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News from the Director General History: Sources on D-Day and the Normandy Campaign

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News from the Director General History

Sources on D-Day and the Normandy Campaign

Carl A. Christie

Given the emphasis this issue of *Canadian Military History* places on the Normandy campaign, it seemed appropriate to discuss sources for study of that subject in this column. The records held by the Director General History (DG Hist) do not constitute the prime resource for anyone looking into the campaign; they should not, however, be ignored.

Perhaps this office's richest resources on this topic are air force documents. Regular readers will remember that each Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) unit kept a daily diary and operations record book (ORB). Duplicate copies were submitted through both the Royal Air Force (RAF) and RCAF chains of command to the Air Ministry in London and to Air Force Headquarters in Ottawa. These documents are today held by the Public Record Office (PRO) near Kew Gardens in London, England, and by DG Hist. Both versions have been microfilmed, the former by the PRO and the latter by the NAC. They may be purchased from these institutions or, in the case of the NAC-held film, borrowed on interlibrary loan through any library possessing a proper reader. These important documents generally list every operational flight, with a list of the crew, the specific aircraft, the purpose and target of the mission, and a capsule summary of what happened.

In addition to the important official air force archival sources and some RCN reports of proceedings, the card catalogue to the DG Hist Document Collection contains about three inches of entries under the heading "Normandy Campaign." These include references to items dealing with Canadian army, navy and air force activities before, during and after the campaign. The greatest percentage of documents deal with the D-Day

landings themselves. A few are simply photocopies of published articles from obscure journals (placed in the files for easy consultation by DND historians and visiting researchers alike); some are transcripts of interviews with participants in the campaign; others are copies of original historical documents held by other archives; many are original documents in their own right.

The collection includes some excerpts from war diaries, as well as plans and analyses, intelligence summaries and operation research evaluations. Not surprisingly, given the recent emphasis on the production of the RCAF and RCN histories, the bulk of these concern air force and navy involvement in the campaign. However, some items deal with army concerns — especially co-operation with the other services. We also hold a small selection of personal papers of individual servicemen, both in original and copy form, which document their experiences in these operations.

Staff historians have not had the time or the resources to undertake a systematic oral history programme. Nonetheless, we have managed to interview veterans from time to time in order to fill gaps in the paper record or to obtain some "colour" or amplification. Transcripts of these interviews are placed in informal "Biographical Files" and shelved alphabetically by surname. Those covering various aspects of the Normandy Campaign tend more likely to concern naval operations (for which Hal Lawrence has done considerable interviewing under contract to DG Hist), but there are a few interviews with airmen and soldiers.

The Document Collection includes a number of enemy documents, both in German

and in translation. The Steiger series, named after a former translator in the office, while not extensive, contains some very useful items to complement the Allied documentation found here and in other English language archives.

The Document Collection includes a few references to photographs and albums. So too does the Kardex, although in the case of this collection, many of the relevant files were transferred to the NAC years ago. It is useful to remember when searching for photographs that no negatives are held at DG Hist; one must always go elsewhere, most often (for a Second World War subject) to the NAC.

In addition to the long string of entries under "Photographs," Kardex includes almost 80 under "D-Day." As is frequently the case with this important collection, many of the files are now at the NAC. Still, it is wise to start at DG Hist, in order to facilitate the process of finding the item within the massive NAC haystack, where archivists maintain a conversion list of files numbers for material transferred from DG Hist.

Documents identified by Canadian official historians during trips to foreign archives are often copied for inclusion in DG Hist's holdings, and eventual transfer to the NAC after publication of the relevant volume of the official history. Because the role of Canadian forces was so completely integrated into that of the British command structure, the bulk of these copied materials come from the PRO in London (the British equivalent to our National Archives). Sometimes the historians have selected specific pages of a file for photocopying. Where it was not easy to differentiate those documents relating to the Canadian forces, or where a sizable part of the file was germane to our research on Canadian activities, the entire file has been purchased on microfilm. However copied, the documents are catalogued and cross-referenced by author, title, and subject as part of the DG Hist Document Collection. They are generally, therefore, more easily identifiable (more "user friendly") than the originals in the PRO.

Included in the collection of PRO copies are a number of documents from the British Cabinet, Foreign, and War Offices, but the majority come from Admiralty and Air Ministry

files. They deal with the involvement of the RCN and RCAF in the Normandy landings and the subsequent campaign. The RCN had ships operating in the English Channel in support of the D-Day landings in a number of ways — including sweeping for mines and patrolling for submarines and enemy surface vessels; the RCAF had squadrons of aircraft involved with RAF Commands playing a part in the campaign — Coastal Command working in co-operation with the Royal Navy in the Channel and North Sea, Bomber Command attacking German defence installations and communications and transport facilities (as well as the regular industrial and urban targets within Germany), Air Defence of Great Britain and Second Tactical Air Force taking on the Luftwaffe for air superiority while also providing close air support and interdiction for the Army, and, after a foothold had been gained on the continent, Transport Command flying supplies in and casualties out.

Researchers planning a visit to DG Hist should know that, with the increasingly difficult job of answering inquiries and assisting visitors, we have decided to close the public reading room on Mondays. In order to give plenty of notice, this policy will not take effect until the beginning of September (as long as we get the promised student help this summer). While regretting that any cut had to be made, the inquiries staff hope that this small reduction in public hours will improve our service to people who write and phone for historical information about the Canadian armed forces.

Carl Christie is Senior Research Officer at the Director General History. He is currently completing *Ocean Bridge: The History of RAF Ferry Command*.

About the time subscribers receive this issue of *CMH*, DG Hist will lose its Director General, Alec Douglas, to retirement, following more than 40 years service to Canada in and out of uniform. Originally commissioned in the RCN in 1950, he was posted to the recently-integrated Directorate of History in 1967 and retired from the Canadian Forces to succeed Syd Wise as Director of History in 1973. *CMH* wishes him well.