

# 1914: Tracing your British WWI Soldier

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## Context

The statistics vary by source on how many served during WWI with totals of 9,296,691 for all services with

7,712,772 enlisted in the Army

293,552 enlisted in the RFC and RAF

407,360 enlisted in the Navy

However, the records that survived the fire on 8 September 1940 at the Arnside War Office records repository does not come close to this total.

## SOLDIERS WHO DIED

### Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission at [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org) ensures that the 1.7 million people who died in the two world wars will not be forgotten. There are 1,059,642 names from WWI covering 4 Aug 1914 to 31 Aug 1921. The standard datafields are: name; rank; service number; date of death; age; regiment/service; grave reference; and the cemetery where buried or the memorial where his name is inscribed. There may be additional comments from the soldiers paperwork such as name and address of next of kin, which can be very helpful as many of the soldiers documents have not survived.

### Soldiers Died in the Great War

This series included one volume for officers and 80 volumes for all other ranks was published in 1921 using regimental records. They list only those who died between 4 Aug 1914 and 11 Nov 1918. The published books have been digitized and made available on CD-ROM from The Naval & Military Press and is available at [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) and [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) with 703,811 names.

Information often includes: name, rank, number, regiment, date of death, cause of death, theater of war; place of birth; place of residence, and place of enlistment. There are errors of fact and transcription so verify where possible.

## Other Sources to confirm Death

Death Certificates - from General Registry Office

Index to Overseas Deaths - [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com)

Official Casualty Lists - *Times*, *Scotsman*, *Irish*

*Times*

Local newspapers - often include photographs

War Memorials - every community has them

Rolls of Honor

## ALL SOLDIERS

### Soldiers Personal Files

Every soldier who served during the war had a personal file. Unfortunately many were destroyed, singed or sustained water damage from the Arnside fire of 8 Sept 1940.

The records that do survive are in WO 363 - the so called 'Burnt Records'. These records are for men who completed their service between 1914 and 1920 and include men who survived the war, died of wounds or disease or were killed in action, and even men executed.

The 'Unburnt Records' in WO364 was created by the War Office recovering documents at the end of WWII. The majority of the records are from the Ministry of Pensions, and primarily focus on soldiers discharged on account of sickness or wounds suffered between 1914 and 1920. A large number of records are for soldiers who were discharged before the war, but after re-enlisting needed their pensions adjusted because of additional service. Many of the files contain documentation relating to enlistment, conduct and overseas service, but also detailed medical reports. Soldiers may be found in both record groups.

Royal Naval Division Service Records 1914-20 formed in 1914 from a surplus of 30,000 sailors for whom no ships were available. They were renamed the 63<sup>rd</sup> (RN) Division in 1916 and came under the control of the War Office. The records from

ADM339 are available on [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) and online at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk).

Women's Auxiliary Army Corps - WAAC. 57,000 women served but only 7,000 service records survive in WO398. Records online at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service has over 15,000 records from WO399, with records online at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)

PIN26 - War Pension files have been indexed and are searchable by name in Discovery - TNA catalog, but the records have not been digitized. Provides the regiment and the nature of the disability.

PIN82 - WWI Widows' Pension Forms for 9,800 recipients indexed and are searchable by name in Discovery - TNA catalog, but the records have not been digitized. Provides the regiment and the nature of the disability.

### Officers

Officer records have the same survival issues that the other ranks do. There are 139,906 records in WO339 consisting of officers who were in the regular army before the war, were given temporary commission, or commissioned into the Special Reserve of officers. In addition there is another 80,000 in WO374 from the Territorial Army or with temporary commissions. These records have been indexed and are in Discovery - TNA catalog, but have not been digitized yet.

Check the Army Lists for details of a soldiers promotions. See *Tracing your pre-WWI British Soldier* handout for more information on Army Lists.

Registers of Soldiers Effects - [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) covers period 1901 to 1929 for soldiers killed. Can be very useful as it names the next of kin who receives allowance, often mother, father, or wife. Records from National Army Museum

### Prisoners of War

A list of British officers taken prisoner during the war is available at both [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) and [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

Over 3,000 prisoner of war reports from British and Commonwealth troops, including officers, other ranks and seamen, from WO161 are digitally available at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk).

### Medal Index Cards

Records from WO364

Medal	Awarded for
1914 Star	Service under fire in France and Belgium, 5 Aug-22 Nov 1914, includes sailors serving ashore
1914-1915 Star	Service in all other war theaters, 5 Aug 1914-31 Dec 1915, and for France and Belgium 23 Nov 1914-31Dec 1915
British War Medal	Service abroad (including India) 5 Aug 1914-11Nov 1918, or 1919-1920 in Russia
Silver War Badge	For retirement, or discharge due to sickness or wounds caused by war service, at home or abroad after 4 Aug 1914
Victory Medal	For military and civilian personnel who served in a war theater.
Territorial Force War Medal	To members of the Territorial Forces enlisting before 30 Sep 1914 and who served in a war theater between 5 Aug 1914-11 Nov 1918

A transcription of the records are available at [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) and [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com), while images of the medal cards are available at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) in color, and at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) in b&w.

## Other Medals and Citations

During the war numerous other medals and awards were granted for gallantry and service, often citations and announcements were made in the *London Gazette*. These included the:

- Victoria Cross
- Distinguished Service Order
- Military Cross
- Distinguished Conduct Medal
- Military Medal
- Meritorious Service Medal
- Mentioned in Despatches
- Royal Red Cross
- Order of the British Empire
- Indian Order of merit
- Indian Distinguished Service Medal
- Orders of Chivalry
- various foreign awards

## Putting the Soldier into Context

### Army Hierarchy

- Army - Numbered I-V
- Corps - numbered using Roman numerals
- Division - arabic numbers 1-75
- Brigade - arabic numbers
- Battalion - arabic numbers

WO95 contains over 10,000 individual unit diaries arranged by operational theater and then in hierarchical order. Search Discovery - TNA catalog on WO95 for diary of interest, most of which have been digitized and can be purchased. The diaries are now online at Ancestry and searchable by date.

Many of the war diaries and operation records were used by the Cabinet Historical Section to produce the *Official History* some of which were not published until recently. The full series has been released on two DVD-Rom entitled *Official History of the Great War 1914-1918* published by Naval & Military Press, 2010 and 2011.

See Becke for Order of Battles and how they changed over time.

## Maps and Trench Maps.

You will need maps showing the big picture of the battle fronts and how they changed over time, and during the battles in which your ancestors were involved. Look for Atlases e.g Nieberg.

For a detailed examination of the events of the battlefield with many maps, photographs (then and now), and a detailed analysis of what happened, see the *Battleground Europe* series published by Leo Cooper Publishing.

A number of WWI trench maps along with a good explanation of how to read, use and interpret the maps are available online at McMaster University <http://library.mcmaster.ca/maps/ww1/home.htm>. The maps are available for download as medium and high resolution files.

## Bibliographic guides

When possible use bibliographic guides to find the material you are seeking whether that is on a particular battle, campaign, or an aspect of army life. See White, Lengel, Hartesveldt and Enser.

## Websites

The Long, Long Trail - the British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918 [www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net)

Western Front Association - [www.westernfrontassociation.com](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com)

See books by Blank and Fowler for additional website suggestions.

## RESOURCES

Identifies resources explaining how to do research and to how find resources, their bibliographies will guide you to many other resources.

1. Becke, Major A.F. *Order of Battle of Divisions. Pt. 1 - Regular British Divisions; Pt 2a - Territorial Force Mounted Divisions and 1<sup>st</sup> Line Territorial Force Divisions; Pt 2b - 2<sup>nd</sup> Line Territorial Force Divisions, Home-*

- Service Divisions and 74<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> Divisions; Pt 3 - New Army Divisions; Pt 4 - Army Council, G.H.Q.s, Armies and Corps 1914-1918.* Reprinted Naval & Military Press. 2007. Index by Ray Westlake 2008
2. Beckett, Ian F.W. *The First World War: The Essential Guide to Sources in the UK National Archives.* Kew: Public Record Office 2002.
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  19. Spencer, William. *Family History in the Wars: How Your Ancestors Served their Country.* Kew, Surrey: The National Archives. 2007.
  20. Spencer, William. *First World War Army Service Records: A Guide for Family Historians, Fourth Edition.* Kew, Surrey: The National Archives. 2008.
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  23. Ward, G. Kingsley and Major Edwin Gibson. *Courage Remembered: The story behind the construction and maintenance of the Commonwealth's Military Cemeteries and Memorials of the Wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945.* London: HMSO. 1989.
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