



Ministry
of Defence

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Dear [REDACTED],

Thank you for your email of 7 December in which you requested the following information:

“Please may I request a brief chronology of the historical branches of the three services?”

I am treating your correspondence as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

A search for the information has now been completed within the Ministry of Defence, and I can confirm that some of the information you requested is held. I have attached a chronology of the Air Historical Branch as requested. The Navy Historical Branch has not got a chronology but I have attached a short history of the branch that you may find of help. The Army Historical Branch has neither a chronology nor a short history document in existence that can be released. The branch came to the Ministry of Defence around 1970. Prior to this it was the military history section within the Cabinet Office/Committee of Imperial Defence. Should you wish to obtain records relating to its existence under that guise, they can be found at The National Archives in the Cabinet Office class. The National Archives can be found at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

For information relating to the Army Historical Branch from 1970, you should email the following address ArmyGS-HistoricalBranch@mod.uk

If you are not satisfied with this response or you wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of your request, then you should contact me in the first instance. If informal resolution is not possible and you are still dissatisfied then you may apply for an independent internal review by contacting the Information Rights Compliance team, 1st Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk). Please note that any request for an internal review must be made within 40 working days of the date on which the attempt to reach informal resolution has come to an end.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may take your complaint to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website, <http://www.ico.gov.uk>.

Yours sincerely,

Army Secretariat

Naval Historical Branch

As First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill implemented his conviction as he established the Naval Staff before the First World War. He required the Staff to include a historical section, explaining it should, "...be the means of sifting, developing and applying the results of history and experience, and of preserving them as a general stock of reasoned opinion available as an aid and guide for all who are called upon to determine, in peace or war, the naval policy of the country,"

His requirement has enduring relevance today as the Naval Historical Branch (NHB) is still part of the First Sea Lord's Naval Staff, providing advice and support to defence policy and operations but also fulfilling a much wider range of tasks for both the Government and the public.

Development of the Branch

The Historical Section was authorised before the First World War, but war was declared before it could be properly established. However, information was collected during the war and immediately after it was over, the Historical Section collated and organized the material. It also produced hundreds of classified studies and began a comprehensive history of the maritime war. Budget cuts meant this work was never completed, with negative consequences, but the work achieved despite this was more important, underwriting such measures as the immediate introduction of convoys in 1939.

At the outbreak of war the Branch's limited staff were assigned purely to collection. However, the first serious German threat to Britain proved to be mines laid in the sea off our coasts. The Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff required historical analysis to effectively counter this. When presented with a mass of raw data and on one to interpret it, he immediately had the Branch reconstituted as both a collection and analytical organization.

During the war, the NHB produced hundreds of reports, including immediate Battle Summaries, which allowed rapid improvements in the Royal Navy's effectiveness. After the war, these were developed into authoritative histories which incorporated captured German materials and are used extensively with the defence community. They were a basis for the Official Histories and many subsequent works, and NHB is currently publishing them to make them more widely available.

Naval Historical Branch Today

Today, the Branch continues to provide information and advice across defence in order to improve policy decisions. It does so by supplying a historical perspective and by countering any misconceptions that may have arisen without evidence. Recent work includes papers concerning the debate on effects based warfare and the maritime contribution to dealing with terrorists. This work is complemented by the longer-term analysis of new classified staff histories. Histories in progress include an innovative Four-Nation study of maritime co-operation since the 1990-1991 Gulf War, initiated by the chiefs of Naval Staff in Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia. The Branch also works with the fleet headquarters providing war diarist support and historically based training for naval and joint units. Recent examples include the naval war diaries for Operation Telic and a study of the Normandy landings for the Royal Navy's Maritime Battle Staff.

The Naval Historical Branch works in partnership with Fleet Headquarters in order to ensure records of the Royal Navy's wide range of activities are produced, preserved and organized, so that their content is permanently accessible. This is vital for the Branch's main business but is also central to legal and compensation issues. These are an increasing aspect of the Branch's work and have considerable financial implications. While the Branch does not 'judge' any cases, it does provide a vital expert input, which both assists the early resolution of legitimate claims and helps challenge any which may be more doubtful. As the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Alan West, recently put it: 'To those who are sceptical about the cost of this historical input, the loss of just one legal case because of lack of written documents would pay for the Branch...'

The Branch's information is also used for a wide range of other Government tasks. These include answering Parliamentary questions, inputs into training at all levels and the urgent supply of information to bomb disposal experts who encounter old mines and bombs. Coupling this information with the expertise of its staff, the Branch is able to assist with many other areas of public concern. Recently these have included the Wreck Commission into the loss of the trawler Gaul, and a civil action on the loss of the SS Stora.

Today though, the NHB does not only engage in naval and military circles. It has close links with the academic community and also assists the wider public. Its assistance to academics helps to inform and stimulate debate on the Navy and defence and its staff regularly present papers on topics as diverse as the D-Day landings and the suppression of the slave trade. The Branch also assists the public to the greatest extent its resources allow. Currently it answers well over 1,000 public enquiries a year, many of them concerned with family history, but including topics as diverse as naval cookery and ships' names (the head of NHB is also the chairman of the Ships' Names and Badges Committee). The staff take great satisfaction in providing this assistance, which also reflects the Ministry of Defence's greater emphasis on veterans' issues and the Freedom of Information Act.

In order to achieve its tasks, the NHB has two main sources of information: the Archive and the Admiralty Library. The Archive has been built up since the formation of the Branch and its main focus is on organizing and preserving documents that are initially classified. While many records are now electronic, they are also supplemented by hard copies. The records are used internally and then made available to other researchers, as security allows. The collection complements that in the National Archive at Kew, and also included private collections that have been donated to the Branch. Some of its most important holdings are copies of the German naval archives up to the end of the Second World War. The archive's curator is also able to access the National Archive's holdings for official purposes.

The archive resources are also complemented by the Admiralty Library – part of the Branch older than the Branch itself, and the property of the Admiralty Board. Managed in co-operation with the Royal Naval Museum, its collection of over 160,000 items has been built up over 200 years and it is one of the finest collections of maritime books in the world. It is currently being supplemented by the arrival of the historical collection of the Hydrographer of the Navy so that NHB's new Portsmouth offices will provide an efficient 'one-stop-shop' for the Royal Navy's requirement for historical information.

Ultimately, though, the information would be little value without staff that are able to exploit it. The Branch has 11 staff, drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds including the Royal Navy, academia and museums. They have a range of expertise and six have post-graduate qualification. Their task continues to be to provide the best possible historical service and so assist the Royal Navy to achieve its objectives.

AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH (RAF)

HISTORY

- July 1918 - Formation of Air History Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence. Charged with compiling Official History 'The War in the Air'.
- March 1920 - Control of Section transferred to Air Ministry. Now known as the Air Historical Branch.
- February 1936 - AHB was disestablished on completion of 'The War in the Air' responsibility for the records being allocated to the Air Ministry Library.
- November 1941 - AHB re-formed for purpose of compiling preliminary narratives of World War 2. By 1947 the staff included 40 historians and researchers to deal with the history of World War 2.
- August 1955 - AHB moved from Cadogan Gardens to Queen Anne's Chambers.
- January 1975 - Hd of AHB ceased to be responsible for the Air Force Department Library.
- July 1979 - AHB moved to Lacon House.
- July 1989 - AHB moved to 3-5 Great Scotland Yard, SW1A.
- April 2001 - AHB moved to Building 262, RAF Bentley Priory.
- April 2008 - AHB moved to Building 824, RAF Northolt.