

## 200 Years of Navy Library Support

WASHINGTON (NNS) – One of the oldest federal government libraries, and one of the few major military historical libraries open to the public, the Navy Department Library serves an international audience and provides resources vital to the writing and publishing of naval history, as well as information relating to the needs of today's Navy.

“Tourists come and go in Washington. They pass the Navy library by. They do not know that they miss the most interesting library in the United States.”

These words appeared 100 years ago in a New York Herald feature article about the Navy Department Library under the headline "The Navy's Century Old Hall of Fame." Many historians and researchers of today would say these words still ring true.

Founded under the direction of President John Adams in 1800, the library was originally established to be a personal library for the Secretary of the Navy, explained Glenn Helm, director of the Navy Department Library.

“Its focus then was to be a source of information on admiral biographies, operational history and all elements of seamanship that were of naval application – basically it was created to be a professional library for the Navy at the highest level,” said Helm.

Today, the Navy Library is the nation's most highly concentrated and accessible collection of literature on the United States Navy, housing more than 170,000 books, more than 343,000 manuscripts, and thousands of periodicals and government documents. The vast collection consists of naval history, nautical history, military history and relevant political history.

Many of the library's books cannot be found anywhere else in the world, said Helm, who explained the cataloging of the books is done using an international data base.

“Thirteen and half percent of everything that we have cataloged has never been cataloged anywhere else on earth, which is a pretty significant amount of material that is unique to this library,” Helm added.

With more than 50 percent of the library's holdings being unique, when compared against the Naval War College, Naval Post Graduate School and the Naval Academy, researchers and others engaged in naval work or research can find complete references on almost any subject.

“A very high percentage of our collection is unique in that other naval libraries do not have copies, so this is likely to be the place where people come to do their research,” said Helm.

With the responsibility for housing such unique and rare collections, comes the very real concern for keeping the collections safe, not from thieves, but from the environment.

With works dating back to the 1400s, climate control is a key factor in determining how to work with and store various pieces of the library collection, explained Davis Elliott, technical information specialist for the library.

“The collection needs to be protected from light, both natural and artificial,” Elliott said. “The library staff is continuously working on the collection to prevent its deterioration by using

archival materials to house the most fragile materials and by doing simple mending jobs to prolong the life of some of the items.”

Elliott said the staff also pays close attention to temperatures, humidity fluctuations and rough treatment from the users.

To maintain the right conditions, many materials are kept in a secure vault or inside archival boxes that are acid free, explained Allen Knechtmann, senior reference librarian for the library.

When researchers request the older and more fragile materials, the library staff is more than willing to accommodate their request as long as patrons follow the rules.

“We will bring out the materials and let them look at them in our reference room,” said Knechtmann. “We also have them use digital cameras when making copies because most of the materials cannot handle the light from the scanners. With regard to certain rare materials, we provide reverence copies for patrons to use so they won’t actually be handling the actual document; they will be handling a replica.”

The library does participate in the interlibrary loan program which transfers items to other libraries, however, items over 100 years old, or in fragile condition are not available to be loaned out.

The library’s stock continues to grow every year with individual making gifts or donations – cruise books, old photographs, welcome aboard brochures, plans of the day, shipboard newsletters and commissioning and decommissioning programs are only a few of the items most recently received by the library.

“We collect these things so that when you’re old and grey or you’ve passed on and your descendents want to know things about what ships you served on or what deployments you were on, they can come to find the information,” said Helm.

Although a small staff, librarians and their assistants will go to great lengths to suggest possible sources of information, such as a book or archival facility, to assist patrons. All detailed questions requiring in-depth research or assistance must be done in person at the library.

“The most satisfying moment of my professional time here was when I had a researcher who was researching the invasion of North Africa in WWII,” Helm said. “He went on to write his book, “An Army at Dawn” by Rick Atkinson and that book won the Pulitzer Prize in history; if you go into the books acknowledgements, I’m in them.”

Elliott added that the work he does is fulfilling and he enjoys the diversity of the books and the patrons.

“My favorite thing about my job is the multi-tasking assignments in which I get to experience,” he said. “I have contact with a wide variety of materials, old manuscripts to newly published books, and patrons that range in all ages and experiences from school age to World War II veterans.”

Helms, Elliott, and other staffers feel it is an honor and privilege to help maintain and care for the library's collection and to ensure history is preserved and passed on to future generations.

"We really do care about our collections. This is valuable naval property; it's irreplaceable, once it's gone it's gone forever," said Helms.

For more than 200 years, the Navy Department Library has met many challenges in its history, including everything from the threat of destruction during the War of 1812 to being moved to various locations over the years. Through it all, the caretakers of this veritable treasure trove of history has continued to make every effort to ensure its safety.

Looking to the future, Helms said they will continue to seek creative and innovative approaches, to care and maintain its unique collection of books, utilizing new technology to not only provide improved reference services, but also to protect and preserve the history housed upon its shelves.