

News From the Directorate of History

Carl A. Christie

All those who have used or benefitted from the invaluable resources (archival, library and human) of the Department of National Defence's Directorate of History must be grieving about now for the DHist that was and could have been. The end of March brought the first major exodus of personnel in a process that will see the whole office shrink to 10 people by 1 April 1996. The remainder of those leaving will depart throughout this fiscal year, with a large number of positions ceasing to exist at the end of March 1996. As mentioned previously in this column, the new DHist will continue to work on the histories of the Royal Canadian Navy and Canadian Forces involvement in peacekeeping operations. Public service will be, at the very least, considerably diminished but only time will tell if it can be continued on even a reduced scale. The current experiment of opening the reading room two days a week (Tuesdays and Wednesdays) appears to be working reasonably well, at least from the perspective of the staff.

The latest change to DHist's reference service came on 1 April when the severe reduction in the enquiries section forced us to stop responding to telephone requests. A message to this effect has been placed on the number identified as our inquiries line. Faxes, military messages, and letters are placed in a pile and answered in order of receipt, as time permits after ministerial inquiries, formal Access to Information requests, and other high priority demands from within the Department of National Defence. Quite frankly, at the time of writing, we are not sure how much time this is going to leave for normal inquiries from

ordinary folks like you and me. We do expect to rebuild our backlog of unanswered inquiries fairly quickly; one full-time inquiries officer (who takes early retirement at the end of March) will simply be unable to cope with the anticipated demands on his time, even with some excellent student assistance. And, unfortunately, part of the coping mechanism will be to provide much briefer replies, and in general, do much less for people than has been the norm in the past.

On the matter of the records held at DHist, negotiations continue with the National Archives of Canada. When these are finalized, the transfers should take place quite quickly. We are hoping that the Archives can keep the down time to a minimum. Until then, researchers can consult the usual array of sources in our public reading room at 2429 Holly Lane in southeast Ottawa from 0830 to 1630 hours every Tuesday and Wednesday.

The staff, especially those who have worked on public service, sincerely regret the action they have been forced to take; however, the current mania for downsizing has left them no alternative.

Dr. Christie has been with the Directorate of History since April 1977 and, as Senior Research Officer, responsible for the inquiries service for the past seven years. His book, *Ocean Bridge: The History of RAF Ferry Command* was recently published by U of T Press.