

## John E. Parker

*Born October 26, 1900, Danvers, Mass.; died December 22, 1989, financial member of the group of four who founded the pioneer computer firm Engineering Research Associates (ERA), and later a top executive in a succession of other computer companies.*

*Education:* BS, US Naval Academy, 1922.

*Professional Experience:* US Navy, 1922-1925; John L. Edwards and Co., 1925; G.M.P. Murphy and Co., 1938; Auchincloss, Parker, and Redpath, 1938-1952; president, Engineering Research Associates, Inc. (ERA), 1946-1951; Remington-Rand: ERA Division, 1952-1953, Electronic Computer Sales Department, 1953-1955; Sperry-Rand, 1955; chairman of the board and chief executive officer, Teleregister, 1955-1969.

Born on October 26, 1900 in Danvers, Mass., John E. Parker was brought up in farming communities in Maine where his family had deep roots. After grade school in Rockland, Maine, and Danvers, his family moved to Boston where he went to the English High School for almost three years, with expectations of going to MIT. Instead, with the aid of a private tutor, he passed the examinations for the US Naval Academy, from which he graduated in 1922. After three years in the Navy, having advanced from ensign to the rank of lieutenant junior grade, he resigned his commission to take over the Washington stock brokerage firm of his dying father-in-law, John L. Edwards and Company.

To learn the brokerage business he started as a runner with Hornblower and Weeks, one of the Edwards' New York correspondents, and went to Washington when his father-in-law died. The Edwards firm was sold to G.M.P. Murphy and Company and within three years Parker had become a partner.

The principal partner was Colonel Grayson M.P. Murphy, a West Point classmate and close personal friend of General Douglas MacArthur, then the Army chief of staff. The Murphy firm had participated in the forming and financing of Pan American Airways, United Airlines, and Northwest Airlines, among other pioneer aviation manufacturing and air transport companies. When Colonel Murphy died in 1938, his firm was liquidated. Parker, now 38, merged the Murphy offices in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington into Auchincloss, Parker, and Redpath, in which he was a partner until 1952.

In his new investment partnership Parker continued the aviation connections. Just at the beginning of World War II, Parker foreclosed on debt-ridden Porterfield Aircraft Company, a tiny, struggling builder of light aircraft in Kansas City, with an Air Corps training airplane proposal. Porterfield, the company founder, resigned and took with him his experienced employees. Parker was unable to interest the Air Corps in a proposal to build troop-carrying wooden gliders, since he had little staff and facilities. To get around this lack he took advantage of his financial connection and board membership in Northwest Airlines and struck a deal with the airline. He formed Northwestern Aeronautical Corporation (NAC) with a capital of \$10,000 (\$1,000 of his cash and \$9,000 of Porterfield equipment). He contracted with Northwest to furnish NAC with staff and space. The advantages to Northwest were that they could participate in the just-starting defense effort and protect their staff from the draft. The advantage to Parker was that he now had a sufficiently credible organization to get a government contract. NAC started building wooden gliders in a leased Northwest Airlines hanger at the Minneapolis airport. A year later the company moved to a government-owned 140,000-square-foot plant at 1902 West Minnehaha Ave. in St. Paul.

By the end of the war, NAC was building 15 gliders a day. Of the 14 firms that had built such gliders during the war, only Ford and NAC were still producing them at the war's end, and NAC had become one of the two or three largest war contractors in the Twin Cities area. When, in the summer of 1945, his wartime contracts were being canceled, Parker had to find some peacetime business for NAC.

## Starting ERA

How and why fate selected Parker for the role of ERA's financial angel are obscure, but this was how in 1985 he reconstructed the probable path:<sup>1</sup>

At that time, as the war wound down, three Naval Reserve commissioned civilians, Howard T. Engstrom, William C. Norris, and Ralph I. Meader, who had been designing, building, and operating the primitive computers used in cracking and creating codes for the Navy in its secret Communication Supplementary Activity Washington (CSAW), were trying to start their own postwar company to continue the secret work of CSAW outside the Navy and free of civil service restrictions. They were searching for financial backing for a firm that would build computers, and other things, and do computing, and other things, for the Navy, and others. The backing had to satisfy the Navy requirements of secrecy and their own requirements of ownership and scientific freedom. They had tried American Airlines, Socony-Vacuum, Raytheon, Goodyear Rubber, National Cash Register, and many others including New York and English financiers. Nothing had worked. Toward the end of the year, Colonel Nelson Talbot, a Dayton resident, who had administered the Army's glider program, who knew Meader through his National Cash Register connections in Dayton, told Meader to talk to Parker.

The three, Engstrom, Norris, and Meader, told Parker that they had been doing some very classified work in the Navy during the war and they would like to continue to carry on this work and be together. They said if they could get someone to finance the start-up of the company who would give them a half-interest, and certify that he wouldn't try to direct any of their scientific research activities, they would agree to bind themselves to the firm for three years.

Apparently they did not tell Parker precisely what they were doing so, to make sure of what he was getting into, Parker consulted some prominent Navy friends, including the assistant secretary of the Navy and the judge Advocate's office, about CSAW, its importance, and the qualifications of its three leaders. He said that as far as he was concerned the most significant endorsement came from Admiral Nimitz, chief of Naval Operations, who told him, "I've looked into your background and there's a job that I would like to have you do. It may be more important in peacetime than it was in wartime." To which Parker replied, "Aye, aye, sir!"

Parker always maintained that he never really knew what CSAW was doing, or how they did it, but took on faith the assurances the Navy gave him. Indeed, he took pride in this attitude. When asked how he decided that Engstrom, Norris, and Meader could actually do what they said they could do, Parker said:

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<sup>1</sup>Norberg, Arthur L., transcript of "An Interview with John E. Parker," conducted on December 13, 1985 and May 6, 1986 in Washington, D.C., housed in the archive at the Charles Babbage Institute.

There was no judgment on my part as to whether or not they could perform. It was the fact that they had been performing over a period of time, all these years during the war, and they made these accomplishments, and the Navy wanted them to be kept together. I had no way of knowing. It was like taking on the Symphony Orchestra without knowing a note.<sup>1</sup>

The Navy assured Parker that if he could put the firm together, he would get a Navy contract. In his later dramatic description of these negotiations Parker said that he had declared his St. Paul plant surplus and was just moving out of it when he got a call to come to Washington, where he was finally asked if he would take over the as yet unnamed firm.

Parker told this story of how he got the whole CSAW group together in Washington:<sup>2</sup>

One day I reserved the fourth floor of the Metropolitan Club, main dining room, and I invited, through Norris, and Meader, and Engstrom, all of them to come. I think 92 came with their wives, to meet my wife and me so we could see each other, to see that they were really human beings. They were agreeable to binding themselves together and signing this contract to spend three years.... I always give my wife a great amount of credit for this, that we made a fairly favorable impression on them, as they did on me. And this was the start of it. And if I had to do it over again, I wouldn't know how to do it.

In January 1946 Engineering Research Associates, Inc. (ERA) was incorporated. Parker and his investor partners owned half and the technical partners, headed by Engstrom, Norris, and Meader, owned the other half. Total equity invested was \$20,000, represented by 200,000 shares of stock at \$0.10 per share. Parker and his investor partners arranged for a \$200,000 line of credit. In June of that year the Navy, without competitive bidding, issued two cost-plus-fixed-fee contracts; a small one to ERA and a much larger one to NAC, both of which had the same management and occupied the same facilities. The larger one called for the development of special-purpose data processing equipment and specialized communication devices as the Navy would specify. The smaller one was for research studies, consulting services, and training programs, which allowed for the recruiting of personnel not yet cleared for classified work. By the next year, August 1947, when ERA could be considered to be an established company, the NAC contract was replaced by one issued directly to ERA, and NAC was phased out. This contract was Navy Task 13, the design on paper of a general-purpose stored-program computer so highly classified that it was said that, except for those engineers working on the computer's logical design, no one else at ERA knew even the smallest detail about the project. It appears that even Parker was not privy to the whole story.

### **Parker's Opinions of the Founders**

Parker's relations with Meader were always strained for Meader had hoped to control the new enterprise. Parker told Norberg:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Well, Meader was not a help. He was not one of the scientific people. He was an administrative man. He had run the Navy's Computing Machine Laboratory at National Cash Register during the war and he was a difficult man to handle. He didn't get along with Norris. Engstrom was afraid of him. He was a trial for me too, and I finally bought him out.... In early 1950 Meader did his best to get us to sell the company to IBM. He was going to sue me because I could have sold the company and gotten \$3 a share. So instead of that, I bought his stock at \$3 a share and that's how I got him out of the company. I made the offer available to everybody in the company, every stock holder. Nobody else wanted to pay \$3 a share for the stock at that time. And it wasn't worth \$3 a share at that time. In my book, it was my contribution to making the company stronger. But it was on the basis that Meader felt that we should have gone with IBM, and that he could get money out of it then. So that's how I happened to buy him out. It turned out all right because when we traded the stock in for Remington-Rand, we got eight dollars and a half in stock for each share. He [Meader] wanted to remain a captain in the Navy and he wanted to be an officer of ERA and he just couldn't serve those two masters. He did get out of the Navy, and although I must give him credit for being one of the three people who put the group together, he was the one person who was a real problem.

Within a week after Meader had been bought out for \$30,000, the muck-raking newspaper column "Washington Merry-Go-Round" published an exposé of ERA, charging the Navy and the founders of ERA with self-dealing and conflicts of interest. Parker and his associates suspected Meader of planting the story. The press did not pursue the charge, which never came up again.

Parker had these comments about Engstrom, Norris, and himself:<sup>1</sup>

Engstrom was a very fine man in many, many ways. He probably was one of the best educated men I ever knew. I looked to him for leadership with the technical group. Bill Norris was really the administrative vice president and did an excellent job in every way. My interactions with Norris were always excellent. He had enough engineering background to be able to communicate with the technical people, although Engstrom was really the leader in that. I always used to feel that this group of people sort of felt sorry for me, this poor fellow sitting up in that front office who didn't know what was going on, you know, and didn't understand any of these really technical things and so forth. I wasn't technically capable of really understanding. I used to go out to every place and I always tried to go through the factory—I call it the factory because that's really what it was—once a day and stop everywhere. Sometimes I'd have Bill Norris, sometimes Howard Engstrom, sometimes Meader, and then I'd have whoever were the other heads of things, and I'd try to assimilate as much as I could. I'll give you an example of what we were doing. When our first complete on-line system was built, Jack Hill was the engineer in charge.... I'd say, 'Jack, why are you doing this that way?' He'd say, "Don't ask me, go ask Arnold Cohen. He's the one who said to do it this way." And there he is, he's the top engineer! All I'm saying is that this was done by absolute pioneers; a lot of this had never been done before. So, there wasn't anything to compare it with. There wasn't any background. What we had to be able to do was to come up with a finished product to satisfy the customer, which in this case was the Naval Communication Annex and then, of course, the NSA, which is now out at Fort Meade.

## ERA History

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

Erwin Tomash and Arnold Cohen have recorded the history of ERA in detail.<sup>1</sup> As much as possible we do not repeat their story, but confine the story to Parker's role in that history, a role which was chiefly concerned with finance.

The first year, 1946 to 1947, was profitable, not because of the Navy contracts, but because of what Parker called "these little things ... that we had gotten into." These included a refueling truck for light aircraft, a truck to siphon out airplane septic tanks, a bore-hole camera, a system that weighed railroad cars in motion, a machine that assembled candy bars, an aircraft antenna coupler, and a self-recording accelerometer.

By the end of its first fiscal year, October 1947, ERA reported revenues of \$1.5 million and a profit of \$34,000. Employment had jumped from 145 to 420. But long-term debt had also increased to \$330,000. Parker said:<sup>2</sup>

There were many problems to deal with, most having to do with lack of capital, and it was a constant job keeping everyone happy. I looked upon the company as a symphony orchestra in which a few strings would break now and then. I was just trying to keep the melody going.

As a consequence *of* Parker's wartime experience with government cost-plus-fixed-fee contracts, he insisted from the very beginning that there be both Navy auditors and General Accounting Office auditors resident on site to approve billable expenses. As an example of how he worked to keep the ERA melody going without upsetting the auditors, he told this story:<sup>3</sup>

In order to keep this group together and to keep happiness as best I could, I took every good excuse I had for giving a dinner. When I got somebody coming out from Washington, for instance, from the Navy headquarters which is now NSA, I would give a dinner. I would have everybody to it, all the engineering, all the technical staff, and I would pay for it myself. None of that ever went into expenses. But having seen that we had those dinners, we got attacks from others because we must have done something wrong. But I'm so happy that I did it that way. Oh, I just know that it made a contribution to keeping those people together.

In a further discussion *of* the auditing *of* billable expenses Parker said:<sup>4</sup>

It's the trivial things that kill you, really, on these kind of contracts. For example, Bill Norris and I were coming up from Chicago to Minneapolis together, a four-hour trip by train. We were working on a proposal for another contract. So we took a room on the train for an extra \$8 or so. We were working on classified documents that we did not want to expose in the open, and so forth. But this is the type of thing the auditors would seize. It was nit-picking but it was the little things that hurt you, not the big ones. Everybody did the big ones all right.

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<sup>1</sup> Hakala Associates, Inc., Engineering Research Associates, The Wellspring of Minnesota's Computer Industry, in commemoration of ERA's 40th anniversary, Communications Department, Sperry, St. Paul, Minn., undated; no copyright notice.

<sup>2</sup> Norberg, Arthur L., transcript of "An Interview with John E. Parker," conducted on December 13, 1985 and May 6, 1986 in Washington, D.C., housed in the archive at the Charles Babbage Institute.

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## How Management Functioned

The ERA management committee took up two different kinds of topics. The first kind were all personnel matters: the determination of a health program, a pension program, a vacation policy. The second kind involved the financial aspects of new proposals. Should a proposal be bid on? What price? What profit should be expected? Parker participated in both of these kinds of discussions. Parker did not participate in technical discussions. Norris, without Parker, would meet with the next lower level people (Rubens, Hill, Mullaney, and Cohen, for example) to discuss the research and the technical possibilities that could be achieved. Their decisions would be passed up to Parker who, when asked by Norberg if he ever had an effect on any of these decisions, said: "I don't believe so. The only thing I might have had some negative reaction to would be in the financial side of it."<sup>1</sup>

## Financial Difficulties

Tomash and Cohen describe how ERA always did splendidly technically, increasing its staff and growing, but always suffering from being under-capitalized.<sup>2</sup> In early 1951 Parker estimated that at least \$5 million and perhaps as much as \$10 million was needed for ERA to seriously enter the computer business. An internal evaluation of ERA's prospects and needs at that time resulted in the consideration by the management committee of four alternative solutions: slow growth, borrow more money, sell stock to the public, or merge with a stronger company.

The alternatives did not come as a surprise to Parker. His prewar experience with early airlines had taught him that for their first 10 years of growth they had to have more and more money, which they would get on the basis of projections of future growth. He said:<sup>3</sup>

I was doing the same thing about ERA. We were going to be in the computer business and we were going to need a lot of money. I said, "We can get it. We'll become a public company. We'd have to project and we'd have to do it by little leaps, but we could do it." We got to the point that if we were going to go commercial, we needed lots of money. We could have sold our stock. We had enough background, except the devilish thing at that time was that we were still under wraps about the things for which we had been formed, which was to carry on our secret code work. So we couldn't go into the SEC and show them the background of all these things, and it was a real problem.

Slow growth was not acceptable to the enthusiastic ERA management, and Parker did not consider it feasible to borrow even more money. Thus he saw ERA's only option to be a merger.

According to Tomash and Cohen:<sup>1</sup>

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From 1948 onward he [Parker] had maintained contact with possible purchasers. ERA was never explicitly for sale, but such companies as IBM, ARMA, Burroughs, Honeywell, National Cash Register, and Raytheon were all kept informed of ERA's progress.

When asked specifically about IBM, Parker later said:<sup>2</sup>

IBM never made an offer, although they gave me every indication in the world that if I would come to them and say I'd like to merge with them, yes. I always said that as long as we were doing what we were and as well as we were, we'd always have IBM as a background.... I'm sure that IBM was looking at ERA. There was quite a good deal of pressure for ERA to discuss a possible association with IBM. Engstrom and I met with Mr. Watson, Sr., and the head of his patent department, who later became one of the officers of ERA. Meader and Talbot urged me to deal with IBM. IBM never actually made an offer. They were restricted by antitrust.

In a private communication J.W. Birkenstock, retired IBM vice president to whom the patent department then reported, expressed doubts about this story of a meeting with Watson and of the head of IBM's patent department later joining ERA, and disagreed with some of Parker's criticisms of IBM.

While talking about IBM, Parker gave an opinion about doing business with them:

For several years I did my best to acquire some business from IBM. Several times we came down to almost having a major contractual product arrangement with IBM, but I always came up against the same block from the IBM standpoint that "it wasn't invented here." Whatever we had, they thought they could do better and they did have the power.... It was always my opinion that we had real possible good legal action against IBM, but it came down to points where we could hire one lawyer and they could hire ten.

### **Sale to Remington-Rand**

In the fall of 1951 Parker got a call from a brokerage firm in Boston saying that their client would like to make an offer to buy ERA. Parker met with the Remington-Rand management: James H. Rand, the president; General Douglas MacArthur, chairman of the board; and their chief financial officer. Parker had never courted that company because it already owned Eckert-Mauchly, and because he was annoyed about a personnel raid it had made on ERA in 1949. Negotiations were complicated by the lack of security clearance for any of the Remington-Rand executives, which made it impossible to disclose the nature of most of ERA's products and programs. Final closing of the deal was delayed for some months, due to an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission and antitrust inquiries from the Department of Justice. Parker spent about four months in Washington with the FTC, who finally, "after being educated in the computer business, qualified that they [Remington-Rand] weren't violating antitrust laws and so forth.

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In December 1951, Parker announced to a surprised and somewhat dismayed group of ERA shareholder/engineers that he had accepted an offer for the purchase of the company. The price was 73,000 common shares of Remington-Rand worth about \$1.7 million. ERA shareholders had their original investment multiplied by 85 in a little more than five years.

The distress of Parker's associates because of the sale was real and, in some cases, permanent. For example, in a private communication in response to Weiss' request for obituary comments on Parker, William C. Norris wrote:<sup>1</sup>

After he left Univac, we virtually lost contact. I can recall only briefly seeing him twice, and on both occasions at reunions. John Parker and I had deep differences over the future of Engineering Research Associates ...

In his interview with Norberg, Parker said that part of his reason for accepting the Remington-Rand offer was that ERA would stay as an intact organization, something that would have been impossible if it had been swallowed up by IBM. Parker also said:

After it was over with [the sale to Remington-Rand] both Burroughs and the Cash Register and others all said, "Gee, why didn't you let us know you were for sale and so forth?" and I said, "Well, it wasn't for sale until somebody came in with an offer that I put up to the stockholders and we felt this was in the best interest of the company to go." I took the position that I would never offer our company for sale but that, if somebody made us a bona fide offer, then I would have to put it up to my stockholders. The professional staff owned 50% of the stock and I owned 50%.

After the sale Parker remained as president of ERA, which was at first a wholly owned subsidiary of Remington-Rand and, about six months later, transformed into a division. ERA, like all the Remington-Rand divisions, operated independently and was in competition in every respect with the Eckert and Mauchly division in Philadelphia and the Norwalk laboratories; most of the computer personnel at Norwalk were former ERA employees acquired by Remington-Rand in the 1949 personnel raid.

At the beginning of 1953, Parker moved to New York to head a newly established Electronic Computer Sales Department. Here is how he described starting in New York:

I was immediately taken in and introduced to the manager of the New York office. The manager of the real estate division had just passed on and his office was vacant and his secretary was without an assignment, so I was introduced to Miss Quinn and they said this is going to be my secretary and this is going to be my office. The treasurer's office, the general counsel's office, and that type of management was in New York, in this very large building. Eventually, we grew from that one office to three. We had one floor in which we had a Univac system where we did work for hire and used it as a demonstrator for people we were negotiating with. We ran a school for our customers including a two-week introductory course in computers for senior management. We had a three-month programming course and a six-month maintenance course. This, I think, was one of our real contributions to the development of the business.

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<sup>1</sup>Norris, William C., July 9, 1990; private communication.

In New York Parker dealt on a regular basis with the top executives of the merged companies, including Art Rumbles, vice president of sales for the entire Remington-Rand organization; Al Sears, vice president in charge of the New York area, who had close relationships with the financial people; Frank McNamara, general counsel; and patent attorney George Elgroth. He had unlimited contact with General MacArthur, Remington-Rand chairman, to whose New York apartment he took most of his leading prospects. Sometimes he used Jim Rand as his authority for his promises of what Remington-Rand would do, but he preferred to use MacArthur.

Here is Parker's description of how both he and his potential customers would be impressed with a meeting in MacArthur's Waldorf Towers apartment:

Sometimes Mrs. MacArthur made it, depending on the group of people. And she'd take the people around and show them these mementos that he had gathered all around the world. It was dramatic the way he would come in. His aide would come in first and, you know, everybody would be around the room somewhere, and he'd walk right over to me the first thing and shake hands with me and ask me about my wife, to show that this was a personal relationship, which, fortunately, it was. This goes way back to his mother and my wife's grandmother, who were intimate friends here in Washington. When he [MacArthur] was chief of staff, my senior partner in my banking firm, G.M.P. Murphy and Co., [was MacArthur's] classmate, and they used to come down and use our apartment for private visits. So this goes way back and, I must say, he was magnificent.

Parker's staff grew to 40 or 50 people. He considered himself to be vice president of all electronic computer sales and was independent, from a sales point of view, of Philadelphia, Norwalk, and St. Paul, although he had in his department representatives from each of these fiefdoms. His sales presentations to customers included seminars on products from all three locations, although he said that Norwalk really supplied practically nothing. In addition to Parker's central sales organization, each of the three subdivisions had sales organizations with representation in the principal US cities.

Parker said that there was a very good working relationship between his staff and the laboratories and, when asked about the relationship between Philadelphia and St. Paul, he replied:

Well, I think the best answer to that is the Univac II, which was a product of a cooperation between St. Paul and Philadelphia. Primarily, I give credit for the development of Univac II to St. Paul.

When pressed further on the question of friction between the two divisions, Parker responded with an anecdote about J. Presper Eckert of the Philadelphia division:

I don't really think so. Do you know Eckert? ... There's just no way that anybody could deal consistently with him without having some friction, but nothing, nothing that I took seriously.... He's a very unusual man. Very unusual.... For instance, once upon a time I invited him to come to a meeting I was having with the senior people of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company: the chairman, the president, several officers. He came in and talked about the future. He made everything that Metropolitan Life had, obsolete. Why did they already have this, when what "Pres" was proposing was going to be so much better. This was typical. He was primarily a developer, an engineer. Not a salesman.

Parker met resistance to the computer business from other Remington-Rand divisions. For example, he said:

Within the management there were people who just didn't believe. People like the president himself [James Rand], who said that he didn't see any future in the computer business. As an example, the president of the shaver division—that used to be a very profitable unit of the company—didn't want to see any moneys spent for development work, research and development, in this field [computing]. At one meeting we had in front of the management, he made the statement that if we ever sold five of these machines that he would have a statue built for me in the front yard.

## **Merger with Sperry**

As Tomash and Cohen point out, under Parker's sales leadership Remington-Rand had computers in place, ahead of IBM, at General Electric, US Steel, Westinghouse, and Metropolitan Life, but, because it was primarily a rental and service business, the more Parker succeeded, the more cash Remington-Rand required. By 1955 James Rand belatedly recognized that his firm did not have the resources necessary to maintain a position of market leadership and sought a stronger partner. In June 1955 the Sperry Corporation and Remington-Rand merged to form the Sperry-Rand Corporation.

When Sperry bought Remington-Rand, Parker recalled that the president of Sperry said he was never going to put another cent into the development of the computer business. He didn't think it was necessary. Parker remarked:

This was where Remington-Rand lost its lead with IBM and it took ten years for them to get back into business.

Soon after this merger, Parker left the company. This is how he described that step:

I said, "I've made speeches all across this country about Remington-Rand and our staff and our ability, that we were always going to continue to keep pace with the advancement of the technology. I just can't go back and say that we're not going to do any of these new things." I asked for a hearing before the board, which Harvey Vickers, president of Sperry, didn't grant me, but I did appear before part of the executive committee.

Parker made a rather impassioned plea that the only way that Univac could maintain its market preeminence over IBM was to continue to invest capital and persist in funding research and development. Faced with a choice of backing Parker, then a senior vice president, or the chairman and chief executive officer, the committee chose to defer to Vickers and follow what proved to be his short-sighted judgment.

That fall, Norris was moved from being head of the ERA Division to be the first general manager of a newly consolidated Univac Division that now included all the previously independent divisions. Parker commented:

When they put Bill Norris in, I told them that they couldn't find a finer man in every respect to do this, but if he had to work under the conditions under which I had had to work, I didn't give him two years to stay with the company. Bill only stayed about eight months.

## Life after Univac

After leaving Univac, Parker was an independent consultant for several years and became well known to Charles and Herbert Allen, who controlled Allen & Company, a New York City investment banking firm that indirectly controlled Teleregister.<sup>1</sup> Teleregister had been a pioneer in the airline reservation systems after having installed the early railroad reservation systems; in 1947 Teleregister provided American Airlines with the first on-line real-time reservation system at their Boston and New York terminals. In 1961 Teleregister was the principal supplier of stock quotation systems in the form of large “tote” boards in brokerage offices. At that time the business was just beginning to utilize desktop access devices, and Teleregister was in the forefront of these developments.

Under its previous CEO, Teleregister encountered technical and financial problems, causing the Allens to seek outside help. They hired Parker as chairman of the board and chief executive officer because of his expertise in the data-processing industry and his background in finance.

In 1964 the Bunker Ramo Corporation, then a defense contractor engaged in the military data processing and process control business and owned jointly by Martin Marietta and Thompson Ramo Wooldridge, was merged with Teleregister. Parker continued as chairman of the board and was the principal executive officer of the merged company. The company grew, through mergers and acquisitions, from approximately \$35 million in 1964 to \$359 million in 1974. Parker retired from the firm in 1969, when almost 70, and from the board of directors, because of the age policy at Bunker Ramo, in 1973 or 1974.

In a personal letter to Eric Weiss, Mrs. Marshall Pritchett, Parker's last personal secretary, listed from memory the boards on which he served in the period that she knew him (late 1960s to 1989): Northwest Airlines, Hall-Scott, Brown Co., Slick Airways, Airlift International, Ambac (now United Technologies), Martin-Marietta, National Savings and Trust Co. (now Crestar Bank N.A.), and Zeigler Coal Co.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to his retirement, the Parkers had a principal residence in Washington but spent most of each week in their New York apartment, which they gave up in 1972. In the mid-1970s Parker was much taken up with the protracted lawsuits that resulted from Howard Hughes' acquisition of Air West. Parker's primary outside interest was the Finance Committee of the US Naval Academy Foundation, on which he served until a few months before his death.

In the late 1970s the Parkers retired to the St. Andrews Club in Florida.

For the last few years of his life Parker wintered in Delray, Fla., a few miles from J.W. Birkenstock of IBM. Parker told Norberg in 1986:

We had a very pleasant relationship through Birkenstock. He's now retired, lives in Delray, where I live in the winter, and I'll be seeing him in the next couple of weeks. And every time we get together we reminisce about why, you know, it hadn't gone that way.

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<sup>1</sup> Sheehan, Dennis W., September 27, 1990; private communication.

<sup>2</sup> Pritchett, Juliette A., September 10, 1990; private communication.

## Summary

A Sperry commemoration of ERA summarized Parker:

Parker was a capitalist by experience, a dynamic, personable extrovert who rolled over problems or tiptoed around them in equally deft fashion.

Tomash and Cohen, both participants in the birth of ERA and both of whom knew Parker personally, describe him in these words:

A genial extrovert, he was well-connected and moved easily in the Washington political and military milieu. Parker was a personable salesman, a resourceful entrepreneur and an energetic businessman. Beneath a hearty, bluff exterior he was observant, shrewd, and pragmatic.

History has shown that his vision of the future of the computing industry was far better than that of his superiors in Sperry and Univac.<sup>1</sup>

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## UPDATES

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<sup>1</sup> From Weiss 1992.