



Deciphering a Second World War Service Record

1. General.

The Royal Marines Service Certificate (R138) can be the most complete document relating to the service of a Royal Marine. However, Second World War records can sometimes be extremely sparse. This is because they were accounting records created to track pay and gratuities, and were not meant as histories of service. However, some information may still be gained from them. Make sure to also have a look at the guide sheet on commonly found abbreviations in service records.

2. Divisions and Service Numbers

Men joining the Royal Marines were allocated to a Division, where generally they were trained and administered. They would return to their Division between service at sea or abroad.

Men were allocated service number. The prefixes "CH/X", "PLY/X", "PO/X" indicate men who were allocated to the Chatham, Plymouth or Portsmouth Divisions. If followed by a number in the 100000 series, these show men who enlisted for Short Service during the Second World War.

The prefix "EX" followed by a number of three or four figures indicates a special Reservist entered at Exton Division between October 1939 and July 1940. Men holding these numbers were then transferred to Chatham, Plymouth or Portsmouth and allocated a number in the six figure series.

Less common prefixes include the letters 'RME' for Royal Marine Engineers, and "RMB/X" for Royal Marine bandsmen.

Further information can be found on the Museum guide sheet relating to service numbers.

3. Administration

Men were administered by a Division, but may not have gone there. For example many Landing Craft personnel were administered by the Chatham Division Royal Marines but never went there. In addition to the Divisions the Home Base Ledger Office ('HBL') and HMS Copra (shown as COPRA on a service certificate – Combined Operations Pay and Records) indicate organisations that administered men in Commando Units and Landing Craft personnel respectively.

4. Ships, Establishments and units.

Ships are shown purely with the name. So if you see a word like 'Indomitable' that will refer to the Aircraft Carrier HMS Indomitable. Once you have a ship's name further information may be found in ship's logs held by the National Archives. Many of these are also now available on-line at www.naval-history.net.



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Many of these 'ships' will refer to Naval shore establishments eg 'Quebec' which was HMS Quebec, a Combined Operations Training Establishment in Scotland. A list of shore establishments is also available on the common abbreviations guide sheet.

For very many men in 1943 their record shows "RM Division" and this then changes to either "COPRA", which indicates they became landing craft crews, or "HBL RM Cdo" which shows they underwent special training, and joined Commando units.

The signature of a Commanding Officer may also provide a clue to the man's unit, though in many cases this has been filled in by administrative personnel.

5. Adding the context

The Service Record might also include other useful information. Unfortunately the section on medals awarded is often not completed. However if it is it does provide additional clues as to where a Marine might have served. The service record might not state that a Marine served in the Far East (though a ship's record might help) but an award of the Burma Star or Pacific Star would indicate that the Marine would have served in that theatre.

You may have the medals themselves. If not it is important to remember that for the Second World War Medals had to be claimed by the individual or next of kin, rather than being sent automatically. Often this wasn't done. If medals have not been claimed it is possible to claim them via the Ministry of Defence Medal Office.

A section on wounds and hurts is also included. Bear in mind that many wounds and hurts were for accidents and illness and not necessarily injuries sustained in combat.

The section on exams and qualifications passed can also give you an idea of what an individual did. They could be a clerk, driver, Coxswain, signaller etc

6. Useful further reference

Brooks, Richard and Little, Matthew, 2008. *Researching Your Royal Marines Ancestors*, Pen and Sword

Ministry of Information, 1944. *The Royal Marines. The Admiralty Account of their Achievement 1939-1943*, (HMSO, London)

Ladd, James, 1998, *By Sea, by Land: the Authorised History of the Royal Marines Commandos*, Harper Collins Publishing, London ISBN 0 00 472366 X

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