

Collective and Corporate Memory in the Defence Medical Services

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Introduction

The lessons of history are rarely learned. It would be comforting to think that each new military operation that we undertake is created upon the solid foundations of our collective experience. In reality, lessons and observations are repeatedly at risk of being forgotten and are in need of being relearned down the generations; we often fail to analyse sufficiently critically and contemporaneously the information and experience which slips through our fingers like grains of sand.

Our corporate experience comprises Collective Memory, which we may define as the accumulated experience and ground truths of all members of the organisation, past and present; and Corporate Memory, which is an official process of collating documentation and imagery. This is ground truth filtered through bureaucracy and procedure, and to which access is controlled.

History is not what actually *happened*, but what can be deduced from what was *recorded* in contemporaneous records and imagery. These records include the written and documentary evidence, the spoken and recorded word, artefacts, pictures, paintings and from the 20th century onwards, film. Historiography is the process of recording and analysing history. I suggest that our modern corporate historiography in the Defence Medical Services (DMS) is inadequate and haphazard.

DMS historiography is important as ready access to corporate history through books and multimedia resources provides a number of benefits (Box 1).

- It enhances corporate bonding through shared knowledge and experience
- It makes people better informed
- It reduces the risk of planning errors and a costly relearning of historical lessons,
- It may improve recruitment, by raising awareness and interest among potential recruits
- It can improve our professional status, media and public support, by raising general awareness of DMS corporate activity and history.

Box 1 *The potential benefits of successful corporate historiography in the DMS*

There is a rich legacy of DMS corporate history from former times, but not much from the past 50 years. We need to get back into a collective and corporate habit of recording our campaign history. The passage of time rapidly erodes collective memory. The participants and architects of change move on to new posts, retire, grow old, forget and die, and their successors have to search out and rebuild the experience from scratch. In March 2003, a junior colleague watching the build up to OP TELIC 1 in Northern Kuwait commented that “*we had never done anything like this before*”. In fact, some of us had stood on the same ground 12 years earlier at the endgame of Op GRANBY (Operation Desert Storm) and students of history will also know that desert medicine of 1991 and 2003 was remarkably similar to that in North Africa during the Second World War [1].

During the compilation of Blood, Heat and Dust (www.pangrafix.com/bhd) detailing the operational experience of field medical units on OP TELIC 1, it became clear that while many medics have lived through life changing experiences in Iraq and elsewhere in the past decade, relatively few are enthused to articulate and pass on that experience in an interesting or informative way. The most valued amateur historians are those who keep a systematic diary and/or a structured collection of digital images. The question thus arises as to how best we can improve long term Corporate Memory and pre-empt Corporate Amnesia in the DMS, such that lessons are passed down and across the generations.

Creating a modern historiography in itself means relearning the experience of our predecessors during and after the Second World War when structured, consistent and coherent writing was a key educational and intellectual skill. Many campaigns were described in great detail in books, academic dissertations and official records, as for example, the extraordinary experiences of the Burma Campaign [2-5].

The present resources for DMS historiography

A medical officer or commander wishing to research the medical aspects of a campaign or operational experience presently has a number of options. Books remain the principal historic resource, but their writing is often opportunistic and not always as systematic as after the Second World War wash-up. Individual medical authors have written accounts of particular episodes

The aim of this Personal View is to stimulate debate on a controversial issue. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and are not intended to represent any official view of the Army, Ministry of Defence or any other organisation.

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and operations; Rick Jolly's *'Red and Green Life Machine'* [6] as a medical account of the Falklands Campaign for example, but very little else of note on medical subject matter relating to the Cold War, Op GRANBY, or Operations in and around the Former Republic of Yugoslavia during the 1990s.

Peer reviewed journals such as this one have carried valuable source papers over the years, but usually relating to selected and clinical aspects of the various campaigns, rather than to historical overview. Magazines such as *Soldier* and the various Corps magazines produce short and imagery of "human interest", which add background colour and contemporary context.

The internet offers a considerable amount of public source material, some of which is found on official sites and much more on personal websites and blogs. The internet resource has been much enhanced by the digitisation of entire libraries by Google Books, such that many "out of print" source books which may be of historic interest and relevance to military medical operations can now be traced and obtained in digital facsimile, although at some cost.

Specialist Libraries which can help in the search for rare material include the branches of the Defence Medical Libraries Service (DMLS), now based in Whittington Barracks, Lichfield, but which supports the British Forces Germany Service Library at Wegberg; the Library of The Centre for Aviation Medicine at RAF Henlow; and the Library of the Institute for Naval Medicine at Alverstoke, Gosport.

The National Reference Libraries, including the British Library and its Reference Collection, hold a huge stock of military material, which can be accessed and resourced by arrangement. The US reference libraries such as The Library of Congress, and those of other countries also hold valuable collections of material.

Museums provide a reference resource: the various Corps, Regimental and Service Museums have also become important repositories of personal material, records and artefacts for researchers on an *ad hoc* basis. Indeed, those in possession of personal files, records and imagery relating to their operational service could do worse than to put them in order and bequeath them to their relevant regimental museums.

Much valuable information is held in Post Operational Reports and other documents. The MoD has developed a formal and detailed strategy for record filing and information management, in conjunction with The National Archives [7]. The process is covered in detail in the Information Management Assessment report by the National Archives in March 2009 [8]. We can but hope that as much material as possible will be made readily accessible to as wide an audience as possible, rather than disappearing into deep vaults for selected historians to access decades hence.

The overall message is that while historical material can be tracked down, the exercise is time consuming, erratic, idiosyncratic and dysfunctional. It may or may not reveal the material that a reader or researcher needs, or the existence of it in one of many different archives. A systematic Web based approach to linking all relevant material may help reduce this deficit. Where material is sensitive or needs to be contained behind intranet firewalls, it would at least be helpful if its existence and general format was publicly referenced and known, even if access remains controlled.

A readily accessible, web based tool for the access of public source material (such as published books, journals, articles, and non-sensitive official material) would thus make the best use

of modern technology in the general and specific education of military doctors. Such a web tool might be a Defence resource; provided by a civilian or commercial agency, or even by a network of enthusiastic amateurs and volunteers, perhaps linked to a charitable or voluntary body such as the Military History Society.

A systematic approach to DMS Historiography

There is presently no systematic approach to corporate historiography. There are nevertheless a number of bodies who could accept responsibility for constructing a reference repository at modest cost, from within existing resources, and using existing technology. They include:

- The DMLS
- The AMS Museum, in conjunction with the RAF Museum and the National Museum of the Royal Navy
- External bodies, including the National Archive Service and the Imperial War Museum.
- Defence-wide bodies, using the new Corporate Memory Organisation and the web capabilities of the Defence Internet
- Private and charitable bodies, such as the Wellcome Foundation

Maintaining the history of the DMS is a command responsibility at all levels. Commanders can do much to encourage this process, through formal education within the training establishments and in Corps Doctrine, the creation and maintenance of an efficient structure or DMS Archive for collecting and disseminating operational knowledge and historiographical information and supporting and encouraging all members of the DMS to collate and deposit relevant material (words, static and moving imagery) with the DMS Archive

What to observe and record

The skills of observing, articulating observations and recording them should be second nature to medical professionals. In practice, there is a very wide range of aptitudes for observation and descriptive recollection in any organisation and society. The habits of the regular diarist provide a particularly valuable historical resource, and all individuals should be encouraged to keep some form of record of daily experiences to supplement fallible memory. It is often the seemingly trivial that provides the greatest interest and colour to the historical record, rather than the bald facts of events and campaigns.

Digital cameras are now ubiquitous and record imagery at negligible cost. Operational images fall into two broad categories: clinical photography and the remainder. We need a systematic approach to clinical imagery for the education of future generations of medics, and we must consider how best to collate the huge amount of material that has accumulated in personal and official collections in Operations TELIC and HERRICK, into a systematic educational and training framework.

Photographic images are easily transmitted to a central image repository (eg Flickr) as an email attachment or on CDs or memory sticks. A corporate non-clinical image depository with images appropriately labelled and referenced images, would rapidly achieve value as a reference resource of people, places and events.

The growth of YouTube has shown how easily multimedia imagery can be captured and disseminated, and indeed there is

a rich but fragmentary resource of military vignettes on YouTube and Google Video. We need to explore ways of drawing this ephemeral material into a corporate collection and archive.

However, the collation of historical material has a cost in time, effort and person-power. The trained human eye must observe the process, and ensure quality, structure and appropriateness (including security classification) of deposited material.

The storage, accessibility and durability of digital records

Digital storage offers remarkable functionality in the transmission, collation and presentation of multimedia resources, but it also has one profound limitation, which has not yet been subjected to the test of time. Whereas printed word and imagery can be assimilated directly by the human eye and brain, digital data requires software and hardware. Digital technology is susceptible to continuous change and rapid obsolescence, such that the storage media and software of one era may leave the would-be reader blind to content at a later date, if that specific technology is no longer available.

There is also the unquantifiable risk of data loss and erasure through deliberate action, accident or “act of god”. Paper and papyrus may burn, but they had survived as storage media for millennia. We have no idea whether digital data can survive a catastrophic event or process, which might include electronic wipe out by solar flare or nuclear radiation, viral malice or physical deterioration of the storage media, as is evidenced with compact discs over time. Thus, use of some form of non-digital representation (paper, microfiche) would seem sensible insurance for the most valuable corporate memories.

A useful intermediate format for record storage and presentation is that of the e-book. The individual e-book allows far greater storage of material and imagery, and the presentation of multimedia material which is not possible in a conventional book. E-books are cheap to produce and distribute en-masse. By formatting content professionally such that they can be printed out as a normal book, there is an excellent chance that the material will survive in one or more locations.

Conclusions

There is a requirement for a systematic DMS corporate strategy for collating and compiling the personal and unit records, miscellany and ephemera of operational experience into a readily retrievable, accessible and structured format before they are dispersed and lost from personal collections.

From this material, individuals or teams with historiographical interests and writing skills can be recruited, invited, directed and supported to compile and distribute a written account and narrative after each major operation and within a reasonable time frame.

The digital era provides considerable opportunities for a better corporate historiography than has been possible in recent decades, at minimal cost using existing resources.

A robust strategy within the DMS will help ensure that the rich experience of thousands of individuals condenses into digestible Collective Memory rather than evaporates into Collective Amnesia.

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