

## Military History and Army Records

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**T**HE writing of military history depends upon the preservation of the record of military activities. Preserved in various archives, libraries, and other depositories, that record enables historians today to reconstruct the military history of bygone centuries. Through accident, neglect, or even design on the part of those entrusted with it, part of the record of the past has been lost forever. In our own time, no less than in centuries past, preservation is a very real problem. At one time or another in his career, every officer is likely to face it. Simply stated, it is one of preserving the current record that will be of greatest use and value in the future without flooding repositories with an unmanageable volume of paper.

### *Army Records Management*

In many respects the writing of contemporary military history depends on the good judgment of numerous civilian and military action officers, secretaries, clerks, records managers, and administrators. An extremely small portion of the approximately one million linear feet of records created annually by the Army survives as part of the permanent historical record. Most records are destroyed by agency or command records managers and others shortly after they are created and their temporary value has ended. Those remaining are retired to federal records centers. Screened in accordance with predetermined retention and destruction schedules, some of these are destroyed periodically. Very few finally reach the National Archives, and from these the history of the Army in our own time must be written.

Good records management helps create future archives, and adequate documentation makes possible the preparation of good history. Effective management during the entire life-span of

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Army records is a prerequisite for the preservation of future military archives and the preparation of future histories. Throughout the Army, from the small unit to the departmental level, records clerks, action officers, records managers, and official historians, serve as custodians of the Army's actions and thoughts, keepers of the institutional memory. Only through the guidance and work of records managers, with the cooperation of civilian and military personnel alike, will Army records of historical value eventually enter the archives to become available to future historians.

Good records management is the product of experience and professional training. Although military officers and records managers are introduced to the historical importance of Army records in their respective schools and training programs, this introduction is fleeting. Many officers and civilians, including records managers, never acquire a keen historical sense. Determining which documents should be saved and which can be destroyed requires an appreciation of the place of history within the Army. Professional training, orientation, and experience should imbue historians with this appreciation. Army officers, usually lacking the historian's special training, still need to recognize the historical value and potential scholarly uses of the documents that pass through their hands.

Recognition of the historical significance of the many documents created during World War II helped spur the creation of a formal records management program. The Army had to arrange and dispose of a mass of unorganized and unevaluated documents, so that those of historical significance would be retained for future reference. Army historians, in particular, were interested in records necessary for official histories of World War II and pressed for a systematic program of collection and preservation. The result of this general concern was the establishment in 1943 of the War Department Records Branch of the Adjutant General's Office. Redesignated the Departmental Records Branch (DRB) in 1947, it became a custodial facility for the Army's World War II records. Until these documents were transferred to the National Archives as permanent records, they were maintained at the branch where they were screened and arranged in proper order. In compiling inventories, indexes, and other finding aids, the records managers in the branch became thoroughly familiar with the documents. Their knowledge was invaluable to the historians who prepared the volumes in the U.S. Army in World War II series.

Although successful in organizing and preserving a volumi-

nous quantity of Army documents, records managers realized that many of their difficulties stemmed from fundamental weaknesses in the Army's system of creating and maintaining records. Records keeping in the Army had undergone little change since the introduction in 1914 of the War Department decimal filing system and its scheme of subject files. Using this system, Army file clerks often exercised considerable latitude in selecting documents to retain and files in which to place them. As the staff of the DRB discovered, the separate Army bureaus and various agencies, offices, and divisions of the Army staff rarely followed common standards of records management. The branch staff had to review thousands of documents item-by-item to separate unimportant from important ones. At the same time, latitude enjoyed by Army clerks allowed considerable duplication. Historians happily discovered that files maintained in certain agencies were more comprehensive than similar files in the custody of the DRB.

Hoping to prevent the recurrence of these difficulties, records managers began planning a new, Army-wide system soon after the end of World War II. To avoid reviewing documents and files in an intermediate records repository like the DRB required a system for predetermining the value of every Army file, one segregating temporary from permanent records at the time files were created. Permanent records would then go directly from the agency creating them to a records repository, and the entire records retirement program would become decentralized and streamlined.

After reviewing over two thousand different subject files then being used in the Army and considering the legal, administrative, fiscal, and historical value of the documents involved, records managers devised standards to determine the disposition of each file. Instead of incorporating these features into the existing system, however, records managers decided to create an entirely new system. In this new filing system, files defined by the function or mission they served in the unit or agency creating and maintaining them replaced subject files. A new records management program, the Army Functional Filing System (TAFFS), incorporating decentralized records keeping and retirement, was introduced throughout the Army between 1959 and the end of 1962.

The functional system has not completely lived up to expectations. Surveys of Army records as recently as 1975 show that some Army staff agencies still fail to use the system properly. Lengthy and sometimes confusing regulations some-

times cause difficulties, and subject filing and the use of the War Department decimal filing system continue. Historians and action officers, in particular, find subject files more convenient. A general lack of confidence in the system contributes to acquisition and retention of documents for reference and working files, a practice that causes duplication and delays the retirement of important records. And without familiarity gained by working with the documents, records managers frequently do not appreciate the historical value of many documents and files routinely shredded or burned. Particularly susceptible to destruction are informal files of working papers, background files, and personal working files that rarely enter the records retirement system. Decentralized records keeping, which in essence makes every action officer in the Army his or her own records clerk, continues to encourage highly individual approaches to the job without assuring that important records will be retained for historical reference.

### *Vietnam Records*

Army historians recognized that problems continued even after adoption of functional filing, but intensified combat operations in South Vietnam beginning in 1965 caused real alarm. Anticipating once again the need for adequate documentation to prepare official histories, historians discovered that the Army records management program was falling short of its promise and potential.

Even during peacetime the Army's records program suffered from a shortage of experienced and trained managers. And records personnel assigned to units in combat sometimes lacked even basic training in records management. Uncertain about the functional system, entertaining only vague ideas about what constituted historical records, and with short tours limiting experience, records clerks and administrators in Vietnam often found their task complicated, unrewarding, and occasionally overwhelming. Moreover, because of the vicissitudes of combat or the lack of guidance, many records were never created while others were prematurely destroyed. Unit records tended to suffer most as professionally trained records managers generally were assigned only to major command headquarters. It was difficult for them to visit remote, highly mobile units engaged in combat; such units usually did without professional guidance on records keeping.

Historians were especially concerned about basic sources of

combat history: the daily journal and the supporting documents constituting the journal file, as well as other planning, intelligence, and operational records. These records provide the gist for future histories; units that leave behind poor records or none at all receive little notice by historians. More importantly, such documents help evaluate and modify the Army's doctrine, tactics, and training.

Military historians serving with units in Vietnam and working with records managers made special efforts to see that combat records and other significant documents were prepared and entered the Army's records retirement system. Instructions to Army field historians from higher headquarters gave first priority to "developing and maintaining general awareness of the necessity for creation and preservation of accurate comprehensive records."<sup>1</sup> By monitoring the records program within the units he served, the field historian helped assure that sources required by historians were being created and retired; he often salvaged documents that might otherwise have been destroyed or lost. Provisions were made to acquire records of activities such as the pacification and advisory programs for which the functional filing system provided inadequate guidance.

That such extraordinary efforts were required by field historians contributed to The Adjutant General in 1968 suspending authority to destroy any records created by Army units in South Vietnam. Starting in that year, all records from the combat zone were retired as permanent regardless of previous functional filing designation. To facilitate use by Army historians, records were returned to the United States quickly. Many records from Vietnam, however, remain to be screened, evaluated, reorganized, and disposed of by Army records managers, a situation somewhat similar to that after World War II.

### *Headquarters Files*

Combat naturally makes difficult the creation and preservation of records, yet even at larger, more stable headquarters to the rear of the combat zone, including Department of Army headquarters itself, records are susceptible to unnecessary destruction. Pressures of economy, space, and time continually jeopardize historically valuable staff documents. The tempta-

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1. Hqs., U.S. Army Vietnam, USARV Reg 870-1, 28 Dec 1966. See Chapter 13 for additional discussion of military historians in the field.

tion to destroy records is very real at every level. In their zeal to win the "battle of the bulk," records managers and staff officers easily lose sight of the historical value of records, and destruction is easier than preservation with its time-consuming administrative tasks.

At all large headquarters, whether during peace or war, a chronic problem is the creation and unwarranted destruction of uncontrolled personal working papers or action officer files. Records managers have been slow to recognize that these files often contain documents of historical significance. Such documents, drawn from a variety of sources and usually related to a single subject, action, or case, help historians understand the how and why of major actions, decisions, and policies. They often make the difference between good and bad history and, in some respects, are as crucial as the basic sources for combat histories. Officers sometimes consider working papers personal property and destroy them upon reassignment, retirement, or completion of a particular action. Sometimes they are passed to a successor, but the files rarely are brought to the attention of the records manager or historian.

There probably is no simple solution to the problem of preserving action officer files. The functional filing system itself is ambivalent regarding their official status, and records managers have yet to devise a system to keep them intact. Conscientious application of the functional system contributes in part to the destruction of these files when agency records managers remove historically significant documents from the files because they are not considered records material or because they originate from another agency or office. Army historians occasionally resort to a variety of informal practices to compensate for this neglect. They often personally gain access to or acquire certain files pertaining to their current work. After crises, when historians have worked closely with action officers, working files and background papers have been entrusted by officers to staff historians for safekeeping and future reference. That the historian alone seeks out and preserves these valuable documents and files is symptomatic of a serious weakness in the functional filing system. Historians fully recognize that it is impossible and improper for them to act as records managers of working papers and action officer files, but occasionally the higher claims of history must take precedence over a system that inadvertently neglects important sources. Historians would prefer records management regulations that assure the retirement of these files.

Even if it were proper for historians to play an active role in obtaining action officer files, they cannot be expert in all the subjects addressed by a large staff. Volume alone makes difficult the identification of historically significant working papers. Judgments in many instances are often based upon intuition rather than expertise. Neither the historian nor the staff officer is immune from occasional professional astigmatism that inhibits his appreciation of less familiar subjects. In many cases the action officer is the expert who can guide historians and records managers, advising them of the existence of significant files and urging their retention. Being aware that files may have historical significance is the first step toward their preservation.

### *Selecting and Preserving Historical Sources*

Without the professional acumen and guidance of an historian, archivist, or records manager, determining what documents to preserve is risky. In a field as catholic as military history, selection of sources may well reflect a variety of biases. For some historians and officers, operational records of battles and campaigns suffice; others with a larger view of military history want additional records. Yet difficult as it is to specify the nature of the records from which the history of the Army will be written, some general guidance can be tendered to the officer who has to wrestle with this problem. Whether in a field unit or a large headquarters staff, primary consideration should be given to preserving records required by the functional filing system. If applied with diligence and intelligence, the system generally will cover the most basic and important Army records. A leading archivist set forth a "basic rule" that "if records constitute the data upon which important decisions were made or illustrate the . . . decision making process, they are likely to be of historical importance."<sup>2</sup> This rule or reliance on the functional system alone can be restrictive, and any selection at all risks neglecting the narrow interest of a specialist. Nevertheless, records pertaining to the organization, mission, functions, operations, plans, and policies of a unit or agency will include those historical records serving the widest possible interests.

Familiarity with the functional filing system together with professional historical advice will identify many important historical records, but finding the more elusive Army documents requires thorough knowledge of an organization and its

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2. Meyer H. Fishbein, "The Archivist Meets the Records Creator," *American Archivist* 28 (1965):195-97.

workings. Through contacts with key persons, historians often locate and acquire significant documents. Similarly, in the course of staff work an officer will become familiar with how decisions are made, who makes them, and where plans and studies are prepared. Action officer files contain pertinent documents, but individuals often possess diaries, memoranda of conversations, personal messages, and similar confidential communications. These can be extremely important historical sources. People who have documents like these sometimes are surprised to learn of their historical value. Once aware of the value, they may become reluctant to part with the documents because of their personal nature. Others part with them but insist that their use be restricted in one way or another, while some, fearing the disclosure of sensitive, critical, or embarrassing information, may seek to censor or suppress the documents. Suppression of information embarrassing to the Army is generally a disservice to the Army and to the cause of history, and historians discourage it. On the other hand, unless special provisions are made for the preservation of sensitive personal papers, they may be irretrievable. The Army has a special repository, the Military History Research Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, for just such a purpose. At the institute even the most highly sensitive personal papers can be preserved until their use is approved by the donor. (See Chapter 12.)

Attention to the details of creating, maintaining, and retiring records not only helps assure their preservation but facilitates their use. Although lost in the anonymity of large bureaucracies, the Army's records clerks, file clerks, secretaries, and others play a vital role in preserving historical records. Historians and staff officers may find that these people know the records quite well. In the search for historical sources, their contributions can be as important as those of many decision makers and action officers.

### *Automatic Data Processing*

With the introduction of computers, miniaturization, and sophisticated means of communication, records keeping and records management in the Army is becoming more complicated than the mere filing and retirement of pieces of paper. These rapidly expanding and highly technical fields are impinging on almost every aspect of modern records keeping. Although paper records are not about to be replaced entirely, they are but one

medium for the transmission of information. And information conveyed by the records, rather than the nature of the records, is the historian's prime concern. Neither the records manager nor the historian has displayed an overwhelming concern about the historical value of new forms of documentation. The ramifications of these less traditional records for future historical research is still uncertain. Records managers and archivists are beginning to come to grips with some of the difficulties in identifying, evaluating, storing, retrieving, and preserving new forms of documentation. Military historians, likewise, are realizing that these records offer new opportunities for research and are seeking their preservation. Like many paper records, computer records and micro records are perishable, and much work remains to be done by historians, records managers, and archivists to make certain that they are available for future research.

Some of the Army's contemporary history will be difficult to write without computer records and computer analysis of historical data. Even combat history may require these records and techniques as the use of computers in tactical operations alters the nature and substance of operational records. Most reporting systems within the Army today depend at one stage or another upon computer operations, and historians using such reports are concerned about the possible loss of the raw data and the supporting documentation. Nearly every officer has already been or will be exposed to this new computer environment. A few will become experts, but even fewer will combine their expertise with an interest in military history. Until historians and records managers acquire the technical and specialized skills of computer experts, they will have to rely on advice and assistance from those individuals who can bridge the gap between computers and history. As with paper records, the first step toward preserving information for research and reference is recognition by those handling such information that it possesses intrinsic historical value.

Not many in the Army can make its historical programs and the historical aspects of records management a primary concern. Not even historians or records managers can devote their full attention to preserving historical records. But all Army officers can help make records management an effective adjunct to the Army's historical programs. This help may entail no more than

becoming familiar with appropriate regulations and assuring that records are prepared, maintained, and retired. A more active role may be required when, for example, action officer files, personal papers, or records that escape the normal channels of retirement are involved. Motives for preserving historical documents vary from individual to individual. Pride in a unit's accomplishments or a desire to see that lessons are derived from a particular action are worthy motives, but most historical records do not have immediate value. As a sense of history and an appreciation of the role history plays in the Army grows, a feeling may also grow that a record of events is worth preserving for its own sake.

Few pat answers exist for the many problems in records management and its relation to military history. Other than current Army regulations, no manual tells officers or records managers how to recognize historical records. While the functional filing system is a starting point, and the historian's insight and intuition help in locating and evaluating documents, every officer should make certain that significant records in his or her custody are preserved. Command interest in and emphasis on records management and historical activities are important and necessary. Yet the success of the Army's historical programs depends on the cooperation of many people in saving today's records for generations of historians to come. This cooperation and the preservation of the Army's historical records serves not only one's unit, command, or agency, but also in the years to come the historical profession, the Army, and ultimately the American people.

## Bibliography

To place records management in the larger context of its relationship to the archival and historical professions, there is no better starting point than H. G. Jones's *The Records of a Nation* (listed below), also the articles by W. Kaye Lamb and Philip D. Jordan. Still general but relevant to the problems discussed in this chapter are the articles by J. J. Hammit, Arnold Olson, and Gerald F. Brown.

Especially useful articles about records management are those of Everett O. Alldredge (1971), Ollon D. McCool, Maynard Brichford, Frank B. Evans, and Meyer H. Fishbein. Literature about the Army's records management program is limited. See Seymour J. Promrenze, Mable Deutch, and Sherrod East. Army

regulations pertaining to functional filing are also listed below.

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