1.7m Second World War records to go online

The release of the first tranche of records in the long-awaited release of Second World War service records online is due by close of play on 1 November, Ancestry has announced.

The website will release 1.7m British Army medal record cards and 150,000 service records.

The digitised records will be released via the Forces War Records and Fold3 military subscription websites with an index of the records also available via Ancestry which is offering seven days of free access to its military records from 7 November to mark Remembrance Day.

The collection will be the largest release so far of British Army Second World War records and marks a major step in the digitisation of the collection that is currently being transferred from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) to The National Archives (TNA). It has been estimated that 50 kilometres of records will eventually be accessioned over the course of the six-year project.

The medal cards were created when servicemen applied for their campaign medals after the Second World War and provide details such as service number, address and theatres of war that they served in. Medals were not automatically sent to those who served. Soldiers or their next of kin had to apply for them and the cards are written in the hand of the applicant.

The service records that are being released include approximately 56,000 from the Corps of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers REME) as well as approximately 96,000 from smaller groups such as the Pioneer Corps, the Military Police, the Royal Corps of Music, Royal Army Veterinary Corps and the Royal Army Dental Corps.

Although these records have already been added to The National Archives catalogue Discovery, an index will now also be available on Ancestry with digital images available on Ancestry's military off-shoot websites Forces War Records and Fold3.

The service records going online will comprise of attestation records, statements of service, B103 Service and Casualty forms and tracer cards which documented promotions and transfers. Medical records and conduct reports, along with any other miscellaneous records included in a person's file will not be included as part of the digitised record.

Because of the medical information contained within the files, the MOD and TNA have agreed that the rest of the record will remain closed until 115 years after the birth of the record subject.

This arrangement is likely to disappoint some family historians and researchers because previously it was possible to apply for a service record via a Subject Access Request (SAR) form when copies of all records held in the person's file were supplied including

medical and conduct reports. Now researchers will only be able to have records opened before the 115-year cut-off date if they make a freedom of information (FOI) request.

Similarly, there will be restrictions relating to the medal cards where medals were applied for by next of kin. In these cases, the name and address of the applicant will be withheld until 82 years after the medals were applied for. Because it was up to those who served to apply for their medals, some applications were made decades later.

Ancestry's 30-strong digitisation team based at The National Archives are busy digitising the next tranche of service records which will see another two million records being added to the site, hopefully next year. In total 12 million records will be added to the site by 2027.

Access to the records will require a subscription to Fold3.com for non-UK subscribers or an All Access subscription with Ancestry.

[Sarah Williams](#)

Editor

Sarah Williams is the Editor of Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine.

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