Feb. 25th

APT Ashtrays

Feb. 25, 1959

On this day, Douglas Ross [Dec 21] gave a public demonstration of APT (Automatically Programmed Tool), a programming language predecessor of modern CAM systems. APT processed a description of a part to generate instructions for milling that part on a numerically controlled machine tool. This relieved a machinist of having to calculate the movements himself.

A *New Yorker* article about the event (March 28) reported that: "The Air Force announced today that it has a machine that can receive instructions in English – figure out how to make whatever is wanted – and teach other machines how to make it. An Air Force general said it will enable the United States to build a war machine that nobody would want to tackle. Today it made an ashtray."

Souvenir aluminum ashtrays, milled by the APT System, were included in the press kit. One of them was later donated to the Computer History Museum [Sept 24] by Ross.

An APT II commemorative ashtray. (c) The Computer History Museum.

APT was one of first large cooperative programming ventures, combining teams from the Air Force, MIT, and the Aircraft Industries Association. MIT's involvement grew out of work by John T. Parsons [Oct 11] on servo mechanics.

APT wasn't quite the first numerical control system; Patrick J. Hanratty [March 5] had developed PROTO and MTD in 1957-58. However, there's some debate over whether APT's design predates those systems.

Brøderbund Founded

Feb. 25, 1980

Brøderbund Software was known for its 8-bit games: Choplifter, "Lode Runner", Karateka, and "Prince of Persia" [Oct 3], all of which first appeared on the Apple II [June 5]. Later the company produced Myst [Sept 24] and the "Carmen Sandiego" series. It also published and distributed bestselling consumer software, such as "The Print Shop" [July 00], "Bank Street Writer" [Nov 18], "3D Home Architect", and "Family Tree Maker".

Brøderbund was founded by Doug and Gary Carlston to market the "Galactic Empire" and "Galactic Trader" games that Doug Carlston had coded for the TRS-80 [Aug 3] in 1979

"Galactic Empire" used names from various African languages, including calling a group of merchants the Broederbond, an Afrikaans word meaning a "band of brothers". The Carlstons slightly altered the spelling when naming their company.

Apple's Black Wednesday

Feb. 25, 1981

Apple CEO Michael Scott [Feb 1] fired forty employees, including half of the Apple II [June 5] team. Later that afternoon he assembled the remaining employees in front of a keg of beer and explained his reasons, "I used to say that when being CEO at Apple wasn't fun anymore, I'd quit. But now I've changed my mind — when it isn't fun anymore, I'll fire people until it's fun again."

Following this, he was moved to the position of vice chairman, a title with little power, and Mike Markkula [Feb 11], the man who had first hired Scott, replaced him.

Scott left Apple on July 10, 1981, and has since become an expert on colored gemstones. The mineral scottyite (IMA 2012-027) is named after him.

By a coincidence, Scott shares the same name as the manager in the US TV version of "The Office".

Patriotic Battery Failure

Feb. 25, 1991

During the Gulf War, an American Patriot Missile battery in Dharan, Saudi Arabia, failed to intercept an incoming Iraqi Scud missile. The Scud struck an army barracks, killing 28 personnel and injuring around 100 others.

The failed intercept was due to arithmetic rounding. A value, 0.1 secs, was rounded to fit into a 24-bit register using fixed point arithmetic. As time passed after the missile battery was switched on, more 0.1 secs were added to this register, compounding the rounding inaccuracy.

The failing battery had been running for around 100 hours, and the error had grown to about 0.34 seconds. This was enough that the incoming Scud was outside the tracking range of the device.

The problem had actually been detected some two weeks earlier, on Feb. 11, and as a stopgap it was recommended that each battery's computer be restarted regularly. The manufacturer finally supplied updated software on Feb. 26, the day after the incident.

During the Gulf War, the US Army claimed a successful intercept rate by Patriot missiles

of 80%. This estimate was scaled back to 70% shortly after the war ended. In a later congressional investigation, testimony indicated that the Patriot's intercept rate could actually be lower than 10%, and perhaps even zero.

For more numerical errors, see [Feb 10], [June 4], [Aug 1], [Sept 23], [Oct 24].

DEC Alpha Announced

Feb. 25, 1992

The DEC [Aug 23] Alpha was a series of 64-bit RISC processors designed to replace the aging 32-bit VAX [Oct 25], and aimed at high-end PCs, workstations, and servers. At their introduction, they were the world's fastest chips.

The first Alpha was the DECchip 21064, designed by Dirk Meyer and Edward McLellan. The first two digits, "21," signified the 21st century, the last two digits stood for 64 bits, and later versions incremented the middle digit.

Following DEC's acquisition by Compaq [Feb 14] in 1998, some designers believed that the quality of the Alpha processors went down because Compaq was more committed to Intel's 64-bit Itanium. Eventually Compaq phased out the Alpha, and sold all of the Alpha intellectual property (including the design team) to Intel.

Surfing the Internet / Net / Web

Feb. 25, 1992

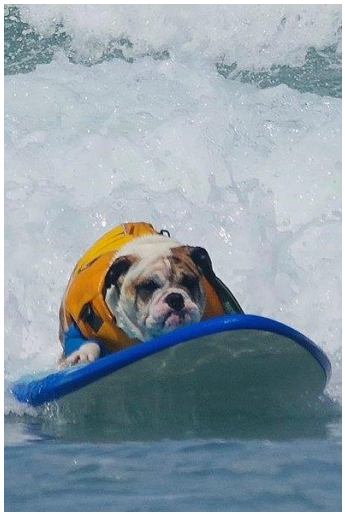
The phrase 'surfing the internet' first appeared on this day in the USENET newsgroup alt.gopher, in a post from Mark McCahill [Feb 7], which included: "There is a lot to be said for surfing the internet with gopher from anywhere that you can find a phone jack."

The mention of Gopher [April 00] marks this as a reference to the Internet rather than the Web. McCahill later explained the comment: "One of my favorite sports is windsurfing, so 'surfing' is never far from my mind… that and extending the 'channel surfing' metaphor to the internet."

In June, the term appeared in print for the first time, in a short article called "Surfing the Internet" by Jean Armour Polly in the University of Minnesota's *Wilson Library Bulletin*, a popular magazine amongst librarians. She came up with the name after seeing an Apple mouse mat with a picture of a surfer on a big wave, with the words "Information Surfer". That mat had been created by Steve Cisler, who worked at the Apple corporate library. He later recalled hearing people talking about surfing information in the late 1980's.

'Surfing the net' first appeared on Aug. 5, in a post to the bit.listserv.gutnberg newsgroup, and on March, 1993, Tom Mandel published an overview of the Internet called "Surfing the Wild Internet."

'Surfing the web' finally appeared on Nov. 22, 1993, in a post to bionet.announce.



Doggedly not surfing the Internet. Photo by Mike's Birds. CC BY-SA 2.0.

Predating all of these events, Paul Saffo wrote a *Personal Computing* column in July 1989 which talked about 'information surfing,' and he recalls hearing the phrase around Silicon Valley at least two years before he wrote his piece.

Saffo refers to Marshall McLuhan in his article, who popularized the term "surfing" to refer to a rapid movement through documents or knowledge. For example, McLuhan wrote in "The Gutenberg Galaxy" (1962): "Heidegger surf-boards along on the electronic wave as triumphantly as Descartes rode the mechanical wave."

Google's First Tweet

Feb. 25, 2009

Google's [Sept 7] first tweet was:

"I'm 01100110 01100101 01100101 01101100 01101001 01101110 01100111 00100000 01101100 01110101 01100011 01101011 01111001 00001010."

You'd be right to assume it was written using 8-bit ASCII [June 17], and it decodes to "Feeling Lucky". Google's "I'm Feeling Lucky" button takes the user directly to their first search result.

Arun Ravindran wrote a one-liner Python 3 script to decode it:

```
tweet = "011 ... 10"

print("".join(chr(int(i,2)
) for i in tweet.split()))
```