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News from the Directorate of History

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News from the Director General History

Carl A. Christie

Editor's Note: The Director General History was formally known as the Directorate of History.

One of the most popular sources for Canadian military historians is the war diary. As mentioned in the previous column, Canadian Forces (CF) units on active operations keep a daily record of their activities and forward it, along with copies of key documents as appendices, to DHist. This is a requirement almost as old as the forces themselves. War diaries documenting recent events (such as the voluminous collection of the Gulf War, as well as those of units at Oka) will remain closed to the public until they can be declassified, but those covering the period through the end of the Korean War are open, available at the National Archives of Canada (NAC), and heavily used by all manner of researchers.

Technically speaking, the term war diary applies only to the army. It has, however, since the advent of the unified force, been appropriated by the entire CF. The Royal Canadian Air Force maintained a similar document, simply called a daily diary, with an operations record book (generally referred to by air force historians as ORBs) appended as appropriate. Increasingly, researchers are referring to these air force documents as war diaries.

This generic term cannot, however, be applied to reports produced by the Royal Canadian Navy. The closest approximation would be the Report of Proceedings (ROPs) which, because it is not very comprehensive, is rarely as useful. In peacetime, ROPs were prepared monthly to highlight events and

occurrences. Additional ROPs were required in wartime for such things as convoys and naval engagements. A very large proportion of wartime ROPs was inadvertently destroyed in the 1950s, but some microform copies and originals do survive at both DHist and NAC. Almost invariably they need to be supplemented by ship's logs (all of which are held at NAC), ship movement cards, and related documents in both DHist and NAC. Many of these related documents are copies of material in the Public Record Office (PRO) in London, England, and the U.S. National Archives in Washington D.C., acquired by DHist for the purpose of writing official histories.

(On a tangential note, some naval officers despatched with their ships to the Persian Gulf during the build-up of coalition forces made urgent calls to DHist requesting guidance on compiling a war diary, hitherto strictly an army document in their minds. In the end, thanks to advice from DHist archivists and the work of Major Jean Morin, a DHist historian attached to the staff of Commodore Ken Summers, CF commander in the Middle East, most units deployed to the region submitted excellent, full war diaries which will be a crucial source for historians of Canadian participation in this crisis.)

War diaries created since the Korean War are still at DHist; eventually they will find their way to NAC.

RCAF diaries and ORBs are held by DHist. The entire collection, covering the period from before the war to the unification of the forces, has been microfilmed by the NAC. They can

therefore be read there on microfilm, or borrowed from it on interlibrary loan through any library possessing a reader. The NAC has loaned this microfilm to institutions across Canada and around the world. The system has been a godsend to researchers who cannot travel to consult the original sources.

During the war, copies of RCAF diaries and ORBs put together overseas were sent through the RAF chain of command to the Air Ministry in London as well as to Air Force Headquarters in Ottawa. Consequently the documents can be consulted today at the PRO in England, as well as in Ottawa. Sometimes there is a discrepancy between the two copies of a diary, meant to be identical. This is most likely to happen with the appendices, often the best part of a war diary. DHist historians occasionally check a particularly sticky point on microfilm copies of the PRO-held version, as well as the original in the office.

Anyone reading a war diary should be aware that, like any source, it must be used with care. The soldier or airman assigned the task of keeping the diary, drew it as a secondary duty, and often performed the chore with a certain lack of enthusiasm. Just as today, service personnel tended to question the need to compile documents for the historical record when there was more immediately important work to be done. (As an aside, the almost missionary task of monitoring the preparation and submission of annual historical reports and war diaries by CF units is an unsung, important role of DHist.)

The researcher cannot count on a diary having been written close to the events it records. Some diary keepers have admitted composing the document several days at a time, long after the fact. And we cannot depend on the historical judgement of the diarist. As an example, there is one case of an RCAF Eastern Air Command squadron, heavily involved in attacking German U-boats during a big Second World War convoy battle, whose diarist that day tells us a great deal about the wedding of an officer and a nursing sister and nothing about the activities out over the North

Atlantic. War diaries, like all sources, should be used with extreme care and always in conjunction with other, corroborative evidence.

Since unification of the CF in the late 1960s, each non-operational unit has been required to submit an annual historical report (AHR) to DHist, although it should be admitted that for the first few years this requirement was often honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

Many AHRs are classified documents—more because of restrictions under the Privacy Act than concerns about national security—but many are unclassified and available to any visitor. DHist archival staff review AHR access restrictions whenever possible. Many formerly closed AHRs have been declassified and are now open for consultation. Access is facilitated by a computerized finding aid listing each unit, file number, years covered (there are unfortunate gaps in some units' submissions), and security classifications by years. A printout of this listing, essentially a control device designed and used by Donna Porter, the archivist responsible for managing the war diary and AHR programme, may be consulted at DHist. (Donna also has a similar listing for war diaries, covering all the operations the CF has been involved in save Oka and the Gulf.)

Everyone working on the history of a CF unit since unification should consult the AHRs. They are much briefer than war diaries and therefore contain a smaller quantity of detailed information. However, they can be a valuable source, usually highlighting the year's important events, naming the key personnel, and generally giving a feel for the development of the unit. Clippings and photographs are often included as appendices. Like war diaries, AHRs vary in value as a source, depending on the historical awareness of the compiler and his commanding officer.

While war diaries and AHRs are the only documents automatically deposited at DHist by legal authority (some unit files that used to fall into this category now go directly to the NAC), a considerable amount of interesting and important material arrives in less formal

ways. DHist archivists and historians constantly watch for potentially useful sources—not only for current official projects like the Gulf War, RCAF and RCN official histories, and the socio-military study of 5th Brigade in the First World War, but also for the historians of the future—basically anything that will document the development and activities of the CF. Owen Cooke, DHist's Chief Historical Archivist, seeks to enrich the quality of sources through archival acquisitions.

Many units have transferred demi-official documents, like photograph albums, to DHist. The rich collection of album dates from a series of Air Board albums from various stations across Canada in the 1920s (such as Rockcliffe, Victoria Beach on Lake Winnipeg, and High River, Alberta), through the Second World War and the days of Canada's peak NATO involvement in the 1950s and early 1960s, right up to units recently disbanded.

Directorates within National Defence Headquarters have contributed copies of reports and studies on a number of issues, ranging from women in the military to CF unification. Often this material has not been placed on the official filing system, and has been rescued from destruction by DHist. Those that have been declassified can offer important insights on policy matters. At the same time, many operations can also be studied in our public reading room. For example, the holdings include a large and growing collection of Search and Rescue (SAR) reports. Currently used primarily in response to specific queries, this source might well form the basic building block of a future history of SAR in Canada for some enterprising historian. Similarly, our collection of aircraft inventory cards, and the records of past honours and awards directorates, which would otherwise have disappeared, have provided the foundation for useful reference books.

Individual service personnel and officials of the department have donated correspondence or memoirs for retention or copying. Given the fine line between office and personal papers, some of these collections (as at the NAC and other archival institutions) offer a rich resource.

For example, the papers of Colonel Bob Raymont fill many boxes, most of which are mines of information.

Colonel Raymont made a crucial contribution to the history of the Canadian Army, as well as to the history of Canadian defence policy, when he donated several hundred feet of papers accumulated during his years as executive assistant to General Charles Foulkes and successive Chiefs of the Defence Staff. Retained at DHist as a reference for today's DND staff, many of these files remain classified, but a surprising number have been declassified and are open to the public. Isabel Campbell has prepared a preliminary finding aid that makes this invaluable collection at least partially accessible. Arranging and reviewing these files is a very slow process, so it will be some time before they are completely available to researchers. In the end, no one will dare ignore the Raymont Collection in any study of postwar Canadian defence policy and related matters.

DHist acquires sources like this at a rate of several hundred a year. Some are only a few sheets of paper; others fill several boxes. For purposes of description each one is called a "document" and catalogued into the Document Collection. Although shelved simply by accession numbers, they are identified through a card catalogue, with author, title, and subject entries. Large collections also receive a full finding aid, duly noted in the catalogue. After a brief introduction visiting researchers are encouraged to browse through the catalogue and finding aids. When they find items they wish to consult, the staff fetch them from the climate-controlled archival storage rooms.

In describing the archival sources at DHist, it is important to explain that—except for certain permanent reference files—they are only retained so long as they are needed for ongoing departmental programmes in historical research or other staff requirements. At regular intervals large consignments are transferred to the National Archives of Canada for permanent retention. We have a close and fruitful connection with NAC, which enables both institutions to better serve researchers in military history.

D Hist's importance to military history in Canada and to the Department of National Defence in particular has recently been recognized by its elevation in status. Dr. W.A.B. Douglas is now officially Director General History. Taxpayers can relax; the more impressive title brings no additional financial remuneration for him or any of his staff. Nor has it brought any increase in size or facilities. It simply recognizes the significant role DHist plays within the department and the historical community. Like most organizations today, DHist is basically expected to do more with less.

Should readers have any questions about DHist, its collections, or mandate, they should feel free to pass them to me through the *CMH* editor. I would be happy to try to answer them through the medium of this column.

Carl Christie is Senior Research Officer at the Director General History. He is currently completing a history of RAF Ferry Command.