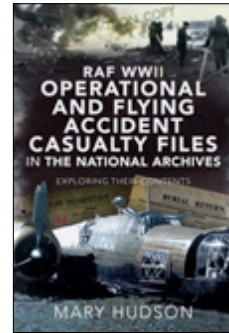


## Book Review

# RAF WWII Operational and Flying Accident Casualty Files in the National Archives – Exploring their Contents



Author: Mary Hudson

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Reviewed by Flight Lieutenant Lilie Weaver

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### Introduction

In writing this text, Mary Hudson draws on a long experience with the RAF, first as the spouse of a serving pilot, then as an officer in the WRAF, and later RAF, herself. Finally, after having achieved an MA in War Studies with King's College London whilst still serving, she worked for 14 years for the Air Historical Branch, dealing day-to-day with enquiries concerning the subject of this book – RAF casualty files.

She writes, therefore, with an explicit focus on the technical aspects of exploring such files, and as a guide to those who wish to conduct academic (or personal) research into those who lost their lives during WW2 serving with, or alongside, the RAF. Nonetheless, she is able to weave together the stories told by these documents into a compelling read. Whilst there is no narrative arc per se, Hudson uses examples of particular crews, reproducing the contents of their casualty files split across the sections of the book to give some insight into the chronological process of a crew who did not return from a sortie, the evidence sought as to their fate, informing, and onwards through to their eventual (sometimes post-war) identification, burial and commemoration.

The text is split into three sections, the first tracing the casualty handling process from occurrence and first notification through to confirmation, burial rites in the UK and overseas then to how those who went missing on duty were handled. The second focusses on the Missing Research and Enquiry Section (MRES) describing the extraordinary efforts both during and post- WW2 to identify the missing and accord respect and a suitable final resting place for all those who lost their lives serving with the RAF and Dominion (later Commonwealth) Air Forces. It neatly illustrates the ambivalence with which enemy aerial combatants were treated, both at home and in occupied Europe – much of the information on casualties during WW2 came from the German authorities through the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and this was reciprocated by the British. One of the more jarring photographs included shows the funeral (in Britain) of a Luftwaffe crew, their coffins draped in Nazi flags, with military and civilians alike according respect to the deceased, and similar certainly occurred for Allied casualties in Europe, whilst on the other hand there are cases described of downed airmen being summarily executed by the Gestapo.

It is this section in particular which is illustrated with the stories of the dead and missing through the MRES' files, and Hudson deserves credit for bringing colour to what is, necessarily at times, a morbid and unforgiving subject. She amply demonstrates the enormous lengths the Air Ministry went to both during and after the war to locate and identify aircrew (and others) lost in remote areas, often far from the front lines, and the determination of the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission to make sure that every single combatant who lost their lives in Allied service is commemorated by name.

The final section addresses more directly the involvement of the next-of-kin, describing the nature of correspondence both sent and received – letters received varied from effusive thanks for the efforts to provide timely news of a missing husband or son, to bitter complaints about too little, and even too much information being provided.

Richly illustrated throughout with contemporaneous photographs and copies of casualty files and related documents, Hudson deserves credit for including enough detail about each crew or casualty to contextualise their story, without the book becoming a series of anecdotes. She handles this sensitive subject unflinchingly, but with tact and clear sympathy for those affected by the loss and grief of losing a loved one to war.

The prose is necessarily precise, at times pedantic, but provides an invaluable and detailed resource for anyone attempting to tackle the byzantine and enormous administrative puzzle that is military bureaucracy. Patiently explaining each reference, department and function, Hudson draws on her considerable experience with archival research to provide a very detailed reference guide. In other hands, this could mean that the text is dry, but to her credit, Hudson has succeeded in producing a very readable account of the process of recording, storing and communicating casualty information during the chaos, and in the aftermath of WW2. Required reading for anyone considering tackling casualty files in the National Archives, and

a fascinating insight into both the bureaucracy and the personal stories surrounding a very human desire – to give loved-ones certainty and the reassurance of a final resting place in the face of losing their nearest and dearest in conflict.



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