

Describable Item Cataloging¹

By SHERROD EAST

*Departmental Records Branch
The Adjutant General's Office
Department of the Army*

THE first objective of any records depository, whatever its type or however it is administered, must be adequate control (both intellectual and physical) of its record holdings. The more difficult technical or professional problems that the depository must solve, whether in accessioning, arrangement and description, disposition, or reference service, relate in one way or another to the establishment of such controls. Specific purposes and techniques of control may of course vary widely according to the needs and the purpose of a particular records establishment. The specialized technique of records control described below has come to be called describable item cataloging; and its primary purpose, although it serves several, is to facilitate reference exploitation of large accumulations of records of diverse origin organized by record groups, each generally comprising numerous separately created and separately organized file series.

This system of cataloging has evolved in the Departmental Records Branch of the Adjutant General's Office, over a period of 5 years. The writer presented the idea first to the Interagency Records Administration Conference in June of 1948 in a paper entitled "Describable Item Indexing." The inspiration for this effort to develop a new and specialized cataloging system stemmed directly from a paper read by Fritz Morstein Marx of the Bureau of the Budget before the Society of American Archivists at its 1946 annual meeting. Although records management was even then "a specialization of recognized standing," it could not, Mr. Marx pointed out, "cease to exert itself in the elaboration and refinement of its working methods."

Coherence in administration can be achieved only when there is sufficiently frequent resort to the record of operations and the reasoning underneath those

¹ The term "describable item" as used in the archival sense is not of recent origin. It was used by Dallas D. Irvine of the National Archives as much as a decade ago to refer to components of a record group or subgroup that warranted, or were susceptible of, separate description as units.

decisions that govern policy. Record officers are called upon to furnish a reference service to line and staff officials comparable to that rendered the scholar by the library. Development of such reference service will further raise the sights of record management.

As modern administration is necessarily a complicated process, so record management is a complex and highly technical activity. Yet those in charge of records have an important part in helping the administrator attain the purposes of responsible management. Together with other staff services available to the government executive, record officers can help him to exercise his functions with insight and wisdom. They are the custodians of the evidence of the agency's thought and action.²

The challenge to develop a new cataloging system had its basis not only in problems immediately at hand, but in:

(1) Criticism by historians to the effect that our filing systems, while reasonably adequate for identifying specific transactions, nevertheless do not lend themselves to exploitation on a broad subject basis.³ (This is particularly true in complex organizational structures such as the Defense Establishment, where two or more military departments, and many elements of each, are concerned with policy formulation and implementation in the same field of activity, subject matter, or functional area.)

(2) Failure of new archivists and new archival establishments to produce the "proliferation" of catalogs, calendars, inventories, and indexes needed to exploit large collections of modern records.⁴

(3) The contention by some archivists that the techniques of the librarian for controlling the location and to some degree indicating the subject content of a book through the medium of a catalog card are not applicable to organized files or their components: the case, the dossier, the folder, or the document.⁵

(4) The successful use of cataloging techniques in work with records and manuscripts when such work is done on an individual document basis (generally, however, restricted to relatively small document or manuscript collections).⁶

² Fritz Morstein Marx, "The Role of Records in Administration," *American Archivist*, 10: 241-248 (July 1947).

³ E. g., the comments of Harry Yoshpe, unpublished, before the Society of American Archivists at its 1946 annual meeting.

⁴ Morris L. Radoff, "A Guide to Practical Calendaring," *American Archivist*, 11: 123-140 (Apr. 1948).

⁵ Cf. Herman Kahn, "Librarians and Archivists—Some Aspects of Their Partnership," *American Archivist*, 8: 243-251 (Oct. 1944).

⁶ Cf. Dorothy V. Martin, "Use of Cataloging Techniques in Work With Records and Manuscripts" (Historical Records Section, Departmental Records Branch, *Seminar Paper* No. 1), Apr. 11, 1949. This paper is a reproduction of a lecture presented at the fourth intensive training program in the preservation and administration of archives, offered by the American University in cooperation with the National Archives and the Maryland Hall of Records, and repeated before the Historical Records Section Seminar on Feb. 17, 1949.

REFERENCE PROBLEMS IN THE DEPARTMENTAL
RECORDS BRANCH

The reference service program of the Departmental Records Branch, involving thousands of inquiries each month, includes such major tasks as exploring the masses of records on broad subjects of research interest to the Defense Department's many staff and operating agencies; searching for specific documents needed by such agencies; providing photocopies, typewritten excerpts, or (rarely) factual summaries or interpretations of specific documents; consulting with researchers; and otherwise promoting the full and most effective utilization by the Defense Department of the military's recent past experience as revealed in the voluminous records accumulated during and after World War II — of the Army, the Air Force, the Office of the Secretary of Defense and associated joint boards and staffs, and related agencies. Services are rendered at the search rooms, by loans, by telephone consultation, in writing, or by photoduplication.

The records of the recent past, although already retired from the many current file rooms where they accumulated, have, of course, the widest variety of applications to current combat and noncombat problems. No period of the military establishment's long history is without at least some specific practical significance for the solution of current military problems. But it is in records of the intermediate period (corresponding to the concept of the intermediate records depository, i.e., intermediate between the current file room and the National Archives) that the Defense Department's use of its past experience becomes most profitable and most vital and can be achieved on the most extensive scale and with the greatest economy and efficiency.

The accomplishment of the reference service program of the Departmental Records Branch depends directly on the success of the depository's other programs: partly on the success of the accessions program in achieving the centralized concentration, orderly preservation, and physical protection of the records of the many defense agencies served by the depository; partly on the success of the analysis and description program in adequately identifying, organizing, and evaluating the many record groups, record series, and file items so that the pertinent ones can be found as economically, rapidly, and effectively as possible; and partly on the success of the disposal program in discarding useless material.

In addition, however, other difficulties need to be surmounted for effective reference service. Unfortunately, the researcher being

served by the Departmental Records Branch can only rarely supply an exact citation that provides an immediate locator identification of the file item needed; and only in these few cases is the depository's service to him an automatic, routine, and clerical process, as it usually is in handling administrative transaction cases. Research cases present different problems. Sometimes the inquirer provides a set of clues that may range in adequacy from the very general to the reasonably specific. Sometimes, especially if an important continuing research project is involved, the clues may emerge only after the researcher's own hypotheses and research objectives have developed through his general exploration of the published and unpublished records finding mediums. In rare cases, an inquirer may decline to supply enough clues to depository reference personnel because of unusual security restrictions on his objective or because of his intellectual habits of independent, unassisted research. Moreover, occasionally a potential user does not even know that there is a depository to which he may direct an inquiry. All of these problems require the best consultative assistance that the depository's reference personnel can muster and the most effective dissemination techniques that the depository can employ, all in order to bring the proper document promptly to the researcher and thus help the Defense Department apply the proper item of "past experience" at the right time and to the particular situation at hand.

The catalog is the medium through which our depository attempts to synthesize its intellectual controls for the benefit of our own staff and our clientele. It is the key to the records series in our custody as well as to all our finding aids, to our reference library, and in many cases to file items of exceptional significance. Individual skill and knowledge of the content and arrangement of particular file series can never be dispensed with, but the describable item catalog is as essential to this records depository as a catalog is to a library.

INSTALLATION OF THE CATALOG SYSTEM

Describable item cataloging was begun in the Departmental Records Branch late in 1947. Before that time its records holdings, aggregating more than 1,500 separately organized file series comprising 150,000 linear feet of records in some 3,000 distinct accessions, were controlled in accordance with accepted archival procedure; that is, by record groups designated to include the records created and/or retired by major offices, agencies, services, bureaus, and command headquarters. The procedure followed before the cataloging system was adopted was as follows:

(1) Accessions documents, including a formal records transfer agreement, containing general descriptions of the bodies of records transferred, were maintained and filed according to a job or transaction control system, which was keyed to the record group control by means of a register and hierarchically arranged job control cards, individually typed in one copy. (The records transfer agreements were prepared coincident with the receipt of records.)

(2) Series identification sheets, patterned after the initial series identification procedure of the National Archives, were prepared as soon after the receipt of records as possible, depending on the backlog of work and the availability of trained personnel. The series identifications also were controlled and filed by record group. They were prepared in order to help evaluate records for disposal and to supplement descriptive data on record holdings at the series level.

(3) The information contained in the records transfer agreements, supplemented by information contained on the series identification sheets, was assembled periodically in a mimeographed guide, which presented in orderly arrangement, by record group, the noncurrent record holdings of the depository as of a given date. This guide was indexed alphabetically by name of organizational unit and by subject matter. It was an accepted type of finding aid for listing record holdings. (One such guide, with both organizational and subject matter index, was prepared by the Departmental Records Branch, under the title "Noncurrent Record Holdings of the War Department Records Branch, Records Division, AGO, as of 1 January 1946." Two previous guides, similarly prepared but without subject indexes, were issued as of October 1, 1944, and July 1, 1945.)

With the introduction of the cataloging plan, steps 1 and 2 above were retained. Only step 3 was changed; the describable item catalog took the place of the mimeographed guide.

FORMAT AND REPRODUCTION OF CARDS

The format of the 5" x 8" item cards comprising the catalog follows that of the standard 3" x 5" card used in library cataloging (see Exhibits I and II, below). The line for the author or agency of origin entry is at least 7 spaces below the top margin of the master card to facilitate the typing of subject headings above it on the added entry cards. It is indented 18 spaces from the left edge of the card to provide space for the file symbols and location data, which appear in the upper left margin without crowding. The line for the title entry is indented 5 spaces to the right and is 2 spaces below the author or agency entry. If the item has a title, the description of the contents of the item begins on a line 2 spaces directly below the title. If the item has no title, as in the description of some file series or components of series, the description begins on the title line. The 5" x 8"

card affords up to 14 lines for descriptive material, including the entry. Six lines are reserved for subject cross-references. Normally, these begin 11 spaces above the bottom edge of the card and are indented in the same manner as the description or title of the item. It has been found that the average describable item when indexed has 6 or 7 cross-references, although some complicated items have as many as 14 or 15.

Before the development by Army personnel during World War II of the relatively inexpensive Army parchment-paper reproduction process (which has since become available commercially under a variety of trade names) reproduction costs for the number of cards necessary to "work" this cataloging system efficiently would have been prohibitive. With this process, however, any number of cards required, from 30 to 250, can be reproduced at a cost of about 8 cents each.

CROSS-REFERENCING — STANDARDIZED HEADINGS

As of this writing the Departmental Records Branch has identified 177 major record groups, and all its record holdings are attributable to one or another of them. The names of all organizational elements identified either in author or agency entries or in record item descriptions appear as "category 1" headings, referred to collectively as agency headings. "Category 2" comprises functional headings (see below). And, finally, "category 3," or special headings, includes the names of key individuals, both civilian and military; geographic, political, and administrative designations; code names, campaigns, and operational areas; items of materiel; and so forth.

The identification of the function ("category 2") as a major key word or phrase for use in analyzing, describing, utilizing, and evaluating records represents a generally accepted principle, now shared alike by current records administrators and archivists. Although the principle is thus generally accepted as a workable ideal, there are nevertheless problems inherent in using functional terms in day-to-day records operations. The most difficult part of cataloging has always been cross indexing, that is, supplying uniform headings. These headings must be at once both general and specific enough; as mutually exclusive as possible; historically authentic, that is, part of the general, accepted vocabulary of military operations in the particular period in the past when the records were created; and concise and easily understood. Of the three categories of headings the functional

type presents the greatest difficulties. Accordingly, an expansible "List of Functional Headings for Use in Accessioning, Indexing, and Reference Operations" (including over 300 items) has been issued as a master list of standardized functional headings for Branch-wide use.

Still another interesting aspect of the catalog is the definition for the user of the principal functional headings. Each of these headings, included in the "List of Functional Headings" referred to above, is defined and delimited, and the definition is reproduced on the main guide cards for that particular heading in the catalog (see Exhibit III).

Standardized headings, important though they are for bringing together the "forest of trees" for reference on a given broad subject, nevertheless represent only a fraction of the subject analysis and description of the series. Since each of the thousands of series has a unique subjective character, it is essential that it be adequately titled; that its purpose, character, subject content, and form be clearly perceived; that the resulting summary, whether in 10 words or 50, be self-evident to the layman; and that the particular filing system or classification structure governing the series be clearly understood by the analyst and properly conveyed to the reader.

To date this system of cataloging has been applied to all of the general series descriptions taken from records transfer agreements and series identification sheets; to several hundred printed and processed items in the reference collection of the General Reference Section; to the finding aids produced by the Branch over its 10-year period of operation; and to an undetermined number of file items or components of series, identified through day-to-day archival operations, that are considered worthy of cataloging separately from the series of which they are a part. This last category, the file item, is the most recent to be emphasized. There is now under way a concerted program to increase the number of selected file items cataloged as a byproduct of other work. Brief training sessions, all of which are productive of cataloged items, are being conducted weekly for small groups of employees to demonstrate how easily each employee can produce an item a day, incidental to his regular duties.

Thorough understanding of the purpose of the catalog on the part of all Departmental Records Branch employees and a willingness to contribute to its growth are essential to its development as a primary guide to the location of pertinent record groups, series, or cataloged file items among the record holdings of the depository.

ARRANGEMENT OF THE CATALOG

It was axiomatic that the catalog should have an overall dictionary arrangement. Cards for all categories of describable items—record groups, file series, and file items (as well as library type items not part of an organized record file)—could be fitted into an alphabetic scheme along with the much larger quantity of cards for subject cross-reference entries, that is, those with agency, functional, and special headings.

In order that all author or office-of-origin entry cards (master cards) representing components of a particular major record group would be filed as one block, it was decided that such cards would be arranged behind a center guide for that specific major record group in descending hierarchical order.

It was also decided to insert cross-references (*see* cards), filed alphabetically by names of *all* organizational entities identified either in author or agency entries or in record item descriptions, thus assuring that any organizational clue would be sufficient to guide the searcher to the block of item cards filed under the appropriate record group. In instances where there have been changes in organizational designation, as, for example, Army Air Forces, Army Ground Forces, and Services of Supply, *see* cards are inserted in their appropriate places in the alphabet to direct the searcher to Air Force, United States; Army Field Forces; and Army Service Forces, respectively.

Another device to facilitate research has been to introduce into the catalog the known facts with respect to the maintenance by one agency of the records of another (see Exhibit IV). As a further illustration: the Supreme Allied Commander's Secretariat of Allied Force Headquarters was found to have been the filing point for several high-level AFHQ agencies, including the immediate offices of the Supreme Allied Commander and the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander, the offices of the Chief of Staff and the Deputy Chief of Staff, the Inter-Service and Political Secretariat, and the Political and Economic Council. Cross-reference cards for each of these agencies refer the user to the catalog card describing the records of the Secretariat (which the Departmental Records Branch has on microfilm). This plan provides an easy approach to the complete group of cards representing the body of records attributable to any and all record groups, no matter how scant or out-of-date the organizational clue may be with which the searcher begins his search.

The arrangement of a portion of the catalog is illustrated below:

ALPHABETIC
GUIDES
(left position)ORGANIZATIONAL
GUIDES
(center position)SUBJECT
GUIDES
(right position)

A

[Block 1. This block covers "A to Adjutant General, Office of The." All subject titles and cross-references belonging to this block are filed alphabetically; the block also includes *see* cards which refer the searcher to the record group under which the record item desired may be found. (Alphabetic guides are always in the left position.)]

ADJUTANT GENERAL, OFFICE OF THE

[Block 2. This block covers the first major record group in the catalog. (This guide is in the center position.)

Guides for organizational components of the major record group are placed behind the center guide in descending hierarchical order.]

ADM

ADMINISTRATIVE AND STAFF
PERSONNEL, GENERAL

AFRICA

AI

AIR COMBAT OPERATIONS,
GENERAL

AIR-F

AIR COMBAT PERSONNEL,
GENERAL

[Block 3. This block covers index cards which appear in the catalog between Block 2 (described above) and Block 4 (described below). At present only three alphabet guides (ADM, AI, and AIR-F) are needed for adequate separation; additional alphabet guides will be inserted as needed. When a special subject warrants the insertion of a special guide, this is in right position; four such guides occur in Block 3, namely, Administrative and Staff Personnel, General; Africa; Air Combat Operations, General; and Air Combat Personnel, General.]

AIR FORCE, UNITED STATES,
HEADQUARTERS

[Block 4. This block covers the second major record group in the catalog. (Guide is in the center position.)

Guides for components of the major record group are placed behind the center guides as described in Block 2.]

ALPHABETIC
GUIDES
(left position)

ORGANIZATIONAL
GUIDES
(center position)

SUBJECT
GUIDES
(right position)

AIR-FR

AIR TRANSPORT PERSONNEL
AIR TRANSPORT SERVICES

AIR-W

AIRBORNE COMBAT
OPERATIONS, GENERAL
AIRBORNE PERSONNEL
AIRFIELD CONSTRUCTION
PERSONNEL
AIRFIELDS
AIRPLANE ASSEMBLIES
AIRPLANES, IN GENERAL

AIRPO

AL

ALJ

ALEUTIAN ISLANDS CAMPAIGN,
Jun 42-Aug 43

ALGERIA-FRENCH MOROCCO
CAMPAIGN, Nov 42

ALIEN EXCLUSION PROGRAM

[Block 5. Explanation of this block coincides with the explanations as given for Blocks 1 and 3 above. At present five alphabet guides (AIR-FR, AIR-W, AIRPO, AL, and ALJ) are needed, and 11 subject guides, as shown.]

ALLIED FORCE HEADQUARTERS

[Block 6. This block covers the third major record group in the catalog. (Guide is in the center position.)]

DISSEMINATING CATALOG CARDS ON REQUEST

Identical duplicate catalogs are located in each of the physically separated records sections of the Departmental Records Branch. In order that certain major users of the record holdings can be served even more effectively, promptly, and economically other identical catalogs have been established and are currently maintained in the office of the Air Force Records Administrator, in the Army's Historical Division, and in the Army War College. A

further, related service has been to make available smaller special sets of cards, on demand, for records bearing on a particular staff division, on a particular technical service, or on some other record-creating agency served by the depository. Recent examples are catalog cards on microfilmed operations reports, which are being disseminated to the specialized military service schools. These services will be continued and extended as needed and when feasible.

Extra copies of individually selected catalog cards are made available, on an item-by-item basis on request, to any authorized and interested user of the depository's record holdings. Thus, for example, a researcher may, in using the catalog in one of the Departmental Records Branch records sections, find an entry for a particular record series that is of general or continuing bibliographical interest to him in his research work. Such a user may ask for copies of such cards and, if appropriate and feasible, leave a standing order for new cards on a specific subject. This saves him time that would otherwise go into laborious longhand copying of data from the catalog; it also saves the time of depository personnel in serving him later from an exact catalog citation; and it may prevent errors arising from longhand copying of citations of particular series.

The catalog card number at the lower right hand corner of each card is cited in such requests. If the stock of any one card is near depletion, a rerun is requisitioned after coordination within the depository to ensure that any important revision of the entry has meanwhile been incorporated on the card.

To ensure that such cards will not at any time in the future be confused with the cards in the master sets of the catalog, each such "take-away" card is marked on the back with a rubber stamp:

Courtesy Copy of Duplicate Card, from Catalog of
Departmental Records Branch, TAGO.

CONCLUSION

The describable item catalog developed by the Departmental Records Branch provides intellectual control of record holdings in the manner best calculated to facilitate reference service. Its use for and relationship to other aspects of the depository's archival program must be treated separately, incidental to a discussion of those aspects.

In so far as is known this system of cataloging, which combines standard library indexing methods, archival techniques of records description, and modern methods of reproducing catalog cards, rep-

resents the most comprehensive attempt yet made to bridge the gap between the traditional calendar and ideal inventory of the archivist and the general catalog of the librarian.

For an intermediate records depository such as the Departmental Records Branch there remains the problem of when and how to cut off the catalog. Many cataloged series of records and their component file items will have outlived their usefulness and must be destroyed before the transfer of their permanently valuable companion series or items to the National Archives. Obsolete cards must be withdrawn from the master catalog. Furthermore there are strong arguments for the maintenance and transfer of permanent records to the Archives according to historical periods rather than on an arbitrary cutoff date. A "closed" catalog transferred to the National Archives coincident with the retirement of headquarters records of the military establishment for the World War II period (ca. 1939-47) should be of considerable value to scholars and historians of the future. Still another argument for a period cutoff arises from our recognition of the cataloging problem growing out of the differences in objectives, functions, and terminology, as between the periods of World War II and the "cold war." A solution to these problems may have to be found sooner than we think.

AGAW-H

102.06

A49-176

Assistant Secretary of the Army, Office of the.

Files of the Office of the Under Secretary of War (Army) (1941-March 1948), and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army (March 1948-1949), concerning industrial plant facilities and equipment in research and development of materiel, acquisition and disposition of real property, and the procurement of materials for production, pursuant to provisions of contract agreements negotiated by Defense Plant Corporation (of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation), consisting of correspondence, and contract and letter form agreements; arranged alphabetically by name of contractor, or short title abbreviation thereof, into two separate series, i.e., "approved" and "canceled." Security classified and unclassified material included. 63 linear feet.

1a. Agency of origin. 1b. Under Secretary of the Army. 2a. Plant Facilities, Industrial. 2b. Research and Development, Materiel. 2c. Industrial Equipment. 2d. Materials for Production. 2e. Corporate Name Files.



50-814

EXHIBIT I. Example of series catalog card.

AGAW-A
400.
A52-205

Wiley, Bell I., Maj.

"Redeployment Training." (AGF Historical Section *Study* No. 38.) 1946. [iii], 21 pages. Lithoprinted. Restricted. An analysis of AGF *Training Memorandum* No. 1, 1 June 1945, and an account of the difficulties encountered (principally overseas) in putting into effect the redeployment training prescribed by that memorandum.

A revision of this *study* has been published in Department of the Army, Historical Division, United States Army in World War II: The Army Ground Forces, The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops (Washington, 1948), pages 619-647.

In Records of the Office of the Chief, Army Field Forces (RG 400), AGF Central Files, 314.7.

1a. Author. 1b. Army Ground Forces Headquarters. Historical Section. 2a. Troop Units: Training. 2b. Troop Units: Movement and Deployment. 2c. Education Services to Troops. 2d. Recreational Services. 2e. Military Personnel: Management. 3. Title.

53-1233



EXHIBIT II. Example of "file item" catalog card.

Construction of Command
Facilities, General

Construction of Command Facilities, General

"Command" facilities are those at military posts, camps, and stations, in contrast to "industrial" facilities, which are government-owned, contractor-operated plants and other facilities for the production (and sometimes repair) of war materiel. For industrial facilities, see "Plant Facilities, Industrial," (M-5). See also specific type of facilities, F-5 ff.

Replaces former DRB headings in whole or in part: Some "Construction" subheadings, such as "Contracts," "Projects," "Reports," "Studies," "Contracts-Construction," "Facilities-Specifications."

F-1

49-122



EXHIBIT III. Main guide card: example of definition of functional heading.

AGAW-J

940

Allied Force Headquarters. Central Mediterranean Coordinating Committee.

Such of the committee's records as were preserved appear to have been included with the records of the Petroleum Section, AFHQ, *q.v.* This committee was one of two formed in January 1946 "to ensure the smooth hand-over of Petroleum Section's responsibilities" upon the inactivation of that Section. The other was the Combined Petroleum Committee.

- 1a. Agency. 1b. Allied Force Headquarters. Petroleum Section.
2. Petroleum Products.

O

53-994

EXHIBIT IV. Example of informational catalog card.

W. J. BARROW

Document Restorer

STATE LIBRARY BUILDING

RICHMOND 19, VA.