

Military Records

Army Service Records

These records are for the ancestors that enlisted into the armed forces. Obviously, the majority of these would be for men who enlisted for the First World War but some may have served before the First World War. If any served during the Second World War their records have not been released by the M.O.D. yet and so are only accessible by relatives.

There were about 6-7 million soldiers (Other Ranks and Non-Commissioned Officers) who served with the British Army in the First World War. Each soldiers' record of service was stored by the War Office until after the First World War was over.

The 2 Million "Burnt Documents" (WO 363)

Unfortunately, about 60% of the soldiers' Service Records were irretrievably damaged or lost completely as a result of enemy bombing in 1940 during the Second World War. The exact number of serving British soldiers is not known because of the loss of the records.

However, about a third, approximately 2 million, were saved from destruction. These records are known as the "Burnt Records". Officially they are classed as WO 363 records, which is the reference number given to them by the National Archives. (The "WO" in the classification code stands for "War Office".) As a result of the loss of so many of the First World War Service Records, there is now only a 40% chance that the Service Record of any individual is available.

The surviving 2 million "Burnt Documents" Service Records are for soldiers who were discharged, demobilized at the end of the war, who died between 1914 and 1920 and who were not eligible for an Army pension. Some soldiers who were in the regular army before the outbreak of war in August 1914 may, however, be included in this class of records.

The Service Records will not include soldiers who continued to serve in the military after 1920. As their records are also not available for public access.

The "Unburnt Documents" (WO 364)

In addition to the 2 million or so "Burnt Documents" there are also 750,000 Service Records who survived the Second World War bomb damage. These records are for soldiers who were discharged for medical reasons (illness or wounds) during the First World War. These records also include soldiers who were in the British Army before August 1914 and who were eligible for an Army pension because their term of service came to an end in or before 1920. This group of records is known as the "Unburnt Documents". Their official classification by the National Archives is WO 364.

British WW1 Medal Records 1914-1920

Every individual who served in a theatre of war was eligible to receive a campaign medal. It is believed that the records of medals issued for service during 1914-1920 form the only more or less complete list of people who, by the fact that they were eligible to receive a WW1 medal, can be considered to have "participated" in the First World War. It should, therefore, be possible to trace and confirm that an individual served in the First World War from the medal records.

Medal Index Cards

The medal index cards are not easy to interpret. Here are some tips that will help you make sense of them.

The Standard Card

There are two variations on the standard index card. The one found most often is shown here. The items highlighted in the red box are common. They are the man's name, regimental numbers and the regiments or corps with which he served.

In this example, Jesse S. Coulson served as Private 4658 with the 7th Dragoon Guards. There is a “do” or “ditto” under the entry: this is a common feature and it refers to the fact that he appears on two medal rolls – see below. The Star and the other two medals were issued at different times.

SERIAL	INITIALS	CAGE	STATUS
COULSON	4/D.Gas aw	PLO aw	4658. <i>he</i>
<i>TAB</i> <i>Page</i>			
SERIAL	INITIALS	CAGE	STATUS
VICTORY X*	cc/103/B3 aw	117 aw	
14 STAR	cc/Y.	B.	
Tomato of War first served in			
Date of entry therein	13. 10. 14		

This card shows Jesse's unit (the 7th Dragoon Guards), which would enable a researcher to look closely into where he went and what he did. Most cards do not do this: they only show a regiment or corps... for example the Lancashire Fusiliers or the Royal Field Artillery (RFA).

The next section of the card shows the medals to which he man was entitled.

Name	Grade	Rank	Enlist. No.
Coulson	7/D. Gas dr	Pvt dr	4658. the
<i>JRS Jain</i>			
Metal	* Incl.	Fans	Remarks:
VICTORY	x * cc/103/B3	1/7	
UNITED	dr	dr	
14 FAN	cc/y	B3	
Transit of War first record in			
Date of entry therein	13. 10. 14		

In Jesse's case he qualified for the Victory Medal, the British War Medal and the 1914 Star. There are references alongside them: CC/103/B3 page 117 and CC/7 page 13. These are references to the places

where Jesse is entered in the rolls. The Victory Medal and the British War Medal are on one roll, and the Star on another.

Note that the “do...do” against the British War Medal means “ditto...ditto”. The rolls are not available on line. They are held in original form at the National Archives in Kew.

For thorough research it is essential that they are examined, for they often include more information about the soldier – this is certainly the case for men of the infantry, cavalry or yeomanry.

Sadly, for men in the larger corps like the Royal Engineers, Royal Artillery, Machine Gun Corps, Army Service Corps, Army Veterinary Corps, Army Ordnance Corps and Labour Corps there is usually no information about the man’s unit unless he went overseas very early.

For men who went overseas up to the end of 1915 it was normal practice to enter the date on which the man had first disembarked in a theatre of war. It is usually – but not always, as we can see from Jesse’s card – accompanied by a code telling us which theatre of war it was.

Name		Corps	Rank	Engl. No.
COULSON		4/D. Gas	PLG	4658
		as	as	as
Medal	Roll	Page	Remarks	
VICTORY	cc/103/53	117		
BRITISH	as	as		
14 STAR	cc/7	13		
Theatre of War first served in				
Date of entry therein		13.10.14		

Jesse Coulson landed in a theatre of war on 13 October 1914. His card does not tell us which theatre, so to find out we could look up the history of his unit on this site in order to find out.

Jesse may have served with other units or regiments in the army before he went overseas or once he had returned home after the fighting. The medals documents do not tell us this for they only cover the period of entitlement, which started when he hit the shore of a theatre of war and end on 11 November 1918.

As ever with these things, you can find exceptions that do mention service prior to this time, but they are rare. Many cards are marked with an asterisk or similar symbol. These highlight the details that are inscribed in the rim of the medals (name, rank, regiment etc).

Name COULSON		Corps 4/D. Gas	Rank PLG	Regt. No. 4658
Medal *S		Roll cc/103/53	Page 117	Remarks
Victory X*				
British War 14 STAR				
Theatre of War first served in 13. 10. 14				

In this case, it appears that his 1914 Star was inscribed to J. Coulson and the other two medals to J. S. Coulson. The asterisks against the Victory Medal and British War Medal link up with an asterisk against the initial S.

Officers' index cards often give the date on which he first went overseas even if it was after 1915.

The card below shows an officer's entitlement.

Name LAWTON		Corps W. Rid. R.	Rank Lieut	Regt. No.
MC		7th Bn. Regt.	A/Capt.	
Cuthbert				
Medal Victory	Roll Off 126/51	Page 1. 1. 10. 25-1-22	Remarks 22/6/1911	
Theatre of War first served in France				
Date of entry therein 1. 9. 17.				

The interpretation is as follows: Cuthbert Lawson landed in France on 1 September 1917, at which point he was a Lieutenant with the Duke of Wellington's (West Riding Regiment). He later became an Acting Captain with the 7th Battalion of the same regiment. He qualified for the Victory Medal and British War Medal, and his details are on roll Off/126 page 51. His pair of medals was issued on 25 January 1922. Lawton also won the Military Cross, from the "MC" that appears next to his name. The other codes on the card have no useful meaning.

Below is a splendid example of a card for a man that was commissioned as an officer having previously been in the "other ranks". The important reference is "Comm", for "commissioned".

Name	Corps	Rank	Regt. No.
POVVELL	R BORDERS	Sgt	10633
MC 24.11.14		2/26	
Frank		2/26	
Rank	File	Roll	Remarks
15	L/3.13	362	Comm
Theatre of War	France	NW/3/2607	
Date of entry	30.5.15		

The middle red box says that his medal details are on "R&F" ("rank and file") roll L/105B15 page 2556. Note too that this brave soldier was awarded the Military Cross, Distinguished Conduct Medal and Military Medal. The last two were awards to the "other ranks", the MC was for officers and senior NCOs.

The Second Type of Card

The image below shows the second type of card. It is essentially the same but the medals details appear in a box rubber-stamped top right instead of bottom left.

Campaign: 1914-15		(A) Where decoration was earned	
(B) Present situation			
Name	Corps	Rank	Reg. No.
(A) KING	Durham L.I.	Plt	25946
(B) Ernest			
Action taken		Dis.	
THEATRE OF WAR		Rep.	
France		Rep.	
14.4.15		68/K/324	

The remark "Rep" on this card is unusual: it may mean the card itself was replaced at some point.

The Third Type of Card

The third type of card covered the issue of a Silver War Badge. There is no reference to any medals. Sometimes this was because the man had no other medal entitlement; sometimes because the man had two index cards (one for the medals and one for the badge).

Name	Corps	Reg. No.	Rank	Date of Discharge	Cause of Discharge
Sutton Cecil Glendy	R. H. A. I. Bly	195084 195084	5 R	3-7-18 2-3-16	A.O 265/14 Para 2 (a) 1 Sick
Date of application	(a) Badge	(b) Medal			
No. of File	"	"			
Address of applicant					
Action taken RA/2050.					

W6749—H6226 200,000 9/17 HWV(T232) 1F17/1881

This card gives the Army Order that authorised Cecil Sutton's discharge: in this case AO265/17 paragraph 2(a)1. The "RA/2050" is a reference to the roll of the Silver War Badge, a list just like the medal rolls.

Here is an example where the entitlement to the Silver War Badge was written on the standard card. The soldier appears on the roll, or "List", F/674.

15 STAN	32 B 5	419	Dis 7 8 17
<div style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 5px;"> Sub List F/674 </div>			
<small>Threat of War first served in 1915</small>			
Date of entry therein		6 12 17	

K 1288

Note too that he was discharged on 7 August 1917 (see "392, below).

Miscellaneous references on the cards
Class Z Army Reserve

Name	Corps	Rank	Reg. No.
MILL BARD	10 R A R	Q1	33109
Charles			
Medal	Roll	Page	Remarks
Victory	0/2/101	5/2	660
British	Y	Y	
<div style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 5px;"> A. R. Z. </div>			
Threat of War first served in			
Date of entry therein			

K 1288

Class Z Reserve was authorised by an Army Order of 3 December 1918. There were fears that Germany would not accept the terms of any peace treaty and therefore the British Government decided it would be wise to be able to quickly recall trained men in the eventuality of the resumption of hostilities. Soldiers who were being demobilised, particularly those who had agreed to serve “for the duration”, were at first posted to Class Z. They returned to civilian life but with an obligation to return if called upon. The Z Reserve was abolished on 31 March 1920.

The card below shows a reference to “A.R.Z”. This is also seen as “Class Z”, “Cl. Z”, “Cl Z AR”, “Dis” and other variants, sometimes with a date. They all mean that the man was eventually discharged to Class Z Army Reserve.

Sometimes “Dis” or “Disd” appears. This means the man was discharged but not necessarily by transfer to Class Z Reserve.

Death in Service

If the soldier died during his army service, it is usually marked on the card. Note usually, not always. It is often given as “KiA” or “Killed” or “Dead” or similar.

In the example below, the date given is that when the man’s death was officially accepted. It appears that he had been missing and his presumed death was officially recorded on 26 March 1917.

1/3		X		X		X	
JONES		R.W.F. 2nd		Dmn		716	
John, F						290081	
Model		X		Ball		Page	
Yard		J/2/102/340/3301					
15		J/4/6 DE 1378					
Theatre of War first served in		26/1/34th					
Date of entry theatre		8-8-15					
						Death accept 26-3-17	

Time Expired

The reference “TE” or “T/E” means “Time expired” and “T of E” means “Terms of Engagement” (expired). That is, the man had reached the end of his agreed period of military service. It applies only to pre-war soldiers of the regular army, Special Reserve or Territorial Force. The man was allowed to return home. From 1916 onward, however, many TE men returned to or were retained on active service as conscripted soldiers, despite their earlier service being completed.

392

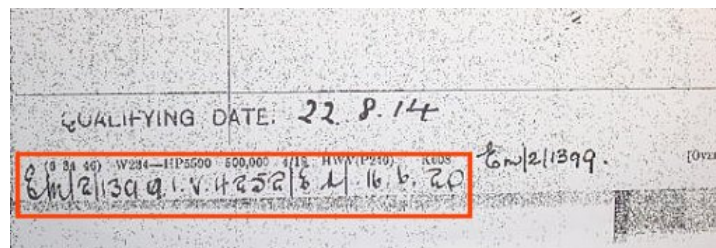
King’s Regulation 392 was the one covering causes of early discharge of a soldier from his service commitment. It had a large number of subordinate clauses, which are listed here. “392” or KR 392” or variants of it, are often seen on the cards, in most cases with a date which is when the man left the army.

Returned

The remarks “Rtd”, “Retd” or “Retd undisposed of” sometimes appear on cards. Soldiers did not have to apply for their medals – they were automatically sent out. Sometimes the man (or his next of kin, if he had died) had moved and the medals were not deliverable. They were then returned to the Medals Office. Sometimes an error was made in the rim inscription, and the soldier returned them for re-issue.

Emblems

The reference “EM” or “Emb” means that the man was mentioned in despatches. The coded reference is now rather obscure. Sometimes an IV (“issue voucher”) date appears, as in this example that shows 16 June 1920.



Personal Information

It was not usual to record personal information such as address, age or next of kin on the cards, but it is occasionally found as in this example of a War Badge card:

Name	Corps	Regt. No.	Rank	Date of Discharge	Cause of Discharge
Wapenshaw A.	East Yorkshire R.	24165	1st Lt	21.7.17. 2.9.14	from 5.10.14 Para 392 K.R.

Date of application (a) Badge 30/10/16 (b) Medal
No. of File "2473B.a.G.10".
Address of applicant:- 64 E. Clarendon Street
Sunderland Road
Gateshead Durham
Action taken
W/903-8738 00,000 5/16 HWV(P1345) 010/1222

World War 1 Medals

Campaign Medals

There were five campaign medals available for individuals who saw service in the First World War. An individual, male or female, could be issued with a maximum of three of these medals, although there are a small number of exceptions to the rule.

Service medals were issued automatically to other ranks, but officers or their next of kin had to apply for them. Medals were impressed with the name of the recipient and usually included some or all of the following: service number, rank, first name or initial, surname and military unit (Regiment or Corps). This was either on the rim of the medal or in the case of a star, on the reverse.

In addition to the five campaign medals a badge was available to officers and men who had been honourably discharged or had retired as a result of sickness or wounds from war service.

Pip, Squeak and Wilfred



Pip, Squeak and Wilfred are the affectionate names given to the three WW1 campaign medals — The 1914 Star or 1914-15 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal respectively. These medals were primarily awarded to the Old Contemptibles (B.E.F.) and by convention all three medals are worn together and in the same order from left to right when viewed from the front. The set of three medals or at least the British War Medal and the Victory Medal are the most likely medals to be found among family heirlooms.

When the WW1 medals were issued in the 1920's it coincided with a popular comic strip published by the Daily Mirror newspaper. It was written by Bertram J. Lamb (Uncle Dick), and drawn by the cartoonist Austin Bowen Payne (A.B. Payne). Pip was the dog, Squeak the penguin and Wilfred the young rabbit. It is believed that A. B. Payne's batman during the war had been nicknamed “Pip-squeak” and this is where the idea for the names of the dog and penguin came from.

For some reason the three names of the characters became associated with the three campaign medals being issued at that time to many thousands of returning servicemen, and they stuck.

“Mutt and Jeff”



In a similar vein when only the British War Medal and Victory Medal are on display together, they are sometimes known as “Mutt and Jeff”.

The 1914 Star

Also known as '*Pip*' or the '*Mons Star*'.



This bronze medal award was authorized by King George V in April 1917 for those who had served in France or Belgium between 5th August 1914 to midnight on 22nd November 1914 inclusive.

The award was open to officers and men of the British and Indian Expeditionary Forces, doctors and nurses as well as Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Royal Navy Reserve and Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve who served ashore with the Royal Naval Division in France or Belgium.

A narrow horizontal bronze clasp sewn onto the ribbon, bearing the dates '5th AUG. - 22nd NOV. 1914' shows that the recipient had actually served under fire of the enemy during that period. For every seven medals issued without a clasp there were approximately five issued with the clasp.



Recipients who received the medal with the clasp were also entitled to attach a small silver heraldic rose to the ribbon when just the ribbon was being worn.

The reverse is plain with the recipient's service number, rank, name and unit impressed on it.

It should be remembered that recipients of this medal were responsible for assisting the French to hold back the German army while new recruits could be trained and equipped.

Collectively, they fully deserve a great deal of honour for their part in the first sixteen weeks of the Great War. This included the battle of Mons, the retreat to the Seine, the battles of Le Cateau, the Marne, the Aisne and the first battle of Ypres. There were approximately 378,000 1914 Stars issued.

The 1914-15 Star

Also known as '*Pip*'.



This bronze medal was authorized in 1918. It is very similar to the 1914 Star but it was issued to a much wider range of recipients. Broadly speaking it was awarded to all who served in any theatre of war against Germany between 5th August 1914 and 31st December 1915, except those eligible for the 1914 Star. Similarly, those who received the Africa General Service Medal or the Sudan 1910 Medal were not eligible for the award.

Like the 1914 Star, the 1914-15 Star was not awarded alone. The recipient had to have received the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. The reverse is plain with the recipient's service number, rank, name and unit impressed on it.

An estimated 2.4 million of these medals were issued.

The British War Medal, 1914-18

Also known as '*Squeak*'.



The silver or bronze medal was awarded to officers and men of the British and Imperial Forces who either entered a theatre of war or entered service overseas between 5th August 1914 and 11th November 1918 inclusive. This was later extended to services in Russia, Siberia and some other areas in 1919 and 1920.

Approximately 6.5 million British War Medals were issued. Approximately 6.4 million of these were the silver versions of this medal. Around 110,000 of a bronze version were issued mainly to Chinese, Maltese and Indian Labour Corps. The front (obverse) of the medal depicts the head of George V.

The recipient's service number, rank, name and unit were impressed on the rim.

The Allied Victory Medal

Also known as '*Wilfred*'.



It was decided that each of the allies should each issue their own bronze victory medal with a similar design, similar equivalent wording and identical ribbon. The British medal was designed by W. McMillan. The front depicts a winged classical figure representing victory.

Approximately 5.7 million victory medals were issued. Interestingly, eligibility for this medal was more restrictive and not everyone who received the British War Medal ('Squeak') also received the Victory Medal ('Wilfred'). However, in general, all recipients of 'Wilfred' also received 'Squeak' and all recipients of 'Pip' also received both 'Squeak' and 'Wilfred'.

The recipient's service number, rank, name and unit were impressed on the rim.

The Silver War Badge



The Silver War Badge was issued on 12th September 1916.

The badge was originally issued to officers and men who were discharged or retired from the military forces as a result of sickness or injury caused by their war service. After April 1918 the eligibility was amended to include civilians serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps, female nurses, staff and aid workers.

Around the rim of the badge was inscribed "For King and Empire; Services Rendered". It became known for this reason also as the "Services Rendered Badge". Each badge was also engraved with a unique number on the reverse, although this number is not related to the recipient's Service Number.

The recipient would also receive a certificate with the badge. The badge was made of Sterling silver and was intended to be worn on the right breast of a recipient's civilian clothing. It could not be worn on a military uniform.

There were about 1,150,000 Silver War Badges issued in total for First World War service.

The 'Death Penny'



The **Memorial Plaque** was issued after the First World War to the next-of-kin of all British and Empire service personnel who were killed as a result of the war.

The plaques (which could be described as large plaquettes) were made of bronze, and hence popularly known as the "Dead Man's Penny", because of the similarity in appearance to the somewhat smaller penny coin. 1,355,000 plaques were issued, which used a total of 450 tonnes of bronze, and continued to be issued into the 1930s to commemorate people who died as a consequence of the war.

It was decided that the design of the plaque, about 5 inches (120 mm) in diameter and cast in bronze, was to be picked from submissions made in a public competition. Over 800 designs were submitted and the competition was won by the sculptor and medallist Edward Carter Preston using the pseudonym *Pyramus*, receiving two first place prizes of £250 for his winning and also an alternative design.

Carter Preston's winning design includes an image of Britannia holding a trident and standing with a lion. The designer's initials, E.C.R.P., appear above the front paw. In her outstretched left-hand Britannia holds an olive wreath above the rectangular tablet bearing the deceased's name cast in raised letters. Below the name tablet, to the right of the lion, is an oak spray with acorns.

The name does not include the rank since there was to be no distinction between sacrifices made by different individuals. Two dolphins swim around Britannia, symbolizing Britain's sea power, and at the bottom a second lion is tearing apart the German eagle. The reverse is blank, making it a plaquette rather than a table medal. Around the picture the legend reads (in capitals) "He died for freedom and

honour", or for the six hundred plaques issued to commemorate women, "She died for freedom and honour".

The design was altered slightly during manufacture at Woolwich by Carter Preston since there was insufficient space in the original design between the lion's back paw and the H in "HE" to allow an "S" to be inserted to read "SHE" for the female plaques. The modification was to make the H slightly narrower to allow the S to be inserted. After around 1500 female plaques had been manufactured, the moulds were modified to produce the male version by removing the S.

The plaques were issued in a pack with a commemorative scroll from King George V; though sometimes the letter and scroll were sent first.