

In this article, based on an original paper prepared by Bridget Spiers when she was the archivist in the RM Museum, and with assistance from Roy Swales, Mark Bentinck and John Rawlinson, Alastair Donald provides an *aide memoire* to help unravel the complicated maze of register numbers that have identified Royal Marines other ranks since 1885. We do not normally number paragraphs in the Sheet Anchor, but in anticipation that this will become a useful tool for other researchers in the future, it will much assist them if they can refer to paragraph numbers when quoting from this article.

# ROYAL MARINES REGISTER NUMBERS

By Major Alastair Donald RM

## Introduction

1. The practice of allocating their number on the Divisional register to ranks was officially instituted on 1 July 1885. The Admiralty ordered 'that every person belonging to the Royal Marines, except Commissioned Officers, shall be described by a Register Number in conjunction with letters indicating the Division to which he belongs, instead of his Company and Division as heretofore'.

2. Until the registers were introduced a man was known by the number of his company and his name. The new numbering system was introduced retrospectively and allocated based on date of enlistment. In April 1885 'Sergeant David Fraser, 2 Co RMLI' became 'PO 1 Sergeant David Fraser, RMLI'; he had enlisted in 1843 and continued to serve at Portsmouth until 14th April 1885. Some 3214 men were already serving at Portsmouth and each was allocated a retrospective number, the situation was the same at the other divisions.

3. The letters indicating the Division to which a rank belonged are 'CH' indicating Chatham Division Royal Marine Light Infantry, 'PO' indicating Portsmouth Division Royal Marine Light Infantry, 'PLY' indicating Plymouth Division Royal Marine Light Infantry, and 'RMA' indicating Royal Marine Artillery.

## Amalgamation of the RMA and RMLI

4. The Royal Marine Artillery and Royal Marine Light Infantry were amalgamated on 22 June 1923. Portsmouth Division RMLI, located at Forton Barracks, Gosport, closed, and all ranks moved to the previous home of the RMA at Eastney Barracks, Southsea which became Portsmouth Division Royal Marines. The prefixes 'CH', 'PLY', and 'PO' were retained and the Corps title reverted to 'Royal Marines', as in 1802. The register number allocated to a rank entered at one of the divisions after the amalgamation simply 'followed on' the last number allocated before 22 June 1923, eg CH 12346 George Smith (RMLI), who say joined on 1 June 1923 was followed by CH 12347 William Brown (RM) who say joined on 1 July 1923. All numbers of up to five digits which follow the prefixes 'CH', 'PLY' or 'PO' indicate ranks entered in the Royal Marine Light Infantry (and subsequently Royal Marines) Divisions before October 1925, including in the cases of Chatham and Plymouth Divisions, former RMA men transferred on amalgamation.

5. All numbers of up to five digits which follow the prefix 'RMA' indicate ranks who had



entered in the Royal Marine Artillery before the amalgamation. On amalgamation RMA ranks were transferred to one of the new RM (formerly RMLI) divisions. RMA ranks transferring to Chatham and Plymouth Divisions were given new CH and PLY five-digit numbers but for those transferring to Portsmouth Division the number '2' was added to their old number, so RMA/17000 Thomas Greenslade (RMA) became PO/217000 Thomas Greenslade (RM). Thus the Portsmouth Division ranks with a six-digit register number beginning with 2 can be instantly identified as ex-RMA.

### Suffix 'S'

6. The suffix 'S' to any of the 'CH', PLY', 'PO' or 'RMA' numbers indicates a rank who entered one of these divisions for Short Service during World War I. In 1914 the short service register numbers began quite simply at Ply/1(S) (eg PLY 3287(S) C C Anderson.), Po/1(S) and Ch/1(S) and RMA/1(S)<sup>24</sup>

### Prefix 'RMB'

7. The prefix 'RMB' followed by a number of up to four figures [RMB 1 – RMB 3087]<sup>25</sup> indicates a rank who entered the Royal Naval School of Music between its foundation in 1903 and before October 1925 (see also para 13 below). This sequence of numbers was resumed again in August 1955, but from RMB 3400 to prevent any duplication (see also para 14 below).

### Prefix 'D'

8. The prefix 'Depot', followed by a number of up to three digits [Depot/1 – Depot/688], indicates a rank entered on the establishment of the Depot, Royal Marines Deal, between 1866 and 1931. Ranks would have originally had a Divisional number, ie with the prefix CH, PO or PLY, but on being accepted for the staff of the Depot, they were allocated a new register number; 'D' or 'Depot' followed by three digits<sup>26</sup>. The last number so allocated was in fact Depot/688, after which in 1925, in common with all other RN and RM numbers an 'X' was added (see para 11 below). In 1931 this practice was discontinued and the final number of these was Depot/X 45. Records were then transferred to Chatham, Portsmouth or Plymouth Divisions as appropriate and the next available register numbers were allocated.

9. During the 1914-18 War the prefix 'Deal', followed by numbers of up to four digits and the suffix 'S', were allocated to ranks enlisted for Short Service during World War I. These ranks served mostly in miscellaneous units of the Royal Naval Division. Numbers were allocated as follows:

RM Divisional Engineers RN Division D/1(S) to D1500(S)  
RM Divisional Train D/1501(S) to D/2762(S)  
RM Medical Unit D/3000(S) to D/4400(S)  
Ordnance Company RM Division D/4502(S) to D/4553(S)  
RN Divisional Engineers D/5000(S) to D/5599(S)

<sup>24</sup> In mid-September 1914 six hundred Army recruits were transferred to the RMLI; 200 men from the KOYLI went to Plymouth Division, and 200 from the Sherwood Foresters went to Portsmouth Division and another 200 from the Sherwood Foresters to Chatham Division. (LCpl Parker, who won the VC at Gallipoli was one of those transferred from the Sherwood Foresters) The 200 ex-KOYLI numbers started at Ply 12(S) and ended with Ply 211(S), Portsmouth Division's ex-Sherwood Foresters went from Po 31(S) to Po 230(S) and Chatham Division's from CH 1(S) to CH 200(S).

<sup>25</sup> ADM 159 records at TNA at Kew run only up to RMB 2718 but the attestation packs at the FAA Museum run up to RMB 3087.

<sup>26</sup> In fact the prefix 'D' on its own seems to have been rarely used. To distinguish between Depot staff and men who were borne on the books at Deal for pay and admin as in para 9 (eg RMLC, RND Engineers, RM Medical Unit), the 'system' seems to have been for the Depot staff to be recorded as Depot/123 and the latter as Deal/1234(S).



(The 'S' can be shown as either a suffix or a prefix for these numbers. It is also often shown in lower case.)

## **'Z' and 'H' Prefixes**

10. There are two other short service number series, H1 to H18 and Z/1 to Z/103. Both were catalogued at Hayes, before RM service papers were transferred to the National Archives, under 'Miscellaneous Units WW1' and were referred to as 'Belgian Units' but the papers have not been seen since; however at least one CWGC headstone has been seen with a 'Z' number.

## **Royal Marine Submarine Miners**

11. No special suffix or prefix exists for this unit, the majority of recruits were entered into the Chatham short service registers and each man issued the next CH (S) number that was available but the service register was annotated with the letters RMSM at the top. ADM159/211 contains partial register entries for numbers 3278-3345, this register is titled Special Home Coast Defence and the numbers have no suffixes or prefixes. Each man in this register appears to have then been issued with a PO (S) series number and their details are recorded fully in ADM159/208. They served with the RMSM.

## **Royal Marines Labour Corps (RMLC) and the Suffix 'N'**

12. Ranks enlisted in the No.1 (Home Service) Labour Company in 1916 were given Chatham register numbers in the series CH/14100(S) to CH/14343(S). Ranks enlisted or transferred to the RM Labour Corps, which was formed in 1917 (the RMLC Old Formation), were allocated numbers with the prefix 'Deal' and with a suffix 'S' in brackets in the series Deal/8000(S) to Deal/15955(S). Ranks enlisted in the post-war RM Labour Corps formed in 1919 (the RMLC New Formation) were allocated numbers with a 'Deal' prefix and the suffix 'N' in the series Deal/1(N) to Deal/1424(N).

## **Letter 'X'**

13. The letter 'X' was added to the prefixes to indicate men enlisted or re-entered under the revised rates of pay, ie entries or re-entries on and after 5th October 1925.<sup>27</sup> (A new sequence of numbers beginning at 1 was started in each register for ranks who re-entered after a break in service of less than five years before 2nd November, 1925.)

14. By the time the use of Divisional prefixes and Divisional registers was superseded in 1948 (see para 15 below), these sequences had reached four digits [CH/X 3285; PO/X 4393; PLY/X 4897]. In the Royal Marine Band Service the use of 'X' continued until August 1955 [RMB/X 1698], and then the old sequence of numbers was resumed, but from RMB 3400 to prevent any duplication.

## **Six Digit Numbers in WW2**

15. The prefixes 'CH/X', 'PLY/X', 'PO/X' and 'RMB/X' followed by numbers of six digits in the 100000 series, indicate ranks entered for 'Hostilities Only' (HO) Service during World War II, [CH/X 119200; PO/X 127790; PLY/X 117156].

## **Prefix 'EX'**

16. The prefix 'EX', followed by a number of three or four digits (EX 501 – EX 5909), indicates a special Reservist entered in the register of Exton 'Division' between October 1939 and July 1940.

## **Prefix 'RM'**

17. The Divisional system ceased in 1947 and the Corps was reorganized into Groups. In

<sup>27</sup> In Ladd's, *The Royal Marines 1919-1980* page 28, and *By Sea By Land* page 11 the year 1921 is incorrect



January 1948 the prefix 'RM', followed by a number of four and later five digits<sup>28</sup>, superseded the Chatham, Plymouth and Portsmouth suffixes. It indicates a rank entered on a Continuous or Short Service engagement between January 1948 and January 1973.

### **Prefix 'RME'**

18. The prefix 'RME', followed by a number, 300 to 8340 and the suffix 'S', indicates a rank of the Royal Marine Engineers entered for short service during World War I. This group of men was engaged on large scale construction and repair projects under the Admiralty Director of Works, principally to keep ports and harbors operating efficiently.

19. The 'RME' prefix, followed by a number of five digits, indicates a rank of the Royal Marine Engineers entered for HO service in World War II [RME 10001 – RME 17823].

### **Prefix 'AUX'**

20. The prefix 'AUX', followed by a number of up to four digits, indicates a rank of the Auxiliary Battalion formed at the beginning of World War II. Subsequently, these ranks were transferred to Plymouth and allocated numbers in the six-digit sequence [PLY/X 120001 – PLY/X 121382] (see para 13 above).

### **National Servicemen and the Royal Marines Reserve**

21. The 'RM' prefix, followed by a number of six digits, indicates a National Service man entered between January 1948 [RM 127791] and June 1952 [RM 133707].

22. In 1952 the Admiralty decided to institute a system to indicate whether or not a Reservist was a National Serviceman.

a. The prefix 'RMV' followed by a five digit number, indicates that a man became a Reservist either prior to carrying out National Service or after his National Service.

b. The prefix 'RMV9/', followed by a five digit number, indicates that a man was a Reservist during his part-time National Service.

23. On 1 July 1955, the additional prefix, was abolished, and all Reservists, whether serving on or discharged before that date, were allocated a new number with only the 'RMV' prefix. To prevent duplication, this new series had six digits beginning at RMV 200000.

24. On 1 October 1966 the name of the RM Forces Volunteer Reserve was changed to simply the RM Reserve and their register numbers were prefixed with 'RMR' instead of 'RMV'.

### **Computerised Records**

25. On 1 February 1973 RN & RM pay and records were centralized at HMS Centurion and computerised service numbers were introduced. All prefixes in use were replaced, and 'CH/X' became 'P00', 'PO/X' became 'R00', 'PLY/X' became 'S00', 'RM' became 'P0', and 'RMB' became Q0.

26. Later the prefix 'P' was adopted and, using a complicated formula and a suffix letter, new numbers were calculated for all other ranks. At about the same time numbers for officers were introduced (for pay purposes only) and their numbers were prefixed 'N'.

27. 1 November 2006 saw the demise of the 'N' (officers) and 'P' (other ranks) system and under Joint Personnel Administration the service numbers of personnel in all three services now universally start with the digit 3 followed by seven further digits.

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<sup>28</sup> The first so allocated in January 1948 was RM 6934.