genealogy Websites

Military-Genealogy.com the Naval & Military Press' website for military historians and family history researchers has computerised these records, along with similar records relating to the Second World War, and offer a pay-per-view service to search them. These works are also available as a searchable CD-ROM, published by the Naval & Military Press. For further details visit: <http://www.naval-military-press.com/>.

Another pay-per-view service is provided by findmypast.com that has made it possible to search for

The story of D Coy 2 OBLI and 7 PARA at Pegasus Bridge on D-Day 6th June 1944



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soldiers who died in the 1914-18 Great War on-line. It is also possible to access the registers of war deaths via their website <http://www.findmypast.com/HomeServlet>. In addition to their pay-per-view service they operate a voucher system whereby vouchers can be purchased from UK stockists or mail order, see their website for details.

Rolls of Honour

Many businesses, organisations, schools and towns created Rolls of Honour after the war. Many of these are now available on-line and can be accessed by searching Google then clicking on the appropriate search result.

In addition to these dedicated Rolls of Honour sites is a particularly good website <http://www.roll-of-honour.com/> that is striving to list details of the various War Memorials in the UK. This also has a useful

search facility that will interrogate the records they have in their databases.

Soldiers Personal Files

All British soldiers who served in the 1914-18 Great War had a personal file. Around half of these personal files were destroyed in the first German air-raid on London in the Second World War on the night of 7th/8th September 1940.

The records that survived the Second World War were released to the UK National Archives: The Public Record Office at Kew in November 1996. Their website can be found at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>. The original documents are now so fragile that only microfilm is available for inspection and whether an individual soldier's file has survived is entirely random.

Officers' files had a higher survival rate and about 216,000 were released to the National Archives in February 1998. The criteria for release were that the officer had served in the British Army between 1914 and 1920 and that he had left the Army before 31st March 1922.

It is often possible to locate an officer's file on line, by typing the surname into the National Archives Catalogue accompanied by a record class number. Officers' files are mostly contained in record series WO 339 or WO 374 (especially Territorial Officers).

The Medal Index and Medal Rolls

Besides a soldier's (or officer's) personal file the other major source of information is the Medal Card Index, also in the National Archives. This is the most complete listing of British service personnel in the First World War.

The National Archives has now completed the digitizing of the Medal Index. The on-line version

is available at <http://www.documentson-line.nationalarchives.gov.uk/default.asp>.

Most soldiers who served with the British Army in the 1914-18 Great War qualified for campaign medals, normally the 1914 (or 1914-15) Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. The Army Medals Office recorded soldiers' medal entitlement in lists known as rolls. The Index Card available on line provides the reference to where the soldier is listed on the Rolls, which are organised by regiment or corps. The information found on the Medal Card will include the soldier's name, rank and serial number, his regiment or corps, sometimes his unit (e.g. battalion or Field Company RE), his date of death (if he died during the war), the campaign medals he was awarded and the reference numbers that allow the soldier to be traced on the Medal Rolls, which are not available on line.

It is important to check the actual Medal Rolls because they can give extra vital information about a soldier, such as his battalion, that allows further research to be undertaken. This is particularly true of soldiers who served in the cavalry, yeomanry and infantry, but much less so for the larger corps, such as the Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers and Army Service Corps.

Unit War Diaries

Once a soldier's unit has been identified it is possible to find out more about it. All units from battalion level (and the battalion's equivalent in other corps, such as a Field Artillery Brigade) upwards were required to keep War Diaries on active service. These diaries are preserved in the National Archives: The Public Record Office, Kew, in record series WO 95. War Diaries rarely mention ordinary soldiers, but they do provide a detailed account of the

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unit's movements and activities.

Regimental Histories

Nearly all infantry regiments and battalions have published histories. These can usually be purchased through that Regiment's PRI or through most reputable bookshops. On-line bookshops such as Amazon will also have these available.

We hope that the information contained within this article has been of assistance and will help you trace the records of the soldier you are interested in. If you feel that we can be of assistance please email us at inthefootsteps@btinternet.com and we will try to help. Please bear in mind however our opening paragraph, as our resources are limited and we are conscious that our best is often very slow and not always conclusive.

Ian R Gumm
at Willowmead
20th January 2007

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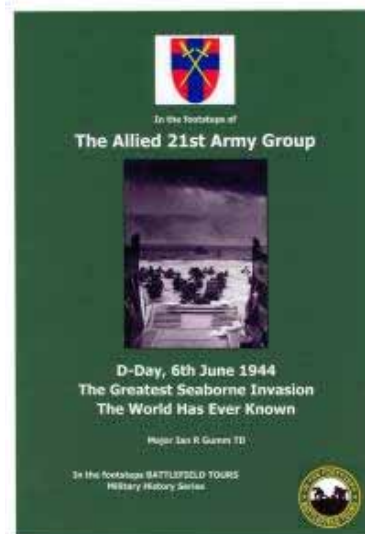
If you are interested in following "in the footsteps" of an ancestor, relative or particular unit we can put together a bespoke battlefield tour proposal for your consideration. The proposal is without obligation as we do not undertake any preparatory work until an order is received.

We also offer a range of commemorative certificates that can be purchased from our website. These decorative certificates are designed to commemorate the military service of service personnel in a readily displayable format, they are not meant to be facsimiles of official documents.

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