



DEATH AND SERVICE NEWSLETTER

Somehow, we have reached the end of another year, and, as 2025 draws to a close, it seems a good time to reflect on what the *Death and Service* project has achieved over the last twelve months.

This has obviously been the year that Volume 3 was released, and I am grateful to everybody who has purchased a copy.

I've been fortunate enough to talk at five different events this year, and it's been a privilege to be welcomed to new venues and welcomed back to others. Not surprisingly, November has been a particularly busy month, and you can see some photos from the some of the events in this issue.

I have continued photographing headstones for future research, and this has taken me into Hampshire for the first (but not last) time. The county was home to a number of WW1 airfields, and I have included two men who died in separate incidents on the same day as this month's graves. We also delve into the RAF Museum Story Vault, a great resource for researching aircraft crashes from the time.

The research itself has continued, and I have uncovered the lives of more than 200 servicemen and women since the start of the year.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your ongoing support of the project – the rise in website and YouTube views reassures me of the project's worth (and my obsession with it!).

Wishing you a peaceful and comforting festive season.

Until 2026.

Richard

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Keep in touch:

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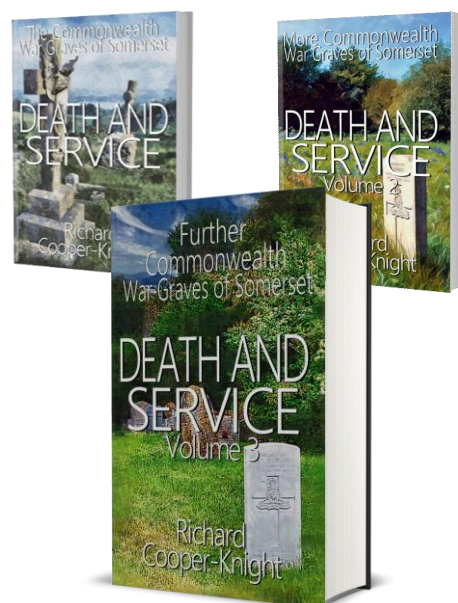
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Volumes 1-3 are available in
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BEHIND THE RESEARCH: RAF MUSEUM STORY VAULT

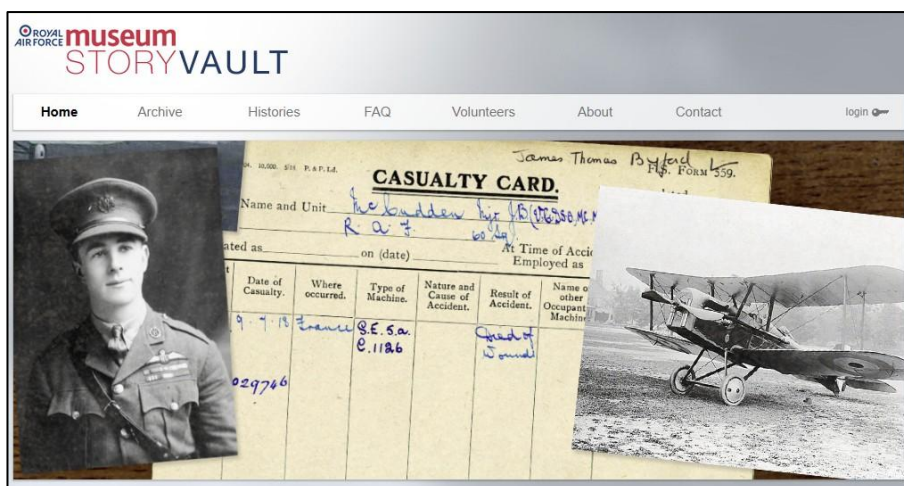
Service records – and in particular the army and navy ones - can provide a lot of information, providing a real insight into the life of a particular soldier, sailor or pilot. The documentation for those serving in the Royal Flying Corps, Royal Naval Air Service and, after 1st April 1918, Royal Air Force, however, is less detailed, however, and it is often a challenge to determine where and how they served.

More than half of the RAF deaths I've researched were as a result of flying accidents, but the service papers for those personnel tell you nothing about the crashes themselves. There will often be a newspaper report about the incident, mainly because of the young man's standing in the local community (pilots generally held the rank of Second Lieutenant or above, a commission that was often attached to their family connections).

The Royal Air Force themselves, however, have an archive of casualty cards holding details of incidents where servicemen were killed. Digitised and searchable, these are stored in the [RAF Museum Story Vault](#) – a resource that, as my research has extended beyond Somerset, has become increasingly useful.

The site allows you to search by surname, and includes a good insight into the incident that caused the fatality. The RAF produced a card for every casualty, and this information helps to cross-reference and match up the people concerned.

Individual casualty cards provide the serviceman's name, rank regiment and squadron. They also record the date and location of the crash, along with the aircraft type, including its serial number and engine time. They confirm if anybody else was in the plane at the time of the crash, and what happened to them. The cards may also include hand-written comments summarising the findings of any inquest: this is not the case in every instance, but can provide an objective view of the crash, compared to the more salacious stance of contemporary newspapers.



The site allows you to hover over the image of the casualty card to see a legible version, and you can download the original for a nominal fee. This may not be needed, however, as the information is also summarised separately on the serviceman's page.

The RAF Museum Story Vault is a great resource, providing details about the death of a cadet, pilot or mechanic. I've found it a useful objective companion to the more salacious reporting of the newspapers of the time.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:

St Paul's Church
Main Road
East Boldre
Hampshire
SO41 5ST



Name: Baker, Douglas

Rank: Flight Cadet

Regiment: Royal Air Force

Date of death: 26th October 1918

Age at time of death: 20

Cause of death: Flying accident

Douglas Walter Baker was born in Newbury, Berkshire, in 1898. One of seven children, his parents were Henry and Rosa Baker. Henry was a commercial traveller for a cornmeal, cake and flour merchants, and the family lived at 91 Crescent Road, Reading at the time of the 1901 census, then at 196 King's Road, Reading, ten years later.

There is little concrete information about Douglas' early life. When war broke out, he enlisted in the 4th Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment, later documents seeming to suggest that he had added three years to his age to enable him to do so. His unit served in France from April 1915, but, as his army service records have been lost, it's unclear when or if Private Baker went with them.

Douglas seemed to want more, though, and, on 18th December 1915, he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps. Given the rank of Air Mechanic 2nd Class, he was attached to No. 1 Aircraft Repair Depot. By March 1917, he had been promoted to Air Mechanic 1st Class. Again, however, he sought more and, just a few months after the Royal Air Force was formed, he started flying lessons.

The now Flight Cadet Baker had transferred to 29 Training Depot Station in Hampshire. Based at an aerodrome near Beaulieu, Douglas was taught in a Sopwith Camel. Two months into his instruction, he was undertaking a routine flight, when his aircraft got into a spin he was unable to get out of. The machine fell to the ground, and Douglas was killed instantly.

A report of the incident noted that: *"the cause of the accident was in our opinion due to the machine spinning to the ground from about 500ft. The reason the pilot could not regain control of the machine is unknown."* [Royal Air Force Casualty Card]

Douglas Walter Baker was just 20 years of age when he died on 26th October 1918. His body was taken to the graveyard of St Paul's Church, East Boldre, not far from the air base at which he had been billeted.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:
St Paul's Church
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Hampshire
SO41 5ST

Name: Vande Water, Malcolm

Rank: Second Lieutenant

Regiment: Royal Air Force

Date of death: 26th October 1918

Age at time of death: 24

Cause of death: Flying accident

Malcolm Gifford Boggs was born on 14th August 1894 in Brooklyn, New York. The second of four children, his parents were Seth and Anna Boggs. Seth died in 1905, and Anna married again, to widower lawyer Charles Vande Water: her children took his name.

The next record for Malcolm is that of his Royal Flying Corps service records. Interestingly, they note that he enlisted on 10th September 1917, and did so in Toronto, Canada. While the United States had entered the First World War by this point, it may have been easier for him to join via a colonial route.

Malcolm's papers show that he was 5ft 11ins (1.81m) tall, and was a student aviator at the time he joined up. He was recorded as being an Air Mechanic 3rd Class, but that came to an end when, on 2nd February 1918, he was accepted for a commission.

Second Lieutenant Vande Water was attached to the 29th Training Depot Station in Hampshire. There is little information about his time there, but a later American newspaper provided details of what happened to him:

Intelligence reaching relatives of Lieutenant Malcolm G Vande Water, of the Royal flying corps, a former Passaic newspaper man, is that he was killed in a fall while testing a new airplane at the British airdrome in Beaulieu, France. Vande Water was the first member of the Pica club to pay the supreme sacrifice. He was on leave in England, after six months' active service at the front, having operated a machine across the English channel to France on the day before his fatal fall. His machine gun shot off a propellor blade while he was flying 100 feet in the air and the airplane dove to the earth.

[The Morning Call: 17th December 1918]

The accuracy of the information included in the article is variable to say the least. Malcolm may have enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps, but, by the time of the accident on 26th October 1918, that had become the Royal Air Force. The Beaulieu aerodrome mentioned was in Hampshire, not France. The RAF's records for the incident do confirm, however, that the propellor

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of his Sopwith Camel was indeed shot through, causing the aircraft to fall to the ground.

Second Lieutenant Vande Water was taken to the Forest Park New Zealand General Hospital in Brockenhurst, Hampshire, for treatment, but his injuries would prove too severe. He died later that day, at the age of 24 years old.

The body of Malcolm Gifford Vande Water was laid to rest in the graveyard of St Paul's Church in East Boldre, Hampshire, not far from the base he had called home.

Did you know?

Within the Royal Air Force—and its predecessors, the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service—the distribution of causes of death differs significantly from that of other military branches.

Based on the deaths I have researched, while a high proportion of the fatalities came from illness, more than half of those researched were the result of aircraft crashes. The average age at the time of death was 23, with two thirds not living to see their 25th birthday.

A range of ranks were noted, but a quarter of those who died were Air Mechanics, and the same number being Second Lieutenants – the entry level for new pilots.

The 2026 calendar of events is building nicely, and I have a series of talks and presentations scheduled over the next eighteen months. You can keep up to date with what's happening [here](#).

If you would be interested in a tailored presentation, or know of a group or society who would be, please [drop me a line](#).



A BUSY MONTH

The last month has been a busy one, particularly around Armistice Day. My thanks go to The History Hut (the photos in rows 1 and 3, from 1st and 11th November), the Pilton Village History Society (second row of photos) and the Somerset branch of the Western Front Association (bottom row of photos) for inviting me to visit them and talk about the stories I have uncovered during my research for the third volume of the book.

