

# The Preservation of War Records at the Air Technical Service Command<sup>1</sup>

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THE Air Technical Service Command has accumulated documentary materials of considerable volume during the past five years of war and preparation for war. Within the past few months more attention has been directed to the organization and preservation of these records. Prior to this year the documents were preserved all right, in the simplest meaning of the word. Our offices just kept everything, with little or no discrimination between papers which were of permanent value and those of transitory or no value. We now face the problem of destroying at least four-fifths of our papers in order to be able to organize the remaining 20% for permanent preservation. This is indeed a problem at a time when available help is becoming scarce.

Perhaps a word is in order concerning the nature of our activities at Wright Field and the type of documents that are produced in the course of the performance of the functions of the Command. The ATSC and its predecessor agencies since 1926 have been responsible for the experimental development, procurement, supply, and maintenance of all Army Air Forces materiel. The word materiel is the only one that needs emphasis in that one sentence statement of functions. There is no way in which I can adequately emphasize the meaning of materiel without going into a series of illustrations and this is not the place for a technical discussion. Sufficient to say that the phrase AAF materiel includes every airplane and almost every article of equipment used by the AAF and most of that which went on lend-lease.

Our people did four things in connection with this materiel. First they supervised much of the experimental development necessary in

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Indianapolis, Indiana, November 6, 1945.

its design. The records of our Experimental Engineering Division are well kept and they are not too voluminous for use. They are perhaps the most valuable records we have from the viewpoint of the future of Air Corps development, and perhaps also from the viewpoint of the Historian. Permanent memorandum reports prepared at the end of each experimental project describe in detail its development, regardless of whether it was a successful or an unsuccessful experiment. Of course it is important to preserve the records of the unsuccessful projects in order to offer some warning against the repetition of these failures by each successive generation in our laboratories. These memorandum reports and much of the correspondence connected with the experiments are well preserved and readily available in a form easy to read.

The second function of Wright Field was to supervise the procurement of AAF materiel, that is, to buy the airplanes and the equipment. The documentary files of our Procurement Division are indispensable in the determination of all contractual claims and for reference purposes in case of litigation. Such contractual records are of course preserved with great care and are readily available in case of inquiry on any individual contract. The volume of this contractual file is tremendous. The Historian engaged in research on trends in procurement policies can hope to use this central file only on a sampling basis. The Procurement Division is of course subdivided into sections, branches and units. It is often possible to use unit files far more effectively than central contract files if the research student is interested in a particular type of procurement or a long term trend or policy in procurement practice. These files of lower echelons have therefore been very useful to research Historians during the past three years. These unit files are usually made up of carbon copies of documents which also exist in the central files and it is probable that the unit files will disappear in the post-war consolidation of activities and destruction of duplicate files.

The third function of ATSC has been to organize the supply activities of the AAF. This means that the Supply Division had to arrange means of receiving the materiel from the manufacturer and distributing it to the using activity. Most of the actual work of delivering airplanes and equipment to the theatres was done by the Air Transport Command, the Ferrying Command, and other agencies, but the ATSC had to plan the flow of materiel so as to provide coordinated supply to world-wide activities. The difficulties involved become apparent when consideration is given to the problems of procurement and distribution of spare parts for every model of all airplanes wherever the planes were being used. The records of the Supply Division consist largely of statistical reports on stock balances of articles in each storage depot or echelon.

A single copy of one report printed on thin paper might well be weighed in pounds rather than ounces. Very early in the war, arrangements had to be made for the automatic destruction of most copies of such reports as soon as they ceased to be current. This practice of destroying obsolete multiple copies of reports was generally followed at ATSC. The basic rule is that the office of origin is responsible for keeping one archival copy of each report issued. It is probable that reports which were issued in large editions are the only documents that have been inadvertently lost to any great extent at our Command. When there are many copies of a report, it is easy for everyone to assume that someone else is keeping the archival copy and for no copy to be kept, in some cases during the pressure of war-time activity. It is possible that no one will ever have occasion to use a missing number of an obsolete supply balance report but the present practice is to attempt to determine the value of obsolete reports and to save or destroy them by positive action rather than by acts of omission.

The fourth function of ATSC has been to plan and supervise the maintenance of AAF materiel. Those of you who have been interested in such developments know that it is now evident that several of the nations can build good airplanes and aeronautical equipment. Many nations can buy and thus possess good materiel. But relatively few nations have successfully met the problems of maintenance. Inadequate maintenance results in high cost in terms of lifetime flying hours of any type of aeronautical equipment. Good maintenance contributes more flying hours to the Air Force than would be provided by the new production of all the factories of a great nation. There are many reasons for the exceptional maintenance standards developed in the Army Air Forces. The Maintenance Division of ATSC does not claim all the credit for this accomplishment, but Wright Field does preserve the documentary records showing the techniques by which these standards were developed. These records are relatively simple to organize, are accessible for use, and their preservation will probably present relatively few problems. The work of the Maintenance Division is closely allied to that of the Experimental Engineering Division and it is not surprising to find that the records of those two divisions are similar in presenting fewer disturbing problems. The records of the Procurement and Supply Divisions, because of volume alone, would present problems in any archives.

Within the past few months the ATSC has attacked with some vigor the problem of proper organization and preservation of its records. The first step was to realize that at least 80% of our files should be destroyed, and steps have been taken to dispose of these papers. It is

well known that the Army makes five copies of everything and no organization could or should maintain archives to hold the volume of material that has accumulated. The Historical Office regrets but recognizes the necessity of reduction in archives. During the past two years it has been convenient to do research in the files of a specialized unit of low echelon in a division and to find in those files coordinated carbon copies of letters written by all other related units dealing with a particular project. As these unit files are discontinued during post-war consolidation the central files of the Command will tend to become the sole depository for archives. The period of transition is not going to be pleasant for the research worker or the archivist. It may be a long period and the end product will not be Utopian, but progress is being made toward reorganization of the files.

The ATSC has recently gone into the microfilming field with enough enthusiasm and excellent equipment to compensate for former neglect of this device. The Adjutant's Office is microfilming bulky files, the primary objective being ease of storage. It is recognized that microfilming offers definite advantages but it may also have disadvantages. A realist must recognize that the War Department is not likely to be able to reprint all of these films when they begin to deteriorate. Microfilming is excellent for documents that must be preserved only because of the rare chance that one may be needed in a patent suit within the next twenty-five years. But I suspect we are also microfilming and then destroying some documents that the historian of the Twenty-second century would like to see. Fortunately the most important documents from the viewpoint of future experimental developments are the less voluminous files of the Engineering and Maintenance Division which are being preserved intact.

### MICRO-DOTS

The German invention of a new photographic emulsion which permits the concealment of the micro-copy of a full-length letter beneath what appears to be an innocent period in a commonplace typewritten communication, is described by J. Edgar Hoover in the April, 1946 issue of *Reader's Digest*<sup>1</sup> under the title, "The Enemy's Masterpiece of Espionage." The significance of this to archivists is that, once the process has been commercialized, they will no longer be limited to a 30 to 1 reduction, but will be able to micro-copy records, such as large maps, of any size. It will also be possible to effect a further reduction of the bulk of records by using 16mm. film where now they are using 35mm.

<sup>1</sup> p. 1.