

Register

Obituaries

Roderick Suddaby

Outstanding curator of the Imperial War Museum who assembled one of the largest and most important collections of private papers

Roderick Suddaby (always known as Rod) was one of the outstanding museum curators of his generation. His entire career was spent in the Imperial War Museum and for 37 years he served as Keeper of the Department of Documents. In that role he personally assembled what is globally recognised as one of the largest and most important collections of private papers, ranging from those of ordinary citizens to the most senior soldiers. This newspaper recognised the importance of the collection and was instrumental in the deposit there of the whole of Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery's papers.

The Department rapidly became an essential resource for anyone carrying out research in the field and both aspiring and established authors (among them Malcolm Brown, Juliet Gardiner, Nigel Hamilton, Richard Holmes, Lyn Macdonald, Sebastian Faulks and Ian McEwan) regularly visited the IWM to consult the collections, but also to draw on Suddaby's great depth of personal knowledge, which he freely shared. It is difficult to find any books on the First or Second World Wars published in the past 40 years that do not list Suddaby's name in their acknowledgements.

He enjoyed a close relationship with all his donors. It was his ability to gain their confidence and friendship that persuaded so many veterans and their families to donate papers to the museum, where they would be both preserved and widely used.

He had a strong belief in precision, thoroughness and correct form, with *Debrett's* and other standard reference books never far from his reach. When one neophyte archivist complained that a senior admiral had addressed him in a letter as "Dear Smith" Suddaby politely explained that this was perfectly normal and that, if fortunate and

with further acquaintance, he might one day elicit the accolade of being addressed as "My Dear Smith".

It was this attention to detail, combined with an almost Stakhanovite belief in hard work and his enthusiasm to help no matter how seemingly trivial the inquiry, that were his trademarks. These traits he inherited from his father, who had worked for Boston Deep Sea Fisheries in Lowestoft, and after serving in the Army during the war (when he went from private to major in five years) had become managing director of the company's head office in Hull.

Roderick Suddaby was born in 1949 in Lowestoft and went to school at Eversley Preparatory School in Southwold and then to Uppingham. He then graduated in history at King's College London and was awarded a scholarship



Roderick Suddaby
He shared his knowledge freely with dozens of authors

to Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, where his MA thesis was on "The Auxiliary Patrol in 1914-15".

It was this depth of knowledge of naval history that took him to the Imperial War Museum in 1970 as a Research Assistant in the Department of Libraries and Archives. In 1972 this Department was split into two and Suddaby was appointed Acting Head of the new Department of Documents, formally becoming Keeper in 1974. His knowledge spanned all aspects of the collection, but he had particular interest in papers relating to the Royal and Merchant Navies and in material relating to Far East prisoners of war. It was the



Suddaby amassed material on Far East prisoners, seen returning home in 1945

latter, which is widely recognised as the best collection of personal records of prisoners and internees of the Japanese across the whole of the Far East, which became the focus of his work following his retirement in 2011. He encouraged former PoWs to believe that their stories were worthy of preservation in the national collection and did much to encourage research in this field.

Appointed as a Research Associate, he contributed greatly to the establishment of a new Department of Research to which he brought his unique knowledge of the museum's holdings.

He believed strongly in public service and his leadership of the department ensured that all of the staff contributed to the effective running of the research room and the Explore History centre which provides an initial access point to all collections areas. He was never happier than when he was personally providing the service in the Research Room, listening to the researchers' inquiries, asking the right questions to clarify their needs and then skilfully steering them towards the best material.

He was also a long-standing member of the Institute for Historical Research and played an important role in both the Army Records Society and Navy Records Society, particularly when encouraging publication of their respective editions of officers' personal papers.

For many years he was the mainstay of the museum cricket team, which played keenly fought matches against other museums. He was also a lifelong supporter of Hull City Football Club.

In July he was due to celebrate 40 years of marriage to Jenny, who, with his two sons, survives him.

Roderick Suddaby, curator, was born November 14, 1946. He died of cancer on June 26, 2013, aged 66

Air Vice-Marshal John Smith

Pilot who took part in the D-Day landings, flew into Singapore after the Japanese surrender and later served in Rhodesia and Cyprus

John Smith was one of those who, through eagerness to serve their country, were economical as to their true date of birth. He saw active service over Europe where he was part of the Air Spotting Pool for the D-Day landings and in the Pacific where he was one of the first into Singapore after the Japanese surrender.

He later played key roles in the oil lift associated with the Beira blockade of Rhodesia (as it then was) following the Ian Smith Unilateral Declaration of Independence, and in the aftermath of the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus. He flew a wide range of aircraft, from the naval Seafire to Canberras, Valiants and Victors. His final posting was as Air Officer Administration at Strike Command, High Wycombe.

Born in Uckfield, East Sussex, in 1924, John Edward Smith joined the RAF in November 1941 as an engineering trainee, but was soon selected for pilot training. A shortage of training capacity in the RAF resulted in his accepting Royal Naval flying training and subsequent assignment to the

Fleet Air Arm. After advanced training in Canada he converted to the Seafire at Henstridge, near Yeovil, home of the Fleet Air Arm. He then joined the newly formed 886 Squadron after carrier landing training in the Clyde.

In the Mediterranean he flew from HMS *Attacker* whose Seafires provided air cover for the Salerno landings. He was flying a reconnaissance sortie over Axis-held territory north of Orvieto using a requisitioned Italian light aircraft, when he was fired on by German air defences. Flying low and fast but otherwise unscathed, he and his observer returned to their forward operating base to report their discovery. At dawn next morning Smith led a formation of six heavily armed Seafires to attack that enemy airfield. After returning to the UK with his squadron for the D-Day landings he participated in extensive air sweeps and strafing of enemy positions and armament trains before rejoining *Attacker*.

When VJ was declared he was one of the first pilots to land in Singapore. He later recalled how those assigned to the

initial wave had been selected because they were young and had no children — reflecting fear that the Japanese might have booby-trapped the runway.

After rejoining the RAF Smith flew Canberras at Binbrook and Gütersloh in Germany, becoming a qualified flying instructor, and was awarded the Air Force Cross. He then converted to the first of the V-Bombers, the Valiant. He was Officer Commanding 90 Squadron at RAF Honington specialising in

There were fears the Japanese had booby-trapped the runway

air-to-air refueling when fatigue problems resulted in all Valiants being withdrawn from service in 1964. He then became officer commanding of a squadron of Victors, also in the tanker role.

He was on a course at RAF Manby when he was deployed with only hours notice to Zambia where he played a major role in the oil airlift. He was next

posted in 1966 to Singapore as Wing Commander (Organisation) at the headquarters of the Far Eastern Air Force where he was promoted to become Group Captain (Org). The organisational skills for which he was so highly regarded ensured the smooth run down of bases in Malaya.

Despite his seniority, he managed to clock up a remarkable number of flying hours by virtue of having retained his qualification as a flying instructor. This continued throughout his next posting when he was appointed as Station Commander of RAF Marham in 1970. He claimed an unofficial record for the number of flying hours achieved by a senior commander. In 1974 he was posted as Air Officer Administration, Headquarters Near East Air Force (NEAF), in Cyprus, to meet the challenges created by the Turkish invasion.

He was always at the heart of mess life. His prowess in mess rugby was legendary. At a guest night in Akrotiri, it was "Big John" who emerged bloody but unbowed from beneath a pile of bodies. He was promptly taken on one

side by the Commander British Forces Near East and banned from further participation since he was far too valuable to risk having him damaged. When his flying career was over he sought treatment for a war wound in one ankle that he had been self-treating. He had got away with it all those years by never removing his socks during medicals.

After a short spell as Director of Recruiting in 1977, he was promoted to air vice-marshal and appointed as Air Officer Administration at HQ Strike Command in High Wycombe.

In retirement after 1981 he moved to Milton Keynes, where he administered a small woodworking company that, among other things, produced bespoke wooden propellers for vintage aircraft.

He is survived by his wife, Rose-Anne, a former Wren and by four sons and two daughters. His eldest son predeceased him.

Air Vice-Marshal John Smith, CB, CBE, AFC, AOA Strike Command, 1977-81, was born on June 8, 1924. He died on June 22, 2013, aged 89