



Ministry
of Defence

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5th October 2016

Dear [REDACTED]

Release of Information

Thank you for your correspondence dated 25th September 2016 requesting the following information:

'I wonder if you might be able to tell me where surviving deaths at sea investigations are held? I note that the BT341: Registry of Shipping and Seamen: Inquiries into Deaths at Sea: Papers and Reports, held at the National Archives only includes those of the Second World War and for 1964.

I am trying to look into a death of an ABS on HMS Plymouth, July 20th 1983. The ship was taking part in Exercise Coral Reef and was anchored in the Plymouth Harbour at Montserrat. The ships log only details the initial search for the missing crew member and then when it is decided that he must have drowned it is not mentioned again. Do you know if the High Commissioner for the Island would have had to get involved as I note that he and his wife later boarded the ship - but this could have been an already planned visit? I am not expecting to find records and if I did, I realise that they would be closed. I just wondered if any would have survived and where I might find out about Exercise Coral Reef?'

Your enquiry has been considered to be a request for information in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

In order to provide a suitable response, I have focussed my search for information on the following questions from your original request which I have summarised as:

- 1) Where are the records of deaths at sea investigations held?
- 2) Details on the death of an ABS of HMS Plymouth on July 20th 1983
- 3) Where can details about Exercise Coral Reef be obtained?

In response to the first question, there is not a single repository which holds the reports of Service Inquiries into deaths at sea. The manner in which they are stored is determined by the age and type of incident. This may well result in the documents being sent to The National Archive or within the

main MOD external archive facility before it is considered by the Review Team for permanent preservation or destruction.

In order to determine whether information in scope of question two was held, a search was conducted within the Department and I can confirm that no information is held on the death of an Able Seaman on HMS Plymouth in July 1983. Our Memorial Database confirmed an entry for the incident however on checking with the MOD archive facility, the related documents were not kept for permanent preservation and were subsequently destroyed.

From discussions with the Naval Historical Branch on what details are held about Exercise 'Coral Reef' in response to questions three, I can confirm that some information in scope of your request is held and I can provide you with the following information summary which you may find useful:

HMS PLYMOUTH deployed as the West Indies Guardship on 31 May 1983. On 10 June she arrived in Bermuda for a five-day visit, during which she took part in Exercise 'Coral Fringe', a tri-annual submarine nuclear reactor accident exercise, which was designed to test the reactions of the authorities ashore. HMS PLYMOUTH played the part of the nuclear submarine. During the exercise the ship's Wasp helicopter was scrambled to assist in the search and rescue of a missing sports diver.

However, the visit to Montserrat occurred much later in the deployment. HMS PLYMOUTH arrived in Plymouth on 20 July. There she experienced some problems with high winds and was forced to move from her position alongside in Plymouth Harbour and join RFA GREEN ROVER at an anchorage in the bay. At this point PLYMOUTH's Commanding Officer noted

"All but a few of the ship's company returned to the ship before sailing, including Able Seaman (Sonar) Hopkins, who later that evening was reported missing from his mess. A thorough search of the ship (Operation THIMBLEHUNT) revealed no trace of him and boat searches were carried out throughout the night with the Wasp helicopter joining in at first light. After 24 hours HOPKINS was declared missing presumed drowned. His body has not been found. My letter 780/1 of 26 July 1983 reported the findings of the ship's investigation".

The Commanding Officer does not mention the High Commissioner in his Report of Proceeding, and the Governor of the Island appears to have attended an official function on board the ship before Hopkins was discovered to be missing, but there were a number of functions during the visit before the ship departed on 23 July.

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, Zone K, 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.org.uk>.

Yours sincerely

Navy Command Secretariat – FOI Section