



The National Archives

'Knights of the Air'

- First World War RAF service records now online -

Known world-wide for their courage, fortitude and risk-taking, Royal Air Force (RAF) officers played a crucial role in Britain winning the First World War. Now, as the country marks the anniversary of the Armistice agreement ending the war, The National Archives makes available online RAF officers' service records.

For the first time over 99,000 service records can be searched online by first name, last name and date of birth, where as previously they were only available to visitors to Kew. View and download the records at: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/air76.asp

Among the service records available online are some of the country's most celebrated and famous pilots - known as 'Aces' for having shot down five or more enemy aircraft.

- **Cecil Lewis** - One such 'Ace' not only survived and went on to write his personal account, *Sagittarius Rising* (which inspired the 1976 film *Aces High*) he also co-founded the BBC. According to his service record, Lewis joined the Royal Flying Corp (RFC) on 7 October 1915, allegedly after lying about his age, and was awarded the Military Cross for his actions during the Battle of the Somme (1-13 November 1916) - the day after the battle ended.

Piloting a First World War aircraft was a dangerous and risky business and sadly many officers lost their lives. 12 out of the top 20 'Aces' were killed in action.

- **Edward Mannock** - The highest scoring British 'Ace' with 74 kills to his name. Mannock joined the RFC in 1917. Conversely at first, he was viewed as overly cautious, however, he soon found his feet after shooting down his first enemy balloon. By June 1918 he had 59 kills to his name, but on 26 July, Mannock's aircraft was hit and crashed behind German lines. The event recorded in his service records - '*Missing, believed dead, 26.7.18*'. He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

- **Sidney Reilly** - Volunteered for the RFC in 1917 then transferred to MI1(c) in March 1918, (British Secret Service), where he was allegedly tasked with assassinating Lenin. Famously known as the 'Ace of Spies', his exploits were dramatised in an eponymously titled TV programme as well as inspiring Ian Fleming's character, James Bond. The final entry in his service records notes that he was '*killed on 28 September 1925 near the village of Allekul, Russia by OGPU troops*' – the equivalent of Russian secret police.

William Spencer, Principal Military Records Specialist at The National Archives said, "*Putting these records online makes the officers' records of service of the fledgling Royal Air Forces available worldwide. Not only is it now possible to search for and download the records of some of the early "knights of the air" such as Cecil Lewis, Albert Ball and Edward Mannoek, it is also possible to locate the records for many other pilots and other Royal Flying Corp/Royal Naval Air Service and RAF officers from all over the empire who served in the flying service in its infancy.*"

The service records were created with the inception of the RAF in April 1918, however many records include the retrospective details of earlier service in either the Royal Flying Corp or Royal Naval Air Service.

Each service record typically details the date the officer was initially commissioned, subsequent promotion(s), the units in which they served, the type of air craft flown, details of any honours bestowed and the date they were announced in the London Gazette. The records also note the date the individual resigned from commission, the date they retired and sadly in several cases, the date they died.

These records and many others can be viewed on The National Archives' website on a pay-per-download basis for the fee of £3.50.

The National Archives also has a series of podcasts entitled *Voices of the Armistice* which bring alive the individual experiences of those who served in the First World War. The podcasts are available to listen and download for free at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/armistice.

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Notes to Editors

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