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News from the Directorate of History

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News From the Directorate of History

Carl A. Christie

Readers should be happy to learn that reports of the demise of the Directorate of History are not true. D Hist, while not thriving to the same extent that it has in the past, continues to function at 2429 Holly Lane in Ottawa. Some of the archival holdings are being transferred to the National Archives of Canada and many of the staff leave at the end of March 1996. Nonetheless, the smaller D Hist fully expects to continue its work researching and writing the official histories of the Canadian Armed Forces, providing historical information and advice to people both inside and out of the Department of National Defence and, in general, trying to foster a greater interest in and awareness of military history in Canada.

Although staff cuts have forced cutbacks in service, it has not been eliminated (as many have feared it would have to be). Telephone inquiries are no longer accepted, but those received by mail and fax eventually receive a reply. (Although we must admit that the normal wait of about five months for a reply must be disconcerting to most inquirers. It is impossible to resist reminding Canadians that, if government drastically cuts the Public Service, there will inevitably be less public service.)

To date, only air force sources have been sent to the National Archives as part of the current downsizing. This reflects the decision to postpone indefinitely the fourth volume of the RCAF history (which would have covered the years 1945 to 1968, including such topics as the Air Division in Europe with its 12 squadrons attached to NATO, the policy considerations behind the development and ultimate cancellation of A. V. Roe's project to replace the CF-100 all-weather

air defence fighter, the famous CF-105 Arrow, the Bomarc missile and nuclear warheads issue, and, of course, the air force side of the armed forces unification question).

The RCAF unit diaries and operations record books and photograph albums now reside at the National Archives. Enquiries and research visits to answer questions about any aspect of the history of the RCAF should, therefore, be made there. D Hist is no longer a key repository for research into air force history. It does still hold a number of miscellaneous RCAF files in the Kardex and Document Collections, but these too will gradually find their way to the National Archives,

The Royal Canadian Navy and Canadian Forces involvement in peacekeeping operations, the subjects of planned official histories, are the two areas for which files are being retained and actively sought by D Hist. Although the shelving of the RCAF history is unfortunate, naval veterans and historians will applaud the determination to complete the RCN history.

The cuts to D Hist are generally lamented, but the downsizing of its archives may bring some benefits. Consolidation of sources at the National Archives will be welcomed by those researchers forced to take a 30 to 45 minute bus ride or an expensive taxi from downtown. And, possible diffusion of valuable sources through modern technology (prompted by the cutbacks) could, in the end, help many people far from Ottawa. As a pilot project, the heavily used collections of RCAF aircraft inventory cards and crash cards summarizing the hoard of inquiry investigations into accidents in Canada during the Second World War are being scanned onto CD-ROM. The work

requires their temporary absence from D Hist. This is inconvenient for the cards' many users; however, it is hoped that, after the work has been verified and indexed, the "cards" can be purchased on CD-ROM. This may be the start of a major development, by which D Hist archival sources are made available at an affordable price. Researchers who no longer have to travel to Ottawa to consult the original documents would undoubtedly applaud such an advance.

In the meantime, some files will probably never see the high-tech approach. Many of the navy files fall into this category. It is difficult to imagine, for example, a scanner that could decipher the contents of the old Naval Historical Section's 8000 series. These valuable files hold extremely useful original documents as well as a wide variety of information on photocopies, faded old photostat, typescripts, articles and clippings, and even personal notes by naval historians like Gilbert Tucker and E.C. Russell. These can be doubly useful because they usually include references to old naval files or (sometimes) obscure publications. All who have done naval history in this country have cursed the RCN's spotty record keeping (and, unfortunately, younger sailors say that not much has changed), but they almost universally give thanks for the work of Tucker and Russell in the old Naval Historical Section. While their publications may need replacing, their notes and articles, as well as their numerous unpublished narratives and "potted histories" of ships remain important sources for Canadian naval historians.

The naval files tend to be poorly served by indexes and finding aids (experienced D Hist staff usually find the best naval documents by browsing) but they reward the persistent and patient searcher. The 8000 series, for example,

has one or more file folders devoted to almost every Second World War RCN ship. They are easily retrieved by staff simply by reading the ships' names recorded on the drawers of the filing cabinets (themselves of apparent Second World War vintage) in the second floor archival storage room of the C.P. Stacey Building on Holly Lane. Reports of Proceedings, a kind of monthly report for each vessel and her company, and original naval messages and signals are interfiled with copies of documents and articles and the (often rough) notes of earlier official naval historians. Sometimes a research problem can be solved with no further searching; more frequently, part of the answer is found in a ship's 8000 file, along with important clues about where to continue the search (at D Hist, the National Archives, which holds ships logs, many Reports of Proceedings and some crew lists, for example, or elsewhere).

Again, these and other valuable naval sources (along with an increasing number on Peacekeeping) should remain at D Hist for the foreseeable future. Current plans call for them to be made available to both visitors and inquirers as they have been for the last few decades.

Carl Christie, Senior Research Officer and Acting Chief Historical Archivist at the Directorate of History, retires at the end of March to take up a new career as a freelance writer (mostly of history). His *Ocean Bridge: The History of RAF Ferry Command* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Leicester, England: Midland Publishing, 1995) is now into its second printing.