

Home Guard were ‘Lad’s Army’ not ‘Dad’s Army’

The National Archives’ digitisation pilot project reveals unexpected find

A pilot project to digitise WW2 Home Guard records, undertaken by The National Archives, has revealed that many Home Guard volunteers were too young to enlist in military service, rather than too old as previously thought.

The surprising find comes as The National Archives releases online for the first time, a selection of over 40,000 digitised Second World War Home Guard personnel records dating from 1940 to 1945.

The release is the culmination of a pilot project which aimed to explore new ways of transferring, preserving and making important records available in a digital format only, whereby the digital record rather than the paper documents, will become the official public record.

The Home Guard, initially known as the ‘Local Defence Volunteers’, was a defence organisation of the British Army during the Second World War. It consisted of around 4.5 million local volunteers otherwise ineligible for military service, usually owing to age or fitness.

The Home Guard were commonly thought to have comprised mostly of men who were too old to serve in military service, yet The National Archives pilot project has revealed that 50% of the records selected for the project, were of men under the age of 27, with 28% of the men aged 18 or younger.*

Although this revelation is a fascinating discovery from a historical perspective, as so many of the Home Guard volunteers were of such a young age, it means that around half of the records from the pilot cannot be released into the public domain, because for data protection reasons they are subject to a closure period of 100 years from date of birth**.

William Spencer, Principal Military Records Specialist at The National Archives, said: *“This surprising discovery, revealed by our pilot project, has destroyed the myth that Home Guard volunteers were primarily formed of those too old to serve in the military. Perception of the Home Guard may have been distorted over the years,*

perhaps influenced by the popular TV comedy 'Dad's Army', but now for the first time we have access to primary source material and a more realistic demographic analysis of the Home Guard has been revealed".

The Home Guard record series (WO409) contains the enrolment forms for armed service personnel, which were completed when men joined the Home Guard. These digital records typically contain information such as name, date and place of birth, address, date of enlistment, promotions, previous military service, and date on leaving service. The County of Durham was selected as a representative sample to digitise for this project, as it contains a number of different patterns of settlement; urban, rural, mining and coastal, and can therefore be considered a microcosm of the whole collection.

The files have been transcribed to allow the records to be searchable by key word, making this initiative a valuable resource to historians. The transcription will allow users to find and locate key information from these documents much more easily.

Few army service records between 1914 and 1920 exist, as many were destroyed by enemy bombing in the Second World War. Only about 40% survive and the condition of these can vary greatly with some being very badly damaged. Therefore these new Second World War records will shed light on the stories of soldiers who survived World War One but whose records from that conflict were destroyed, potentially filling in some gaps for family and military historians.

The Home Guard records can be downloaded from The National Archives website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

For media enquiries or to arrange an interview with William Spencer, contact The National Archives press office on 0208 392 5277.

Notes to Editors

*Statistics based upon ages of the Home Guard volunteers in the year 1940, the year the Home Guard was formed.

** Records containing personal data are closed for the lifetime of the individual. For Data Protection purposes a lifespan is assumed to be 100 years and the closure period is calculated from date of birth.

About the Home Guard

The Home Guard served as the last line of defence, manning anti-aircraft guns and other weaponry in order to protect Britain's coastlines and other strategic places such as airfields, factories and explosives stores, in case of invasion by the forces of Nazi Germany and their allies.

About the pilot project

The pilot project involved digitising the records from a complete county of the Home Guard series, one of the most popular collections within the Armed Forces personnel service records, to test whether digital records created from the paper originals can be authenticated and accessioned as the official record for long-term preservation.

The project is unique as the records will only be available online, with the original files remaining with the Ministry of Defence.

As the Home Guard records are a precursor to rest of the WW2 service records which cover 33km of shelving, The National Archives is unable to take custody of the originals. Preserving these records in digital format is the only way such a vast collection can ultimately be made available to the public.

Key files

Hereward Sprot WO 409/27/56/948

Lt Col Sprot had previously commanded the 6th Dragoon Guards, the 9th Durham, and was Colonel of 4th Durham Survey Regiment before enlisting in the Home Guard. Sprot was highly decorated, being awarded the 'Croix de Guerre' for his previous service in World War 1, and an OBE during his time in the Home Guard. He only served 1 year 130 days in the Home Guard before being discharged due to reaching the age limit. The file also contains a handwritten letter from Lt Col Sprot.

Richard Penny Thomson WO 409/27/56/987

2nd Lt Richard Thomson enlisted in the Home Guard on 15 August 1940 aged 29. He was awarded an MBE during his time with the Home Guard, under the command of Lt Col Sprot (see above). He served in the 16th Battalion of the Home Guard for 5 years and 140 days until the Home Guard was disbanded.

Henry Watson Johnson WO 409/27/72/92

Sergeant Johnson enlisted in the Home Guard on 3 June 1940 aged 53. The file contains his address and names his next of kin as his wife Elizabeth. On 7 October 1949 he received a Defence Medal for his role in the Home Guard. Sgt Johnson served 4 years and 18 days with the Home Guard before being discharged to join HM Forces aged 57.

Michael Chisholm WO 409/27/44/383

Sgt Chisholm had previously served with the volunteer regiment for 3 years before enlisting with the Home Guard. He signed up on the 22 May 1940 aged 45. He served 5 years 225 days and was discharged when the Home Guard was disbanded. He received a British Empire Medal.

About The National Archives

For the record, for good...The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK

government and England and Wales, we look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files.

Our 21st-century role is to collect and secure the future of the record, both digital and physical, to preserve it for generations to come, and to make it as accessible as possible. We do this by devising technological solutions to ensure the long-term survival of public records and working to widen access to our collection. The National Archives also advises on information management across government, publishes all UK legislation, manages Crown copyright and leads the archive sector. We work to promote and improve access to public sector information and its re-use.

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk