

Using a Blog to Push an Elephant up a Stairs.

The research task seemed impossible but with the help of a Blog it became a reality.

Objective:

The focus of the research was to find images and stories of 12 people involved on a mission in WW2 on the 14/May/1940 over Sedan in France. Of the 12 crew in four Fairey Battles, 11 were lost. One of them was my uncle.

Starting point:

On a project like this you start with very little information, tiny, but they are all clues. I started this research in March 2020 with a picture of my uncle Donald Bowen at around the age of 15 years old. I knew from my family that he was lost in action during WW2. That is all the information I had.

So trawled the internet looking for his name and two books popped up. I was lucky.

“They Spread Their Wings”, which has a chapter about Alan Summerson who survived a mission which Donald was on.

“Le Piegé De Sedan”, which goes into detail about the battle over Sedan in May 1940. This book had images of the Fairy Battle K9483 crash site, the plane in which my uncle died. I contacted the author ordered the book.

With the scenario becoming clear it was time to put the fishing rod out to gather more information. At this point there was enough information to publish a Blog, a reference point to which I could point people who would be interested in contributing information. I published the names of the 12 people with little or no information about them.

The Blog worked, it was published on the 11 April 2020 and on the 17 April 2020 I was contacted by a then unknown relation who sent me a picture of Donald taken 1937.

The National Archives in the UK opened up for free downloads due to their offices being closed because of Covid 19. This allowed further research on each individual and updating their information on the Blog against their names.

War graves, you need to identify where each individual was finally buried. In some cases it will give you the parent's names.

Joined Ancestry.com and started researching each name and if found in a family tree would contact the tree owner, reference them to the Blog and await a response. This was quite successful. Why? Once they read the Blog they knew the intent and could trust the request. They would never comment on the Blog but would contact you privately.

Once you identify the individuals date and place of birth you start looking for schools in the area, this approach was also very successful as some schools had already

researched the individual, their past student, and they are more than willing to share their research. Once again the Blog was the anchor point for gaining trust, they could see your honest intent and would engage.

Getting images of the individual's well that is an interesting one.

Do not ever assume that if a person has an image they can share it. It is a cherished hard copy of their loved one, they may not have a scanner nor any means of digitising it. You need to help them. Yep you find one of their relations and ask them to help. The Blog helped me get the entire 12 crew images, a mission I thought that would never be accomplished. These young lads were born over 100 years ago.

Research is all about communicating with people, getting their trust and asking what they remember, simple things, which school, hair colour, what was he doing before he joined the RAF.

The Blog helped to push the elephant up the stairs, but he is resting just two steps from the top.

“We will remember them”

<https://travellinginacampervan.wordpress.com/2020/04/11/my-next-planned-trip-was-to-visit-the-grave-of-uncle-donald-j-bowen-150-squadron-who-died-14-05-1940-in-sedan-france/>

Analysis of the National Archives

This is a time consuming exercise especially when you are focused on 12 people that fought on the same mission.

The Archives present you with several documents.

Overall Summary; which include rotas, vacation leave, inoculation and sporting events.

Day to day Summary logs; for a particular squadron which outline the exercises for the day or missions attempted based on orders received.

Detailed Operations logs; which give details of the crew that flew that date and the mission.

The Detailed Operations Log archives are intermittent with missing data, log pages missing or not digitized. Thus we have to work with what we have and extract the best information possible for each of the people involved.

My intention is to give each individual his own file in this blog that outlines his duties, air time etc.

98 Squadron were focused on supporting the AASF and would supply Replacement Battle aircraft and crew to the various squadrons in France. Their logs are vague and

would state that they supplied replacement crew to 150 squadron, no names maybe just the pilot's name. The 150 Squadron might state replacement crew arrived from the 98 squadron and normally would name them but that is hit and miss. What this means is there has to be a lot of cross referencing between the multiple documents in the archives in order to get an accurate picture. Normally Observers and Gunners names were not mentioned.