RAF CASUALTY RECORDS TO BE RELEASED

THE Ministry of Defence has, for some time, been considering the release of Second World War RAF casualty records to the National Archives, reports **Jonathan Stevens**. Having accepted that there are no longer any administrative reasons why these records should be withheld, under the terms of the Public Records Act 1958 the National Archives has agreed to accession these files for permanent preservation. Once the transfer has been completed, the files concerned will be made publicly available.

These records amount to approximately 20,500 files in total, with each pack relating to an aircraft and all casualties associated with it. Those records not related to battle losses – approximately 35,500 files – will be retained by the MoD for further review in advance of any disposal decision.

The records were produced following an incident involving the loss of an aircraft or personnel. Each file may include a report of initial loss, copies of early correspondence to the next of kin, any further information received on the incident and any subsequent correspondence with the next of kin. After the war, the Missing Research Enquiry Service (MRES) was established attempt in an to locate and identify all missing RAF personnel, and it is estimated that in approximately one third of the 20,500 cases selected for transfer, the records contain further information from MRES, including, where applicable, an exhumation report.

The decision to release these files was made following a limited public consultation. Part of that process involved taking into consideration the sensitivities with regards to any contemporaneous correspondence between the next of kin and the MoD or its predecessors which contained details of an individual's financial and/or marital circumstances,

THE RESULTS OF A LIMITED PUBLIC CONSULTATION HAVE BEEN ANNOUNCED

release of which some survivors and next of kin may see as a breach of confidence. The other consideration was that details of circumstances of loss, injury and any recovered remains might be distressing to some people.

The huge number of records makes it impractical to undertake a file-by-file review of this type of sensitive material before they are released to the National Archives. Consequently, the recent MoD report stated, the "mitigation of sensitivity risks needs to be achieved by other means". The report went on to highlight these methods:

"[By] making it clear on files transferred to The National Archives that the record may contain material that some readers may find distressing; removing most material dated after 1948 from the record to ensure any personal data made available reasonably falls into the historical exemption provision under the Data Protection Act; [and] working with The National Archives to remove from public view any records identified by members of the public (and accepted by MoD and TNA) as being sensitive."

As part of its review process, the MoD also undertook a limited public consultation with a number of groups that represent both surviving members of aircrew and the families of those whose details appear in the RAF casualty packs. The RAF Association, Bomber Command Association, Battle of Britain Fighter Association, Coastal and Maritime Command Association, Royal British Legion, Commonwealth War Graves Commission and War Widows Association were all consulted. The consultation was framed in such a way that a nil response equated to support for immediate release and all those organisations which replied supported release of the records now. It is interesting to note that Second World War British Army and Royal Navy casualty packs have already been transferred to the National Archives.

It is anticipated that the MoD will commence the transfer of the RAF casualty packs to the National Archives during 2013. The packs will be released in date order, commencing with those created in 1939. Given the volume of records involved it is likely to take several years before all the RAF casualty packs are publicly available. ■

ABOVE: **The wreckage of an RAF bomber which was shot down near Hanover during the summer of 1940. The original caption provides no further information on the date or time of the incident, or indeed the identity of the aircraft involved, other than to say that the "image was received in the UK on 26.08.1940 via the US Clipper news service having been released by the Germans".** (HMP)

BELOW: **The remains of another RAF bomber lost over western Germany during 1940.** (HMP)