How to trace your POW ancestor
The accounts of life as a Prisoner of War vary hugely, depending on why a person was taken prisoner, the prisoner’s rank, which country they were captured by and in which war, and who was in charge of the particular camp to which they were sent.

One thing all agree on, though, is that life as a prisoner, even in the best run and most humane of camps, was not much fun. Even where there were no instances of brutality or over-work, the men suffered from hunger, boredom, frustration at being powerless to help their country, homesickness and the acute anxiety that is part and parcel of being held against one’s will with no fixed release date on the cards. While the soldiers cursed their bad luck at being captured, those whose relatives were held as Prisoners of War might find they have hit the genealogical jackpot. Records for prisoners are plentiful and, in the case of the Second World War, where service records are still held by the Ministry of Defence, might be the only available key to unlocking your ancestor’s service.

As Your Family Tree’s ‘Get Started in Military Family History’ explains, if your ancestor was taken prisoner prior to the Great War, you’re unlikely to find much. At that time, with weapons being far less deadly, fewer men were taken prisoner and those that were had to take their chances with how they were treated; there were no rules or agreements to govern the captors’ behaviour, and no organised body existed to see that prisoners were given their due rights. Basically, for the Napoleonic War you’ll only be able to find records at the National Archives in collection ADM103, ‘Navy Board and predecessors: Prisoner of War Department and predecessors: Registers of Prisoners of War’. For the Crimean and Boer Wars, you can search the London Gazette website, www.thegazette.co.uk. It only lists officers taken prisoner, though, arranged by regiment rather than name, and the records are incomplete.

After these wars, and especially after the Second Geneva Convention of 1906 and the Hague Convention of 1907, when conditions for treatment of PoWs were laid out and an independent body – the International Red Cross – was assigned to see that the terms were adhered to by all nations who signed, more records are available. In the Great War, for the first time, hundreds of thousands of prisoners were taken, with 140,000 British prisoners held in Germany alone by the end of the war, and over 52,000 held elsewhere. Records of the details, location and treatment of prisoners were carefully amassed; as ‘Barbed Wire Disease’ by John Yarnell attests, both sides were suspicious that the other might be breaking the agreement. Any reports of such crimes were used to fuel propaganda, and the allegations were looked into extremely thoroughly.

Conditions for your First World War prisoner ancestor might have been better than you realise. The conventions dictated that prisoners were under the power of the government they had been captured by, not the people they were being held by, and the state was therefore responsible for their welfare. Life in captivity was not to be regarded as a punishment. Officers were to receive pay equal to that of equivalent ranks of the capturing army, and were not to be put to work. Ordinary soldiers could be used as labour, but were not to be used in war work or overworked, and should also be paid for their efforts. Oddly, it was legal to punish them for attempting to escape, but not to punish them on recapture if they successfully managed to flee the camp. Injured personnel could ask to be transferred to a neutral country or sent home, and medical personnel could be put to work tending the prisoners of their own country, but were not to be
regarded as PoWs themselves. Lists of prisoners were to be submitted to the Red Cross, and IDs and possessions found on the battlefield were to be turned in rather than kept. All very civilised. In the Great War, unlike in the Second World War, the combatants largely respected the new agreement, and did their best to follow the rules.

Information filtered back to the home nations by way of escapees and repatriated prisoners, overseas diplomats, ambassadors, foreign newspapers and the Red Cross, and can be found in several locations. On the Forces War Records website you can browse the ‘List of British Officers taken prisoner (WW1)’, as well as the ‘List of those who were killed, wounded or missing whilst serving with the 29th Divisional Artillery’ (the latter list is exclusive to our site). It is also possible to browse some illuminating sources in our Historic Documents archive, including ‘The British Prisoner of War, Vol 1 No. 3, March 1918’, a magazine written by the Central Prisoners of War Committee of the British Red Cross & Order of St John, an official account of ‘The Treatment of Prisoners of War in England and Germany during the First Eight Months of the War’ and Henry C. Mahoney’s account of ‘Sixteen Months in Four German Prisons’, published in 1917.

The International Red Cross also holds 200,000 records of British Service Personnel taken prisoner, and many more for prisoners from all over the world. The First World War records are now available to browse online, and 90% have already been digitised; see grandeguerre.icrc.org. Alternatively, you can search through collection WO161 at the National Archives, which includes interviews conducted with returning Prisoners of War in 1918 by the Committee on the Treatment of British Prisoners of War, or FO383, which contains the records of the Foreign Office, Prisoners of War and Aliens Department, 1915-1919. Many of the original records for this period, though, unfortunately no longer exist. A great number were destroyed in the Blitz of WWII.

Luckily, far more World War Two Prisoner of War records still exist, and as mentioned, since service records from that period are still held by the MOD, without applying for your ancestor’s record as Next of Kin these may be the only evidence you can find of your ancestor’s war service if they weren’t either killed in battle or granted a Gallantry award. International Red Cross records are unfortunately unavailable for the moment for this period; a new project to conserve the organisation’s Second World War archives has led to the suspension of the paid-for search of the paper records that it used to be possible to order, except on humanitarian grounds. It’s not certain yet when it will be possible to access these records again. That being the case, a good starting point might be local newspapers and casualty lists, and there are also plenty of PoW records on our website. You will be able to find the list of ‘Prisoners of War held in Germany 1939-45’, also found at the Imperial War Museum. We also hold two collections exclusively available online at our site, the ‘Imperial Prisoners of War Held in Italy 1943’ and ‘Imperial Prisoners of War held in Japan’. Another place you might possibly find your ancestor is in our new, exclusive ‘WWII Daily Reports (missing, dead, wounded & PoWs)’ collection, which is relatively unique in giving the Service Numbers for officers.

The National Archives holds a collection of ‘War Office: Directorate of Prisoners of War: Prisoners of War Lists, Second World War’, classed WO 392 and covering prisoners held by Germany, Italy and Japan. It can be accessed on the shelves of the library there, but is not online, and the files are organised according to which country held the men. The archives also contain

“Absolutely 1st.class service today, Friday. I have used this service in the past and will certainly use again. The service is helpful, friendly, and the service agents always appear genuinely interested in your call almost as if it concerns them personally. [such a refreshing change these days] Thanks”. Edward Clarke
WO208, the files of prisoners held in Italy who either escaped or were released after Italy joined the Allies or of those who escaped the German camps, as well as BT373, records of prisoners taken from the Merchant Navy, and WO344, the MI9 questionnaires compiled for use in the war crimes tribunals in 1945. This last is quite a comprehensive collection – 140,000 questionnaires in all – but it is not complete, since many simply didn’t want to talk about their experiences of captivity.

This is not surprising, considering how many different nations broke the Geneva Convention; in many cases troops who had surrendered were summarily shot by their enemies, and after the ‘Great Escape’ from Stalag Luft III the shooting of 50 of the 73 recovered prisoners was a clear breach of the order that successful escapees not be punished on recovery.

Russia and Japan, meanwhile, had never even signed the agreement, and it showed. According to Norman Ferguson’s ‘The Second World War: a Miscellany’, only 6,000 of 90,000 German and Romanian Prisoners captured at Stalingrad were ever heard of again. The Japanese cruelty towards prisoners at that time, meanwhile, is infamous. While the Germans and Italians largely treated US and UK PoWs relatively well, knowing the treatment of their countrymen in captivity depended on their own conduct, the Japanese guards had no such scruples. The country’s ‘Bushido’ warrior code meant that men who deigned to surrender were considered to be shameful and utterly detestable, worse than animals. They were treated accordingly; vicious arbitrary beatings, beheadings, medical experiments, an absence of every other type of medical treatment, starvation, degradation, punishing work, psychological and physical torture... everything man most dreads, the prisoners of the Japanese endured. According to Fiona Reynoldsön’s ‘The Home Front 1939-1945: Prisoners of War’, 12,433 out of just 50,016 British PoWs held by Japan died in captivity. While there was no strict policy of the murder of prisoners, as in the extermination camps, there might as well have been. Out of 140,000 UK, US, Dutch and Australian captives, 1 in 4 died in the camps through violence, starvation or disease.

Our Historic Documents archive contains vivid accounts of the conditions endured by all PoWs, whether horrific or remarkably fair. We have issue upon issue of ‘The Prisoner of War’ magazine, a monthly periodical produced by the Prisoners of War Department of the Red Cross and St John War Organisation that went free to the relatives of prisoners. It contains war news, interesting news snippets from within the camps, correspondence from relatives, official reports of Red Cross inspections, descriptions of the camps, letters from the prisoners and much more. We have several volumes of ‘Far East’ journal too, though one wonders how much news from this sector really got through.

We also have the ‘WWII PoW Repatriation Files of Staff Sgt. H. Redfearn’, of the Royal Army Pay Corps, discussing the first return of prisoners from Germany in 1943, and the ‘WWII Diary & Report of escaped P.O.W. Sgt. Robert J.D. Powdrill’, who was sent to Stalag 20b, Marienburg, Poland by the Germans. You can browse the ‘WWII Letters & PoW Records – Oflag 79, Germany, by Captain Stanley Birchmore, Royal Artillery’, and leaf through a copy of ‘WWII Autobiograpy “A Full Life”’, telling among other things of Stanley John Doughty of the 12th Royal Lancers’ time as a prisoner of the Italians in Camp No. 52, Genoa. There is also a volume called simply ‘Prisoner of War’, that proclaims itself to be ‘the first authentic account of the lives of British prisoners of war in enemy hands’.

With so many sources around for prisoners, the hardest part is doing the initial background research to find out that your relative was taken prisoner. Once you’ve realised that, the avenues to explore to try to find out more are endless.

Contact our military specialists for more help and information.

customercare@forces-war--records.co.uk

Or via our live chat service on the website
Over 2 million records in our exclusive collections you’ll not find anywhere else online, including:

- Military Hospital Admissions & Discharge Registers WWI
- WWII Daily reports (missing, dead, wounded & POWs)
- Home Guard Officer Lists 1939-45
- Imperial prisoners of war in Japan
- Prudential Assurance Roll of Honour 1914-18
- UK Army List 1916
- Seedies Merchant Navy Awards

...and many many more