

Research Guide

Military History



**SOUTH CANTERBURY
MUSEUM**
EXPLORE our heritage

South Canterbury Museum
PO Box 522, Timaru

W: museum.timaru.govt.nz
E: museum@timdc.govt.nz

Exploring our Heritage

Nau Mai Haere Mai ki te South Canterbury Museum
Welcome to the South Canterbury Museum

As you arrive at the Museum:

If you haven't visited before please ask at the front desk on arrival and our staff will direct you to the Museum's research room.

Please note as we aim to preserve the taonga we hold for future generations, and as we only have a relatively small space, we ask that you:

- *Leave bags (including laptop bags) in the lockers at reception*
- *Leave all food and drink (including water bottles) with your bags. If you have special needs in this regard, please discuss with staff so they can be kept ready for you to access at reception*
- *Bring any materials you need for research with you (but no pens please)*
- *Use pencils only in the research room – which can be supplied if you don't have one.*

Beginning your research

Before visiting consider what you already know – this can save you time and help identify resources that could be useful to explore and discover material helpful to you.

This guide will introduce you to military history resources that may assist your research. It is not intended to be comprehensive as our collections and the resources available are constantly evolving. Increasingly many of our collections can be found listed on our Collections Online at <https://timdc.pastperfectonline.com/> - however there are still many collections not yet listed online. Please enquire with staff if you have a specific need or request.

All Museum collections can only be used in the research room and cannot be borrowed or loaned.

Our hours

Check our hours on our website [here](#)

Contact details

P: 03 6877212

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Researching Military History

This guide aims to assist people researching the military history of former service personnel. The following resources hope to help people answer the most common questions they have about this area of enquiry. This is not an exhaustive list though and, depending on your query and the limitations of each resource, not all will necessarily apply to your particular needs.

Getting started

Consider what you know already and what you most want to know.

This guide is largely targeted at the three main questions below, aiming to help you understand what you will need and what can you expect to find.

1. Where and when did the person I'm researching serve?

You are most likely to find this sort of detail in the personnel files that were kept by the government at the time. Where these files are held and whether they are easily accessible depends on the era of the conflict. Since these files were specialised documents they are sometimes difficult to read. Thankfully there are other useful resources such as South Canterbury's SCRoll database and Auckland Museum's Cenotaph database.

2. What medals did they receive/entitled to? I have my ancestor's medals, what did they get them for?

You will normally find a listing of the medals received by a person in their personnel file. Thanks for the special design of both medals and their ribbons they are easily identifiable. Medals and ribbons can actually tell us a lot about a person's service.

3. How do I find out more about the conflicts they served in?

Thanks to interest in military history, digitisation projects and the recent centennial of World War I there are a lot of resources that are free and easily available.

Hopefully these comments help get you thinking about the resources that might be of use to your specific research. In the following section you can explore more about the specific resources that could be useful to you.

Resources

South African War and World War I Personnel File

The primary resource for doing research on individual is the personnel file. A personnel file is a record of a person's service kept by the government and includes original documents such as enlistment forms and details of postings. Some of the personnel files can be dozens of pages long and others can be quite short, depending on the length of their service or issues they might have encountered.

Personnel files from 1898 to 1920 are held by Archives New Zealand. Thanks to a huge digitisation project these files are available to be read online and can be found here;

www.archives.govt.nz

When doing a search for an individual is useful to have the full name and, if possible, their service number.

If you are wanting information on the medals award to a person this is normally listed on a yellow piece of paper attached to the front page.

Archives New Zealand also holds other resources that might be helpful to military history researchers. These resources are listed here;

www.archives.govt.nz/search-the-archive/research-guides/war

Deciphering Personnel Records

Unfortunately armed forces love acronyms and personnel records tend to be full of acronyms and abbreviations. Thankfully there are some guides to help. For World War I use; www.nzhistory.govt.nz/war/ww1-abbreviations-acronymns

World War II service records are normally supplied with a listing of common acronyms and abbreviations.

Sadly there is no cheatsheet for the terrible handwriting usually found on the files!

World War II and Beyond Service Files

Personnel files for after 1920 are held by New Zealand Defence Force Personnel Archives and Medals (though they refer to the files as Service Records). Unfortunately these files have not been digitised and can only be accessed by contacting the archives to arrange a photocopy or a personal visit. The files can be requested from here;

www.nzdf.mil.nz/nzdf/medal-and-service-records/service-records/

Due to privacy issues you have to prove that the person you are researching is deceased or provide permission that you are allowed to view their record. If there are any charges for supplying the file the archive will contact you.

Supply of files from the NZDF Personnel Archives and Medals can be very slow, due to demand, so factor this time delay into your research.

SCRoll Database

The SCRoll Database is South Canterbury Museum's very own online database that records the service of local men and women in World War I. The database was World War I centennial project that was driven by the Museum, supported by local groups and organisations, and has received a lot of extra material by members from the public.

The personnel are searchable alphabetically or you can look through related images. A large number of the personnel have detailed biographies provided by dedicated volunteers supporting the project. Some entries are quite sparse in detail but others are very thorough with photographs and scanned archival items attached to the record. Although the centennial finished in 1918 work on the SCRoll database is ongoing and so in time more and more detail will be added. The SCRoll database can be found here;

www.museum.timaru.govt.nz/explore/scroll

Cenotaph Database

The Cenotaph database is an online database for all New Zealand service personnel operated by Auckland Museum and covers a wide range of conflicts, from the New Zealand Wars to recent times. The database is searchable by person or keyword. Since it is such a wide ranging database it is useful to try to know as much as you can about the person you are researching or you could be overwhelmed with the results. Like SCRoll, members of the public can contribute information or photographs so while some entries are sparse others can have a lot of material. The Cenotaph database can be found here;

www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph

Medals

New Zealand personnel have been eligible for a wide range of medals for service throughout our military history. These can be largely grouped into either campaign medals awarded for service in a particular theatre or gallantry medals awarded for bravery.

If you have a group of medals from an individual identifying the campaign medals can tell you where they served. Furthermore World War I medals have the person's name stamped around the rim.

A listing of campaign medals can be found here;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand_campaign_medals

A listing of gallantry medals can be found here;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand_Honours_Order_of_Precedence



Publications

Official Histories

Following both World Wars the government published a wide range of official histories to chronicle New Zealand's efforts and these are now available online. These are normally histories of particular regiments/battalions or of campaigns. The histories offer an enormous amount of information that can be used alongside a personnel file to gain a broader understanding of a person's service or to gain a wider understanding of the wars in general. The World War I histories can be found here;

www.nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/subject-000003.html

The World War II histories can be found here;

www.nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/subject-000004.html

Papers Past

Papers Past is an online database of scanned newspapers, journals and other published material operated by The National Library. The newspapers can be of particular interest when researching military history because of articles about local soldiers. The Timaru Herald is available from 1864 to 1945 so both World Wars are covered. Due to the amount of information available researching on Papers Past can be time consuming but sometimes it offers some great material. The database can be accessed here;

www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/

NZ History

The government's website NZ History offers a wealth of information on the various conflicts New Zealand has been involved in. There are pages offering an overview of campaigns but also more focused articles things such as organisation or mascots. This material can be used to gain a better understanding of the context of a person's service. The NZ History page on military history can be found here;

www.nzhistory.govt.nz/war-and-society

Books

Thanks to the interest in New Zealand's military history and the World War I centennial there has been a proliferation of books on the subject. There are far too many to list here but for recent exhibitions the museum has found the following titles useful;

New Zealanders at War- Michael King

The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History- edited by Ian McGibbon

Bloody Gallipoli: The New Zealanders Story- Richard Stowers

Johnny Enzed- Glynn Harper

New Zealand's Western Front Campaign- Ian McGibbon

A Bloody Road Home- by Christopher Pugsley

Museums

South Canterbury Museum

The South Canterbury Museum holds many items related to military history and a lot of these are searchable online on the Museum's database. The Museum also holds other items not currently listed online and can provide guidance for researchers. If you want to undertake research please contact the museum before visiting. South Canterbury Museum can be contacted via these details;

www.museum.timaru.govt.nz/home

ph; 03 687 7212

museum@timdc.govt.nz

Services Museums

Each of New Zealand's services operate individual museums and these offer large collections that might be useful for researchers. The Army Museum is in Waiouru, while the Airforce Museum and Navy Museum are in Christchurch and Auckland respectfully. If you want to undertake research contact the relevant museum before visiting. The museums can be contacted via their websites here;

www.armymuseum.co.nz/

www.navymuseum.co.nz/

www.airforcemuseum.co.nz/

National Library of New Zealand and Alexander Turnbull Library

In addition to Papers Past, the National Library holds an enormous amount of items, both published and unpublished. Of particular importance are the collections of official photographs from the World Wars and the War Art Collection. Its collections can be searched online here;

www.natlib.govt.nz/

Other Useful Sites

A complete listing of every possible source of use for military history is next to impossible thanks to the numerous sites out there on the internet. However, these sites might also be useful;

www.vietnamwar.govt.nz/

A site focusing on the Vietnam War

www.ww100.govt.nz/discover-WW1

The government's site commemorating the centennial of World War I

www.cwgc.org/

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

www.nzwargraves.org.nz/

A site collecting photographs of New Zealand's war graves