

Finding someone who served in the Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force in the First World War



The following databases are available to search on www.Ancestry.co.uk:

British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index Cards 1914-1920 (Records of the Royal Flying Corps are considered Army records until the formation of the Royal Air Force in 1918. Medals awarded to men in the Royal Flying Corps are included in this index)
Great Britain, Royal Aero Club Aviators Certificates, 1910-1950
England, The National Roll of the Great War, 1914-1918
UK, Memorial Books WWI and WWII 1914-1945
The Great War 1914-1918 Magazine

The following databases are available to search on www.Findmypast.co.uk:

Royal Air Force Muster Roll 1918
De Ruvigny's Roll 1914-1918
National Roll of the Great War 1914-1918
Prisoners of War 1914-1918
RFC/RAF Officers and Airmen service records 1912-1939
Gillies Archive plastic surgery pioneers 1917-1925

Case study: Kenneth Mathewson

The following example shows what information can be found for someone who served in the Royal Flying Corps which was part of the British Army until the Royal Air Force was created in April 1918.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission's website (www.cwgc.org) shows that Lieutenant Kenneth Mathewson died on the 3rd August 1916 whilst serving with the 25th Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps and was buried at the Bully-Grenay Communal Cemetery in France.

From Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk) his Medal Roll card shows a discrepancy giving his date of death as 5th August 1916. For his service in the war he was awarded the Victory Medal and the British Medal; the fact that he did not receive the 1914-1915 Star indicates that he did not serve abroad until 1916.

Kenneth was the son of Samuel J. and Carrie L. Smith Mathewson of Montreal; he was born on 24th January 1894 and baptised at the Anglican church in the city on 22nd March the same year. The Canadian census of 1911 shows Kenneth at home in Montreal with his parents and his nine siblings (see www.ancestry.co.uk).

The Royal Aero Club Aviators' Certificates database on Ancestry confirms that Kenneth was born on 24th January 1894 in Montreal. He gained his certificate on 31st July 1915 on a Caudron biplane at the Ruffy-Baumann flying school which was one of several on the airfield in Hendon. There is also a photo of him in the album associated with this entry on Ancestry.

Some details of his flying training can be found by searching the archive of the Flight magazine on www.flightglobal.com – on the 18th June 1915 it was reported that the previous Saturday Mathewson had spent 9 minutes flying. His total reported flying time before he passed his certificate amounted to nearly two and a half hours. He would have paid for his own tuition which would then have been refunded once he was accepted into the Royal Flying Corps.

Having gained his certificate Kenneth joined the Royal Flying Corps as a 2nd Lieutenant serving about six months on probation before his rank was confirmed in March 1916 (see the London Gazette www.thegazette.co.uk). During his probationary period he would have been gaining more flying experience and learning necessary military skills such as the use of Lewis guns which were fitted to fighting aircraft.

His file in the Officers Services records (WO 339/47358) and the Combat Report files (AIR 1/1221/204/5/2634) at the National Archives give further details about Kenneth's service in the Royal Flying Corps. In April he was posted to France with the 20th Squadron but was transferred to the 25th Squadron on the 21st June 1916 just prior to the Battle of the Somme. The squadron provided reconnaissance for the army, fought off German aircraft and bombed strategic targets such as road and railway lines. On the 3rd August 1916 flying an Fe 2b aircraft number 4272 together with his observer, a fellow Canadian called Eric Merrill Des Brisay, Kenneth bombed a target near Lens but was then brought down by enemy aircraft. Kenneth was found dead under his plane and was given a military funeral by a German chaplain in the presence of German officers and a platoon and his grave was adorned with flowers. He was reported missing but his death was not confirmed to his family for several months and then his effects including photos, letters and other personal items were forwarded to his father Samuel Mathewson. (These documents have not been digitised but can be viewed in the reading rooms at The National Archives in Kew; see www.nationalarchives.gov.uk for details).

Two of Kenneth's brothers, Samuel James and James Arthur Mathewson, served in the Canadian army in Europe. They had joined the 42nd battalion and crossed to England on the Hesperian in June 1915; they then undertook four months training before seeing active service in France. Both were wounded but survived the war and Samuel was awarded the Military Cross and bar (see www.thegazette.co.uk).