

The Control Data Corporation's Supercomputer Systems

The Control Data Corporation's Supercomputer Systems:

The Need for Speed

By

Stephen H. Kaisler

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



The Control Data Corporation's Supercomputer Systems:
The Need for Speed

Series: Historical Computing Machine Series

By Stephen H. Kaisler

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-1974-0

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1974-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	xvi
List of Tables.....	xx
Chapter One.....	1
Control Data Corporation	
1.1 CDC Systems Overview	4
Chapter Two.....	6
CDC 6600	
Introduction	6
Chippewa Laboratory.....	7
Emergence.....	8
CDC 6600 Overview	8
2.1 CDC 6600 System Architecture.....	11
2.1.1 Operating Registers.....	13
2.1.2 Reference Address and Field Length Registers	14
2.1.3 Instruction Stack	15
2.1.4 Functional Units.....	16
2.1.5 Control Unit	29
2.1.6 Instruction Control.....	30
2.1.7 Reservation Control	31
2.1.8 Executing Instructions.....	35
2.1.9 Peripheral Control	36
2.2 CDC 6600 Central Memory.....	37
2.2.1 Central Memory Control.....	38
2.2.2 Memory Protection	39
2.2.3 Stunt Box	40
2.3 Extended Core Storage	44
2.3.1 ECS Configuration.....	44
2.3.2 Data Transfer	45
2.3.3 Extended Core Controller	46
2.3.4 Extended Core Coupler.....	47
2.3.5 ECS Instructions	47
2.3.6 Model 6416 ECC Instructions.....	49

2.4 CDC 6600 Peripheral Processors.....	50
2.4.1 PP Implementation.....	50
2.4.2 PP Communication	52
2.4.3 Data Channels	52
2.5 Display Console.....	53
2.6 I/O Subsystem.....	57
2.6.1 Data Channels	57
2.7 Physical Configuration	58
2.8 CDC 6600/7600 Instruction Set.....	58
2.8.1 Branch Instructions	60
2.8.2 Set Instructions.....	63
2.8.3 Boolean Instructions	64
2.8.4 Arithmetic Instructions	65
2.8.5 Shift Instructions	68
2.8.6 CDC 6600 Control Instructions.....	69
2.8.7 Exchange Jump	70
2.8.8 Control Instructions.....	73
2.9 Peripheral Processor Instruction Set	73
2.10 CDC 6600 and Pascal	76
2.11 CDC 6400/CDC 6500/CDC 6700.....	77
2.11.1 CDC 6400	77
2.11.2 CDC 6500	78
2.12 Dead Start Panel.....	79
2.12.1 Load Mode	80
2.12.2 Sweep Mode.....	81
2.12.3 Dump Mode	81
2.13 CDC 6600 SCOPE.....	81
2.13.1 Basic SCOPE Operation	82
2.13.2 CP Resident Software	82
2.13.3 PP Resident Software.....	82
2.13.4 Control Points	82
2.13.5 CP Program Initiation	83
2.13.6 CP-MTR Communication	84
2.13.7 SCOPE Adaptation	85
2.14 Other 6000 Models	85
2.14.1 CDC 6200	85
2.14.2 CDC 6700	85
2.15 Assessment of the CDC 6600	86
2.15.1 The Instruction Set.....	86
2.15.2 The Central Processor	87
2.15.3 Input/Output	87

2.15.4 The Peripheral Processors	87
2.15.5 Operating Systems	88
2.15.6 CDC Advertising.....	88
2.15.7 Final Word	89
2.15.8 The Simulation Model.....	90
Chapter Three	92
CDC 7600	
3.1 CDC 7600 System Architecture.....	95
3.1.1 CDC 7600 Functional units.....	96
3.1.2 Instruction Stack	97
3.1.3 Instruction Execution	98
3.1.4 Exchange Jump	99
3.1.5 Program Status Designation.....	101
3.1.6 New Instructions	103
3.2 Central Memory.....	105
3.3 CDC 7600 Peripheral Processors.....	106
3.4 Maintenance Control Unit	106
3.5 Operator Station.....	107
3.6 CDC 7600 I/O System	108
3.7 Peripheral Equipment	109
3.8 Operating System.....	109
3.9 Livermore Time-Sharing System.....	110
3.9.1 User Management	110
3.9.2 Program Initiation	111
3.9.3 File Management.....	112
3.10 CDC 7600 Assessment	112
Chapter Four.....	114
CDC 8600	
4.1 CDC 8600 System Architecture.....	115
4.1.1 System Architecture.....	116
4.1.2 Memory.....	120
4.2 Instruction Set.....	123
4.3 I/O System	126
4.4 CDC 8600 Assessment	127
Chapter Five	128
The Chippewa Operating System	
5.1 COS Operation.....	130
5.2 Resident Routines	131

5.2.1 PP Routines	131
5.2.2 CM Routines	133
5.2.3 System Display Program.....	134
5.2.4 Pool Processors	134
5.3 Processor Programs.....	136
5.3.1 PP Programs.....	136
5.3.2 CP Programs	137
5.3.3 PP Communication Areas	138
5.3.4 Control Point Areas.....	138
5.3.5 Exchange Jump Area	141
5.3.6 Storage Allocation and Movement.....	141
5.3.7 Disk Routines.....	142
5.4 The System Monitor	146
5.4.1 Handling PP Service Requests	146
5.4.2 MTR Memory Usage	147
5.4.3 MTR Execution Cycle	150
5.4.4 PP Recall.....	155
5.5 Disk File	155
5.5.1 Logical Files.....	156
5.5.2 Track Reservation Tables.....	156
5.5.3 The DayFile	156
5.6 Chippewa Programming Languages	157
5.7 Chippewa OS Assessment	157
Chapter Six	159
The SCOPE Operating System	
6.1 System Requirements	159
6.2 Basic Concepts.....	160
6.2.1 Basic Scope Functions	160
6.2.2 Job Control.....	161
6.2.3 CM Usage	164
6.3 Peripheral Processor Software	165
6.3.1 PP Programs.....	165
6.4 Operator-SCOPE Communication.....	167
6.5 Disk Operations	171
6.6 Memory Management.....	172
6.7 File Structure and Processing.....	172
6.7.1 Logical File Structure.....	173
6.7.2 Magnetic Tape Files.....	173
6.7.3 Random Access Device Files.....	174
6.8 I/O Control.....	176

6.8.1 File Environment Table.....	177
6.8.2 File Name Table.....	178
6.8.3 Non-Disk Files.....	178
6.9 SCOPE Control Cards.....	179
6.9.1 JOB Control Card.....	179
6.9.2 Programming Systems.....	182
6.10 SCOPE Assessment.....	182
Chapter Seven.....	183
MACE Operating System	
7.1 PPU Monitor.....	183
7.2 CPU Monitor.....	184
7.3 Central Memory.....	184
7.3.1 PPU Communication Area.....	185
7.3.2 Control Point Areas.....	186
7.4 File Structures.....	186
7.5 Job Processing.....	187
7.5.1 Job Entry.....	187
7.5.2 Control Points.....	187
7.5.2 Job Scheduling.....	188
7.5.3 Job Execution.....	188
7.5.4 Job Output.....	189
7.6 Physical Structure of Files.....	189
7.6.1 Printed Output.....	189
7.6.2 Punched Card Output.....	190
7.6.3 Punched Card Input.....	190
7.6.4 Disk Storage.....	190
7.6.5 Magnetic Tape.....	190
7.7 Initializing MACE.....	191
7.8 MACE Assessment.....	191
Chapter Eight.....	192
KRONOS	
8.1 Control Point Concept.....	193
8.2 CP System Communication.....	194
8.3 Central Memory Resident Area.....	194
8.4 System Commands.....	195
8.5. KRONOS Time-Sharing Operation.....	196
8.5.1 File Commands.....	197
8.5.2 KRONOS Time-Sharing Commands.....	198
8.6 KRONOS Subsystems.....	200

8.7 KRONOS Assessment	200
Chapter Nine.....	201
The NOS Operating System	
9.1 File Structure	202
9.1.1 CYBER Record Manager.....	202
9.1.2 NOS File Structure.....	202
9.1.3 Physical File Structure	202
9.2 Files	203
9.2.1 File Types.....	204
9.2.2 Permanent Files.....	205
9.2.3 Libraries	205
9.3 Network Access Method.....	205
9.4 Job Processing	206
9.5 NOS Commands	206
9.6 The NOS/BE Operating System	209
9.7 The NOS/VE Operating System	210
9.7.1 NOS/VE Commands	212
9.8 System Command Language	213
9.9 Programming Languages	214
9.9.1 FORTRAN.....	215
9.9.2 ALGOL-60.....	215
9.9.3 PL/I	215
9.9.4 Other Programming Languages	216
9.10 NOS Assessment.....	216
Chapter Ten	217
System Software	
10.1 COMPASS.....	217
10.1.1 COMPASS Concepts	217
10.1.2 Relocatable Object Programs.....	218
10.1.3 Interactive Program Debugging	218
10.1.4 COMPASS Statements	218
10.2 Programming Languages	220
10.3 FORTRAN and CDC.....	220
10.3.1 FORTRAN Optimizing Techniques.....	221
10.3.2 Subscripted Variables.....	222
10.3.3 Conditional Branching Statements.....	222
10.3.4 DO Loops.....	223
10.3.5 Arithmetic Operations.....	225
10.3.6 Subroutines	226

10.3.7 FORTRAN Assessment	226
10.4 ASPER Assembly System	227
10.5 CYBIL	227
Chapter Eleven	229
CDC STAR-100	
11.1 STAR-100 Processor Architecture.....	232
11.1.1 Vector Pipelines	233
11.1.2 Microcode	237
11.1.3 STAR-100 Instruction Stack	237
11.1.3 Storage Access Control	237
11.2 Memory.....	240
11.2.1 Virtual Memory.....	240
11.3 I/O System	241
11.4 Stream Unit.....	241
11.5 Service Station Concept.....	243
11.5.1 Service Station Configuration.....	244
11.5.2 File Storage Station	247
11.5.3 Other Stations.....	251
11.6 STAR Instructions	253
11.6.1 Operand Designators.....	253
11.6.2 Instruction Formats	255
11.6.3 Index Instructions.....	261
11.6.4 Register Instructions	261
11.6.5 Branch Instructions	263
11.6.6 Vector Instructions	265
11.6.7 Sparse Vector Instructions	266
11.6.8 Vector Macro Instructions.....	267
11.6.9 String Instructions	267
11.6.10 Logical String Instructions	268
11.6.11 Non-Typical Instructions	269
11.6.12 Monitor Instructions.....	270
11.6.13 Instruction Set Complexity	271
11.7 STAR Operating System	271
11.7.1 STAR-OS Structure	272
11.7.2 Resident Subsystem	272
11.7.3 Virtual System Tasks	273
11.7.4 Privileged User Tasks	274
11.8 Peripheral Operating System	274
11.8.1 NUCLEUS	274
11.8.2 Non-Resident Programs	274

11.8.3 File Index	275
11.8.4 Minus Page.....	276
11.8.5 I/O Connectors	277
11.8.6 System Messages	278
11.9 File System and I/O Management.....	279
11.9.1 File Creation.....	279
11.9.2 File Ownership and ACCESS	281
11.9.3 File Management Messages	282
11.9.4 File I/O System Messages	283
11.9.5 Miscellaneous File Management Messages	283
11.10 STAR-100 Programming Languages.....	284
11.10.1 STAR FORTRAN.....	284
11.10.2 APL*STAR.....	285
11.11 STAR-1B	286
11.12 Assessment of the STAR-100	286
Chapter Twelve	289
The Cyber Series	
12.1 The Cyber-70 Series	289
12.1.1 Cyber 70 Overview	290
12.2 Cyber 170 Series.....	295
12.2.1 Cyber 170 Low-End Models.....	296
12.2.2 Cyber 175 Configuration.....	296
12.2.3 Cyber 176 System	303
12.2.4 Cyber 170 NOS.....	305
12.3 The Cyber 180 Series.....	306
12.3.1 System Architecture	308
12.3.2 Cyber 180 New Instructions.....	312
12.3.3 Cyber 180 Model 990 ^E	312
12.4 Virtual Memory	316
12.4.1 Address Translation	316
12.4.2 Page Size.....	318
12.4.3 Page Table Search.....	318
12.4.4 Dynamic Paging.....	319
12.4.5 Cyber 170 Mode.....	319
12.5 Cyber 180 990/995.....	320
12.5.1 Central Processor	320
12.5.2 I/O System	320
12.5.3 Cyber 180 990/995 Instructions	321
12.6 NOS Security and Protection	321
12.6.1 VM User Address Space	322

12.6.2 Process Virtual Addresses.....	322
12.6.3 Segment Attributes.....	322
12.6.4 NOS and NOS/BE.....	323
12.7 Operating System Software	324
12.7.1 ETA System V	324
12.7.2 ETA Operating System.....	324
12.8 Programming Languages	325
12.9 Cyber 170/180 Series Assessment.....	325
Chapter Thirteen.....	326
The Cyber 200 Series	
13.1 Cyber 203.....	327
13.1.1 System Architecture	328
13.2 Cyber 200 Instruction Set	329
13.2.1 Register Instructions	330
13.2.2 Index Instructions.....	334
13.2.3 Branch Instructions	335
13.2.4 Vector Instructions.....	339
13.2.5 Vector Macro Instructions.....	344
13.2.6 Sparse Vector Instructions	346
13.2.7 String Instructions	347
13.2.8 Monitor Instructions.....	348
13.2.9 Non-Typical Instructions	349
13.2.10 Cyber 203 Assessment	353
13.3 Cyber 205.....	354
13.3.1 Cyber 205 System Architecture	357
13.3.2 Cyber 205 Scalar Processor	359
13.3.3 Vector Processor	362
13.3.3 String Unit.....	363
13.3.4 Memory.....	363
13.3.5 I/O Subsystem.....	365
13.3.6 Real-Time Counters	366
13.4 The Cyber 205 System Software	367
13.4. 1 Cyber 200 FORTRAN	368
13.4. 2 Cyber 200 Assembler.....	368
13.4.3 Cyber 200 LOADER.....	369
13.4. 4 Cyber 200 Front-End Link	369
13.5 Cyber 200 OS	369
13.5.1 Resident System.....	370
13.5.2 Virtual System Tasks	371
13.5.3 Privileged User Tasks	371

13.5.4 Peripheral System Tasks	371
13.6 Florida State University and the Cyber 205	372
13.6.1 The Cyber 205 Installation	372
13.6.2 System Software Enhancements	372
13.7 Cyber 2xx Assessment	373
Chapter Fourteen	375
Lawrence Livermore Time-Sharing System	
14.1 LRLTRAN	376
14.1.1 LRLTRAN Operations	376
14.1.2 LRLTRAN Enhancements	377
14.1.3 Language Enhancements	377
14.1.4 Vector Extensions	378
14.1.5 LRLTRAN and Operating Systems	380
14.1.6 Assessment of LRLTRAN	381
14.2 LTSS	382
14.2.1 Time Sharing Strategy	382
14.2.2 Interactive Access	383
14.2.3 Program Execution	384
14.2.4 File Manipulation	384
14.2.5 System Overlays	384
14.2.6 Statistics	385
14.3 NLTSS	385
14.3.1 Dual Access Dichotomy	386
14.3.2 NLTSS Approach	386
14.3.3 NLTSS Assessment	388
Chapter Fifteen	390
Advanced Flexible Processor	
15.1 Flexible Processor	390
15.2 Advanced Flexible Processor Architecture	391
15.2.1 AFP Central Processor	392
15.2.2 AFP Microinstructions	392
15.2.3 Crossbar Switch	393
15.3 CyberPlus	393
15.3.1 CyberPlus Architecture	393
15.3.2 CyberPlus Software	393
15.4 Assessment	394

Chapter Sixteen	395
Assessment of CDC	
16.1 Innovative Architectures	395
16.1 Poor Operating Systems.....	396
16.2 Minicomputers.....	396
16.3 CYBERNET	397
16.4 Commercial Credit.....	397
16.5 PLATO	398
16.6 University of Wyoming Experience	398
16.7 Lasting Influence	398
Exercises for the Reader	400
Glossary	403
References	405
Index	414

LIST OF FIGURES

- 2-1. CDC 6600 Concurrency
- 2-2. CDC 6600 Conceptual Architecture
- 2-3. CDC 6600 Detailed System Architecture
- 2-4. CDC 6600 CPU/PPU Architecture
- 2-5. CDC 6600 Instruction Stack
- 2-6. Sample Instruction Sequence
- 2-7. Boolean Functional Unit
- 2-8. Shift Functional Unit
- 2-9. Long Add Functional Unit
- 2-10. Add Functional Unit
- 2-11. Multiply Unit Coefficient Processing
- 2-12. Multiply Unit Exponent Processing
- 2-13. Increment Functional Units
- 2-14. CDC 6600 Scoreboard Concept
- 2-15. CDC 6600 Register Scoreboard
- 2-16. Shift Unit – Scoreboard Example
- 2-17. CDC 6600 Memory Page Frames
- 2-18. Memory Protection
- 2-19. Hopper Format
- 2-20. CDC 6600 Stunt Box
- 2-21. Extended Core Storage Cabinet
- 2-22. ECS Data Request
- 2-23. ECS Data Transfer Example
- 2-24. CDC 6600 PP Implementation
- 2-25. Display Console Control
- 2-26. CDC 6600 Display Console
- 2-27. CC 6600 Display Console Format
- 2-28. CDC 6600 Instruction Formats
- 2-29. JMP Instruction Format
- 2-30. X Register Branch Instruction Format
- 2-31. B Register Comparison Branch Instruction Format
- 2-32. Boolean Instruction Format
- 2-33. CDC6 600 Control Instruction Format
- 2-34. Exchange Package Contents
- 2-35. CDC 6600 Exchange Jump Package

- 2-36. CDC 6400/6500 System Architecture
- 2-37. CDC 6600 Dead Start Panel
- 2-38. Control Point Concept
- 2-39. CDC 6600 Advertisement

- 3-1. CDC 7600 Computer System at LLNL
- 3-2. CDC 7600 Computer System
- 3-3. CDC 7600 System Architecture
- 3-4. CDC 7600 Instruction Stack
- 3-5. CDC 7600 Exchange Package Format
- 3-6. CDC 7600 Program Status Indicator
- 3-7. CDC 7600 PPU Architecture
- 3-8. SCM-to-IOM Architecture
- 3-9. Notional Concept for an I/O Station

- 4-1. CDC 8600 System Architecture
- 4-2. CDC 8600 Modules
- 4-3. CDC 8600 Memory Architecture
- 4-4. XPW Format
- 4-5(a). 4-bit Instruction Format
- 4-5(b). 6-bit Instruction Format
- 4-5(c). 8-bit Instruction Format

- 5-1. Chippewa Operating System Descendants
- 5-2. Pool Processor Memory Layout
- 5-3. MTR Task Request to PP
- 5-4. PP Request to MTR
- 5-5. PP Program Header
- 5-6. PLD Entry Format
- 5-7. PP Control Word Format
- 5-8. CPA Word 020 Format
- 5-9. CPA Word 021 Format
- 5-10. CPA Word 022 Format
- 5-11. CPA Words 23-24 Format
- 5-12. The CDC 6603 Disk File
- 5-13. PP Memory Layout
- 5-14. Job Status Checking
- 5-15. TRT Format

- 10-1. COMPASS Coding Form

- 11-1. STAR-100 System Architecture
 - 11-2. Central Processor System Architecture
 - 11-3. STAR-100 Pipeline 1 Architecture
 - 11-4. STAR-100 Pipeline 2 Architecture
 - 11-5. STAR-100 System Configuration
 - 11-6. STAR-100 Service Station Configuration
 - 11-7. Active File Index Entry Format
 - 11-8. Active File Descriptor Format
 - 11-9. Instruction Format 1
 - 11-10. Instruction Format 2
 - 11-11. Instruction Format 3
 - 11-12. Instruction Format 4
 - 11-13. Instruction Format 5
 - 11-14. Instruction Format 6
 - 11-15. Instruction Format 7
 - 11-16. Instruction Format 9
 - 11-17. Instruction Format 9
 - 11-18. Instruction Format A
 - 11-19. Instruction Format B
 - 11-20. Instruction Format C
 - 11-21. STAR-OS File Index
 - 11-22. STAR-OS System Message – Alpha Part
-
- 12-1. Cyber 170 ECS Configuration
 - 12-2. Cyber 70 Model 72 Computer System
 - 12-3. CDC Cyber 70 Model 74
 - 12-4. Cyber-72 Move Instruction Descriptor
 - 12-5. Cyber 170 Installation
 - 12-6. Cyber 175
 - 12-7. Cyber 175 System Configuration
 - 12-8. Cyber 175 Operator Console
 - 12-9. Cyber 175/176 System Architecture
 - 12-10. Cyber 180 (nee Cyber 170/800) Logo
 - 12-11. Cyber 170-835 Computer System
 - 12-12. Cyber 170-855 Installation
 - 12-13. Cyber 180 Model 875 System Architecture
 - 12-14. Process Virtual Address Format
 - 12-15. Cyber 180 Virtual Address Translation
 - 12-16. Cyber 180 PN/PO Formation
 - 12-17. Segment Descriptor Entry Format

- 13-1. Cyber 203 Data Flag Register
- 13-2. Cyber 200 RG Instruction Format
- 13-3. Cyber 200 Index Instruction Format
- 13-4. Cyber 200 Branch Instruction Format
- 13-5. Cyber 205 Vector Instruction Format
- 13-6. Cyber 200 AB Field Contents
- 13-7. Cyber 200 XY Field Contents
- 13-8. Cyber 200 Vector Macro Instruction Format
- 13-9. Cyber 200 ST Instruction Format
- 13-10. Cyber 200 Monitor Mode Instruction Format
- 13-11. Cyber 200 NT Instruction Format
- 13-12. Cyber 205 System at DKRZ
- 13-13. Cyber 205
- 13-14. Cyber 205 System Architecture
- 13-15. Cyber 205 CPU Structure
- 13-16. Cyber 205 Scalar Processor
- 13-17. Cyber 205 Vector Unit
- 13-18. Cyber 205 I/O System
- 13-19. Cyber 200-OS Configuration

- 15-1. AFP Microinstruction Fields

LIST OF TABLES

- 2-1. CDC 6600 – Basic Characteristics
- 2-2. CDC 6600 Registers
- 2-3. Program Allocation Registers
- 2-4. CDC 6600 Functional Units
- 2-5. Scoreboard Signals
- 2-6. CPU Component Conflicts Categories
- 2-7. Timing Stages for Shift Unit
- 2-8. ECS Instructions
- 2-9. ECC Instructions
- 2-10. Display Console Functions
- 2-11. Display Console Controls
- 2-12. Selected Operator Messages
- 2-13 Branch Instructions
- 2-14. CDC 6600 Set Instructions
- 2-15. Boolean Instructions
- 2-16. Integer Arithmetic Instructions
- 2-17. Floating Point Arithmetic Instructions
- 2-18. Shift Instructions
- 2-19. CDC 6600 ECS Instructions
- 2-20. Exchange Jump instruction
- 2-21. CDC 6600 Control Instructions
- 2-22. CDC 6600 Peripheral Processor Instruction Set
- 2-23. Selected SCOPE MTR Commands

- 3-1. CDC 7600 – Basic Characteristics
- 3-2. Exchange Jump Conditions
- 3-3. Mode Flags
- 3-4. Condition Flags
- 3-5. 7600 Instructions

- 4-1. CDC 8600 – Basic Characteristics
- 4-2. CDC 8600 Modules Description
- 4-3. CDC 8600 CPU Registers
- 4-4. XPW Fields
- 4-5 Initial CDC 8600 Instruction Set

- 5-1. PP Transient Programs
- 5-2. CM Assignments
- 5-3. Chippewa Control Point Area Structure
- 5-4. W and X Bits Interpretation
- 5-5. PP Memory Layout

- 6-1. Primary SCOPE Displays
- 6-2. SCOPE Information Screens
- 6-3. ECS Area
- 6-4. EOF Indicators
- 6-5. SCOPE Tape Formats
- 6-6. Permanent File Attributes
- 6-7. FET Buffer Fields
- 6-8. Job Control Card Parameters
- 6-9. SCOPE Control Cards

- 7-1. CMR Areas
- 7-2. PPU Communication Area Structure

- 8-1. CMR Elements
- 8-2. Selected KRONOS Control Statements
- 8-3. Permanent File Commands
- 8-4. KRONOS Time-Sharing Commands

- 9-1. NOS File Types
- 9-2. Selected NOS CCL Commands
- 9-3. NOS/VE Features
- 9-4. Selected Catalog and File Commands
- 9-5. Job and Attribute Commands
- 9-6. Developer's Commands
- 9-7. Magnetic Tape Commands
- 9-8. Miscellaneous Commands

- 10-1. COMPASS Statement Fields

- 11-1. STAR-100 – Basic Characteristics
- 11-2. STAR-100 Pipeline Operations
- 11-3. Stream Unit Subunits
- 11-4. AFI Entry Fields
- 11-5. File Descriptor Sections
- 11-6. Types of STAR-100 Files

- 11-7. Operand Designators
- 11-8. Index Instructions
- 11-9. Register Instructions
- 11-10. Branch Instructions
- 11-11. G Bit Designators
- 11-12. Object Bit Alteration
- 11-13. Branch Address Source Conditions
- 11-14. Vector Instructions
- 11-15. Sparse Vector Instructions
- 11-16. Vector Macro Instructions
- 11-17. String Instructions
- 11-18. Logical String Instructions
- 11-19. Non-Typical Instructions
- 11-20. Monitor Instructions
- 11-21. STAR-OS Major Subsystems
- 11-22. STAR-OS File Index Description
- 11-23. I/O Connector Block Structure
- 11-24. STAR-OS System Message – Alpha Part Fields
- 11-25. STAR-OS File Types
- 11-26. STAR-OS File Management System Messages
- 11-27. STAR-OS File I/O System Messages
- 11-28. Miscellaneous File Management System Requests
- 11-29. STAR FORTRAN Enhancements

- 12-1. Cyber 70/72 Move Instructions
- 12-2. Cyber 175/176 Functional Units
- 12-3. Cyber 180 Model 990E – Basic Characteristics
- 12-4. PVA Fields
- 12-5. UM Field Bit Interpretation
- 12-6. CDC 180 990/995 – Basic Characteristics
- 12-7. SDE Fields

- 13-1. Rationale for CLASS VI Supercomputer
- 13-2. Cyber 203/205 – Basic Characteristics
- 13-3. Data Flag Register Bit Assignments
- 13-4. Cyber 200 Register Instructions
- 13-5. Cyber 200 Index Instructions
- 13-6. Cyber 200 Branch Instructions
- 13-7. Vector Instruction Field Description
- 13-8. Field G Bits Interpretation
- 13-9. Cyber 200 Vector Instructions

- 13-10. Cyber 200 Vector Macro Instructions
- 13-11. G Bits Interpretation for Opcodes B7 and BA
- 13-12. Cyber 200 Sparse Vector Instructions
- 13-13. Cyber 200 String Instructions
- 13-14. Cyber 200 Monitor Mode Instructions
- 13-15. Cyber 200 Non-Typical Instructions
- 13-16. Select Link Operands
- 13-17. Cyber 205 – Basic Characteristics

- 14-1. LRLTRAN Operations
- 14-2. New Structure Declarations
- 14-3. Buffer Table Entry Structure

CHAPTER ONE

CONTROL DATA CORPORATION

Source: Worthy 1987

Control Data Corporation (CDC) was founded in late summer of 1957 to develop high performance computing machines for the scientific and engineering environments. Several engineers, including William C. Norris and Howard Engstrom, left Sperry Rand Corporation to found CDC in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The new company was financed by the sale of 600,000 shares of stock at \$1 per share. Control Data was the first computer company to be publicly financed in the United States (Worthy 1987).

The new company occupied an old warehouse. Over the next several months, other engineers from Sperry Rand joined CDC. Norris and his team worked in an area where “floor space was divided by temporary chipboard partitions”. Years later, these partitions still stood and remained unpainted as the company continued to grow (Worthy 1987).

By the late 1950s, IBM had gained control of the computing marketplace. Other competitors, such as General Electric, RCA, and Bendix, tried and failed to compete with IBM, and eventually withdrew from the market. Norris, realizing the futility of competing with IBM, recognized a niche existed in which IBM was not providing systems – the high-performance scientific computing arena. Norris and his team determined “to design and build the most power computers the world had ever seen” to fill that niche.

Through the early 1960s, CDC made several acquisitions that brought in needed technologies and skilled personnel. In the 1960s, many computer systems were leased rather than purchased outright – following a model pioneered by IBM, which guaranteed a continuous inflow of capital. To support such a model, debt was incurred to finance the leasing operation, but this had an effect on the balance sheet and investor perception of the company’s financial stability.

One of these acquisitions was Commercial Credit Corporation (CCC) of Baltimore, Maryland in 1968. CCC retained its corporate autonomy (due to financial regulations), but provided CDC with a source of capital for financing computer leasing.

CDC decided to manufacture its own peripherals as it realized that a large portion of the cost of data processing systems was allocated to peripheral equipment. CDC's computer systems required high-performance mass storage systems with significant capacity to match the speed of its computers. Such devices were not available from other companies, so CDC had to design and build its own. Its success allowed it to become a source in the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) market for companies that did not have the capability to build their own peripherals.

CDC also realized that software was becoming a major expense to many organizations. Norris realized that many small to medium companies would buy a computer system if it came with software that could already do what they needed in the way of applications. CDC began developing software applications that ran on its computers that addressed the needs of many corporations. It also modified software applications from companies that it had acquired.

CDC also realized that many corporations could use high-performance computing, but only in less amounts than an entire machine would provide. Their computer systems were too expensive to purchase for many firms that could use some of that computing power. Norris decided that "he wanted to sell a little piece of a big computer at a time". As a result of an anti-competition suit against IBM, CDC gained control of the Service Bureau Corporation (SBC) in settlement (Worthy 1987).

SBC enhanced CDC's ability to offer a suite of services and systems to its customer base. SBC more than doubled CDC's service business both in quantity and breadth of offerings by adding business data processing services to complement its engineering and scientific applications services. Most importantly, it brought a highly qualified and talented management and staff.

By 1969, CDC's timesharing service, which was offered to small and medium companies, was large enough to spin off into its own division, called CYBERNET. With SBC's personnel and expertise, CDC was a prime competitor in the time-sharing arena.

Norris had always been interested in seeing how computers could aid in education. Norris, learning of interesting work at the University of Illinois, offered to install a high-speed CDC computer for the group working on PLATO. PLATO evolved from the late 1960s into a powerful system to support instruction by computer until it became a commercial offering.

As Norris planned to retire in the mid-1980s, he appointed Robert Price as President and Norbert Berg as Deputy Chairman of the Board. The three of them formed a Corporate Executive Office with Price and Berg running the company and Norris offering advice and assistance as needed. By the mid-

1980s, pressure from competitors and the minicomputer vendors whose prices significantly undercut the large, powerful CDC machines. CDC exited the OEM disk drive market, and lowered its prices in other areas. The reduction in profit margins meant less support for research and engineering for new systems.

Competition from Cray Research at the high end of supercomputing, and IBM and DEC in the middle ground, along with financial and management constraints imposed by the SEC and its lending banks, presented CDC management with significant problems. CDC had to slow or severely reduce some of its products and manufacturing facilities, which further eroded its financial viability. Among the losses were Commercial credit, remote data processing, the ETA division, and its training and education programs.

The result was a slimmed down company that focused on computing and systems integration services. In 1992, it changed its name to Ceridian Corporation and spun off computer operations into Control Data Systems, Inc. CDSI focused on systems integration services. By the mid-90s, the mainframe supercomputer manufacturer had ceased to exist although the name Control Data was used by CDSI.

William C. Norris (1911 – 2006)

William C. Norris, the founder of Control Data Corporation, was born in Nebraska in 1911. By high school, he had become interested in physics and electrical engineering. He graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1932 with a degree in electrical engineering. Upon the death of his father, he returned home to run the family farm.

At age 30, he joined the U.S. Naval Reserve where he was assigned to a unit whose responsibility was to intercept, analyze, and decode German and Japanese radio transmissions to try to locate enemy submarines. In 1946, he received funding from a group of investors to found Engineering Research Associates in St. Paul, MN. ERA was purchased by Remington Rand in 1951.

In 1955, after Sperry Corporation bought Remington Rand, Norris became General Manager and Vice President of Sperry Rand, a consolidation of four computer divisions. Lacking support from Sperry executive management, he formed Control Data Corporation in 1957 where he became President. CDC developed a niche in high performance computer systems for scientific and engineering applications. Between 1960 and 1979, CDC acquired over 80 small companies that greatly

expanded its technical expertise and market. In 1986, Norris retired from CDC after anointing his successors. In 1986 he received the National Medal of Technology for advances in microelectronics and computer technology.

See Also:

William Norris: Computer Pioneer, Maverick Social Activist; Jones Telecommunications and Multimedia Encyclopedia, 1999

Worthy, James C. "William C. Norris: Portrait of a Maverick" Ballinger Publishing Company, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987

1.1 CDC SYSTEMS OVERVIEW

Norris, Engstrom and others had become disillusioned with the company support they were getting for the development of computer equipment and decided to start their own business. Norris and colleagues set up shop in the old Minneapolis Star and Tribune Company warehouse. Initially, Control Data started out as a subcontractor for components used by the big computer companies. Norris's goal was to build the most powerful computers the world had ever seen.

The true history of CDC perhaps begins with the hiring of Seymour Cray in 1958. He developed a modular circuit configuration that could be used in high-speed digital computers. Using Cray's work, in the late 1950s Control Data Corporation produced the world's most powerful computer, the CDC 1604, at that time. At the same time, Cray sketched out the design for a small computer (e.g., a minicomputer) – the CDC 160 – with a 12-bit word size that could serve as a personal computer or a front-end to the CDC 1604. The CDC 160 influenced the design of the PPs for the CDC 6600.

In June 1958, Control Data got its first order for the new computer from the U.S. Navy Bureau of Ships. The computer was delivered in January of 1960. When CDC announced the 6600, IBM immediately countered, announcing the development of its own supercomputer. The CDC 6600 was billed as a 'supercomputer', defined as a machine that with its relative power, in any given time period, possessed certain performance and architectural capabilities that made their creation unique within the general framework of computer systems (Lincoln 1982).

Orders for the CDC 6600 stalled, waiting to see what IBM was going to come out with. But IBM's machine only existed on paper, and when this became apparent after a year, CDC filed an antitrust suit against IBM. The same month the suit was filed, CDC released its next supercomputer, the

7600, basically daring IBM to try anything. IBM did nothing this time and the 7600 was one of the most successful computers ever built. Five years later, Control Data won the lawsuit against IBM.

When Cray left CDC in 1972, CDC invested over \$300,000 in his new company, Cray Research, Inc. CDC further developed the STAR computer system and delivered it commercially as the Cyber 203. A following model, the Cyber 205, was successful. Another group of engineers left CDC with management approval to set up ETA to develop a new generation of supercomputers. Eventually, CDC reeled ETA back in when it felt its prodigy was encroaching too much on the parent's market.

The development of microprocessors, the emergence of superminicomputers and minisupercomputers, threatened CDC's long held niche. Competitors included Digital Equipment, IBM, and Cray Research. CDC started losing money; William Norris stepped down in 1986 as Chairman. But, in an attempt to recover, CDC sold Commercial Credit, its remote data processing bureau, its training and educational services division, and closed its ETA division.

By 1990, it spun off its computer division to a company called Computer Data Systems, Inc. and changed its name to Ceridian, which emerged as a provider of computing and systems integration services. Both still exist, but the mainframe computer manufacturer, a world leader in supercomputing for almost 40 years, is no longer there. Ceridian was eventually bought out and its new owners appear to be committed to eCommerce and Human Resources solutions.

In 2007, CDC published an overview of its first (and last) 50 years (CDC 2007k).

We will not discuss the Omega 480, which was similar to the IBM 370 Series in instruction set and architecture. This machine was not very successful for CDC before it collapsed. We also will not discuss the CDC 924, an early CDC computer system of which only a few were manufactured and, apparently did not much influence the rest of the CDC computing systems.

CHAPTER TWO

CDC 6600

INTRODUCTION

Source: Rosen 1969, Thornton 1980b

CDC wanted to compete with IBM in the scientific marketplace. IBM had the 7094 and CDC had the 1604 – both not quite supercomputers, but the fastest machines in their market space at the time. CDC did not want to build a machine based on a current architecture with faster components because it realized (e.g., Seymour Cray realized) that led to limited performance improvements since the architecture might hobble some engineering enhancements if compatibility was required. Further, CDC had realized that no more speed could be delivered by the existing transistors, so brute force computing was not possible.

Seymour Cray led the engineering team that was to develop the new machine which became the CDC 6600. He had pressed for an entirely new architecture which could wrest the last bit of performance out of the machine given the appropriate components. CDC had been developing new circuitry that extended the capabilities of the components used in the CDC 1604.

James Thornton had been to a UCLA Seminar on existing high-performance machines. Nearly all machines “had exploited some level of parallel operation” (Thornton 1980b). It was recognized that a large percent of computing time was spent traversing the wiring between logic gates. This was estimated to be 25 to 30 percent of the time in critical paths (Thornton 1980b). One specification for the new machine was one million instructions per second (1 MIPS).

About this time, silicon transistors from Fairchild Semiconductor became available. Their improved operating characteristics made denser packaging feasible and led to shorter critical-path wire lengths, which allowed circuit boards to be placed back-to-back with all components mounted internally. New packaging solved several cooling problems that had arisen with the denser circuits. Resistors extended from board to board