

OUTCOME OF LIMITED PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE TRANSFER OF WWII RAF CASUALTY PACKS TO THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

MOD has, for some time, been considering the release of WWII RAF casualty packs to The National Archives. There is no administrative reason for these records to be retained and, under the terms of the Public Records Act 1958, The National Archives has agreed to accession those records related to RAF combat losses for permanent preservation. These records amount to approximately 20,500 files in total. Each file relates to an aircraft and all casualties associated with the aircraft are recorded on that file. Those records not related to battle losses – approximately 35,500 files - will be kept by the MOD for further review in advance of any disposal decision.

The records were produced following an incident involving the loss of an aircraft or personnel, and include: report of initial loss, correspondence to the next kin, any further information received on the incident and any subsequent correspondence with the next of kin. After the war, the Missing Research Enquiry Service (MRES) was established to locate and identify all RAF missing personnel, and it is estimated that in approximately one third of the 20,500 cases selected for transfer, the records contain further information from MRES, including, where applicable, an exhumation report.

In deciding when to transfer the records, the MOD and The National Archives needed to assess their remaining sensitivities. The MOD judged these to be:

- a. contemporaneous correspondence between the next of kin and the Department where it contains details of an individual's financial and marital circumstances, release of which some survivors and next of kin may see as a breach of confidence; and
- b. details of circumstances of loss, injury and remains that some people may find distressing

The volume of records make it impractical to undertake file-by-file sensitivity review and extraction of sensitive data prior to transfer to TNA and mitigation of sensitivity risks need to be achieved by other means. MOD will therefore take the following steps to achieve this:

- making it clear on files transferred to The National Archives that the record may contain material that some readers may find distressing.
- Removing most material dated after 1948 from the record to ensure any personal data made available reasonably falls into the historical exemption provision under the Data Protection Act.
- Working with The National Archives to remove from public view any records identified by members of the public (and accepted by MOD and TNA) as being sensitive.

Separately MOD undertook a limited public consultation with those groups that represent the surviving aircrew and the families of those whose details appear on the RAF Casualty Packs in order to explore the best time to make the records publicly available given the breach of confidence risk identified.

The RAF Association, Bomber Command Association, Battle of Britain Fighter Association, Coastal and Maritime Command Association, Royal British Legion, Commonwealth War Graves Commission and War Widows Association were all consulted. The consultation was framed in such a way that a nil response equated to support for immediate release and all those organisations which replied supported release of the records now.

MOD will therefore commence transfer of the RAF casualty packs to The National Archives in 2013. The packs will be released in date order, commencing with those created in 1939. Given the volume of records involved and the separate challenge faced by government departments in implementing the reduction in the 30 Year Rule, which governs when records are reviewed and transferred to The National Archives, it is likely to take several years before all the RAF casualty

packs are publicly available. WWII British Army and Royal Navy casualty packs have already been transferred to The National Archive.