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News from the Directorate of History

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News from the Directorate of History

Carl A. Christie

Like the defence establishments of many countries, the Canadian Department of National Defence (DND) maintains an historical section, and has done so since 1917. Today's Directorate of History at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa represents the union of the historical offices of the three armed services of pre-unification days, the Canadian Army, the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force.

"D Hist," as it is known throughout the department and the military history community, has as its prime mandate the preparation of the official histories of the Canadian armed forces. To date D Hist and its predecessors have published over 60 titles, in both official languages, including major academic studies, such as G.W.L. Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, C.P. Stacey's award-winning *Arms, Men and Governments*, and more recently, the first two volumes of the official history of the RCAF by S.F. Wise and W.A.B. Douglas. Scholarly studies have been accompanied by more modest publications such as *Canada's Army in Korea* and F.J. Hatch's *Aerodrome of Democracy*.

Recently, Ben Greenhous and Steve Harris, responding to our political masters, produced *Canada and the Battle of Vimy Ridge*, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of this key episode in Canada's historical development. This attractive coffee-table style book was presented by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to President Francois Mitterrand during last April's commemorative ceremonies in France.

At the moment directorate historians are engaged in a number of interesting research projects, ranging from the First World War to

the Gulf War. They also assist Canadian Forces (CF) officers' education and professional development programmes and provide historical advice to all levels of DND.

Because good history depends on good sources, the second mandate of D Hist involves collecting archival materials to support the writing of official histories, and maintaining a research library on military history. DND's historical archives are to be found in various repositories. The National Archives of Canada (NAC) are the principal of these, but other essential sources for official history are the central registry of National Defence Headquarters and the document collection at D Hist.

Researchers should be aware that DND central registry files, like those of other federal government departments and agencies, are transferred on a regular and ongoing basis to the Government Archives Division of the Historical Resources Branch of the National Archives. D Hist collects documents and files that fall between the cracks and might otherwise be lost to posterity. In doing this the staff co-operates with the National Archives and from time to time transfers material to the NAC.

In addition to records and documents acquired informally and demi-officially, Canadian Forces Administrative Orders require that all units submit annual historical reports to D Hist, unless they are on active operations. In the latter case CF units must keep a war diary and forward it to D Hist (for example, there are now over 450 shelf feet of paper generated by CF contributions to the Persian Gulf War). These documents are classified, but in the long run they will be a key historical

resource for anyone writing CF history. To supplement these basic records, D Hist acquires a variety of documents and files from units and individuals within the military community.

The existence of these resources, along with the presence of a staff of trained military historians, has brought a third basic mandate. D Hist responds to inquiries of an historical nature emanating from within DND and other government departments and agencies. Whenever possible the staff also tries to give what assistance they can to inquiries from the general public - both from within Canada and abroad.

Besides the primary roles noted above, D Hist also serves as the secretariat for a number of historical organizations, including the Canadian Military History Group, the Canadian Commission on Military History, the Canadian Committee for the History of the Second World War, and the history committee of the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation.

These columns on D Hist will discuss the resources available, highlight specific collections and caution readers against some of the pitfalls awaiting the unwary researcher. However, before zeroing in on specific archival

materials, this first column is designed simply to give a general idea of what D Hist is, what it holds and what its staff is currently doing. Readers interested in more information, or who would like to conduct their own research at D Hist, should contact the office directly. Please write to: Senior Research Officer, Directorate of History, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0K2. (Or telephone (613) 998-7057; fax (613) 990-8579).

Researchers wishing to consult sources held by D Hist should contact the Senior Researcher in advance. The directorate maintains a public reading room (open from 0830 - 1630, 5 days a week) in the Colonel Charles P. Stacey Building at 2429 Holly Lane in southeast Ottawa. Visitors are welcome, but are requested to come prepared, having done as much prior reading and digging as possible. The more you know before you arrive at D Hist, or any archival institution, the more fruitful your visit will be.

Dr. Christie is the Senior Research Officer at the Directorate of History.

Authors Wanted

Canadian Military History wants to publish good work by amateur as well as professional historians. Veterans and serving officers are especially encouraged to submit material or ideas for articles. We are interested in short vignettes of our history as well as longer features. *CMH* also seeks people to review books. Please write with an outline of your background, interests and ideas to The Editor, *CMH*, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3C5.