

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau



(43) International Publication Date
6 April 2006 (06.04.2006)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 2006/037058 A2

(51) International Patent Classification:
H01L 21/677 (2006.01)

(21) International Application Number:
PCT/US2005/034866

(22) International Filing Date:
27 September 2005 (27.09.2005)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(30) Priority Data:
60/613,086 27 September 2004 (27.09.2004) US

(71) Applicant (for all designated States except US):
NORTHROP GRUMMAN CORPORATION [US/US];
1840 Century Park East, Los Angeles, CA 90067 (US).

(72) Inventors; and

(75) Inventors/Applicants (for US only): **NEEBE, Mark, T.** [US/US]; 116 Oak Drive, Catonsville, MD 21228 (US). **ATELSEK, Thomas, F.** [US/US]; 12102 Renner Road, Keymar, MD 21757 (US). **MCCONNELL, William, P.** [US/US]; 3534 Hernwood Road, Woodstock, MD 21163 (US).

(74) Agents: **TREIBER, Adam, M.** et al.; 1425 K Street, N.W., Suite 800, Washington, DC 20005 (US).

(81) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of national protection available): AE, AG, AL, AM, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BW, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DZ, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KM, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, LY, MA, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MZ, NA, NG, NI, NO, NZ, OM, PG, PH, PL, PT, RO, RU, SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, SM, SY, TJ, TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, YU, ZA, ZM, ZW.

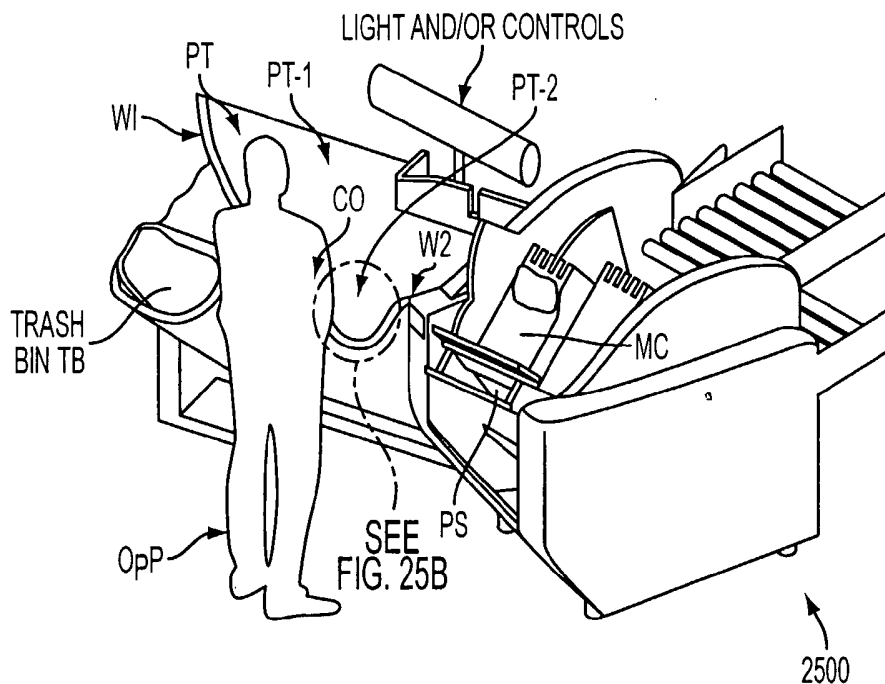
(84) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of regional protection available): ARIPO (BW, GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, NA, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European (AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, MC, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Published:

— without international search report and to be republished upon receipt of that report

[Continued on next page]

(54) Title: PREPARATION OPERATOR FLEX-STATION FOR CARRIER PREPARATION



(57) Abstract: An apparatus for the preparation of bundled mail for subsequent processing is provided. The apparatus includes a first flat surface, proximate to a top end, having a downward angle with respect to a horizontal plane, and a second flat surface, abutting the first flat surface and proximate to a bottom end, having a downward angle with respect to the horizontal plane that is greater than the first flat surface angle. A bottom corner, formed from a first supporting sidewall and a second supporting sidewall, has an opening adapted to receive a corner portion of a mail bundle.

WO 2006/037058 A2



For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

PREPARATION OPERATOR FLEX-STATION FOR CARRIER PREPARATION

Cross-Reference to Related Applications

[0001] The present application claims priority to U.S. Provisional Application Serial No.
5 60/613,086, filed on September 27, 2004, which is incorporated herein by reference in its
entirety.

Background of the Invention

Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention relates generally to, among other things, systems for
10 handling mail (including, e.g., flats, envelopes, letters, postcards and/or other mail) and/or
other objects, and certain preferred embodiments relate, more particularly, to a preparation
operator station for mail and/or the like thin objects which can, preferably, be used in
automated systems for processing mail handled by mail sorting systems, such as, e.g., those
described herein.

Description of Related Art

[0003] The following discussion is based on the inventors' knowledge and should not be
construed as admissions of knowledge in the prior art.

[0004] Currently, a variety of systems are used for the handling of objects, such as, e.g.,
thin objects like mail flats and/or other mail. For example, the United States Postal Service
20 (U.S.P.S.) uses various systems to facilitate and enhance the handling of mail flats. Some
illustrative mail processing systems are described in U.S. Patent No. 6,443,311 (the '311
patent), assigned to Northrop Grumman Corporation, the disclosure of which is incorporated
herein by reference in its entirety as though recited herein in full.

[0005] As another example, one illustrative mail processing system is the AFSM100™ flats sorting system built by Northrop Grumman Corporation and Rapistan Systems and used by the U.S.P.S. The AFSM100 flats sorting machine is a mail sorting system that can process, e.g., large pieces of flat mail, such as for example magazines, in large volumes.

5 Each AFSM100 system has three mail-feeding units.

[0006] In some of these existing mail processing systems, feeders are used to deliver mail into the systems for processing. In some illustrative and non-limiting examples, these feeders include a delivery portion and a destacking (e.g., singulating) portion. In such systems, mail is typically placed onto the delivery portion and delivered to the destacking
10 portion. In these example systems, the mail pieces are usually delivered to a sorting section in pieces (e.g., usually having a fixed gap and/or a fixed pitch).

[0007] In such systems, operators typically load (such as, e.g., manually from mail storage hampers) the mail to be processed onto the delivery portion at the beginning of the operation. The operators usually continue to load the mail while the system processes the
15 mail.

[0008] While the U.S.P.S. processes approximately 200 billion pieces of mail per year, the mail that is processed requires substantial manual loading and tending by operators. With reference to FIGS. 1(A)-1(B), an operator typically loads mail in existing systems as follows: a) mail is brought toward the feeder in trays, tubs, carts or hampers; b) with
20 reference to arrows A in FIGS. 1(A)-1(B), the operator manually moves handfuls of mail from the tray, tub, etc., and places it onto a surface of the system; c) the operator then integrates a new handful of mail into the stack of mail in process by moving the paddle as depicted by the arrows B shown in FIGS. 1(A)-1(B) such that new mail is captured in the stack of mail in process (the paddle then moves synchronously with a conveyor surface); d)
25 the process is repeated.

[0009] This manual process involves a substantial amount of demanding labor and imposes a set of repetitive motions on the operators performing the loading. For letter mail, processing systems may demand about 40,000 pieces an hour. For flats mail, systems may require between about 20,000 and 40,000 pieces per hour distributed over a number of
5 loading consoles (usually, three or four). In such cases, operators may be required to load between about 7,000 and 10,000 flats per hour. With reference to flats, by way of example, these consumption rates can require the operators to lift, transfer and groom approximately 5000 pounds of mail per hour.

[0010] In modern-day mail processing environments, sorting and other systems are
10 continuing to run faster and longer than that in the past. The burden placed upon the operators who feed and/or operate the systems, thus, continues to increase. In many instances, the performance of mail processing equipment is increasingly dependant upon an operator's capacity to support the system.

[0011] As described above with reference to FIGS. 1(A)-1(B), mail processing delivery
15 systems typically include both a transport system (e.g., a belt or magazine conveyor) and a pusher (e.g., paddle) system that work in tandem to deliver mail to the destacking system. In such systems, the transport system defines the rate at which the mail is delivered to the destacking system. In addition, the pusher system defines the orientation angle at which the mail is presented to the destacking system. In such systems, the transport system and
20 the pusher system move together synchronously and are physically coupled to the same drive chain. In this manner, the pusher system acts as a "bookend" for the stack of mail as the mail is transported via the transport system.

[0012] Among other things, the elevated demands placed upon the operators who feed the systems, requires that operators present more mail and/or present mail at a faster rate.

25 This can, e.g., reduce the amount of time available for operators to adjust, groom and/or

otherwise manipulate the mail on the delivery system (e.g., to ensure that it is properly oriented for, for instance, efficient destacking).

[0013] With existing mail feeding systems that have a transport system and a pusher system that are tied together through a single drive mechanism, the synchronous nature of these systems inhibits them from being able to automatically compensate for poorly stacked mail (e.g., leaning too far forward [such as, e.g., in a manner similar to that denoted by dashed lines B shown in FIG. 2(A)] and/or too far backward [such as, e.g., in a manner similar to that denoted by dashed lines A shown in FIG. 2(A)]). These existing systems rely on the operator to correct stacking problems on the delivery system. FIG. 2(A) illustrates, among other things, several states of how the mail can be presented to the destacking unit, with an illustrative preferred state shown in solid lines.

[0014] The stack of flats depicted in solid lines in FIG. 2(A) depicts one optimal condition for presenting the flats (e.g., mail) to a destacking system in preferred embodiments. With systems as described above, an operator typically needs to repeatedly groom (e.g., manually handle and/or manipulate) the mail as it is fed into the destacking section. Otherwise, the angle of orientation relative to the paddle may vary too substantially. As a result, the variation in orientation angle will likely cause a decrease in throughput, an increase in multi-feeds, an increase in damage and/or other problems.

[0015] Therefore, a need exists for a systems and methods that can overcome, among other things; the above and/or other problems with existing systems.

Brief Summary of the Invention

[0016] Various embodiments of the present invention can significantly improve upon existing systems and methods. In some preferred embodiments of the present invention, an apparatus for the preparation of bundled mail for subsequent processing is provided. The

apparatus includes a first flat surface, proximate to a top end, having a downward angle with respect to a horizontal plane, and a second flat surface, abutting the first flat surface and proximate to a bottom end, having a downward angle with respect to the horizontal plane that is greater than the first flat surface angle. A bottom corner, formed from a first supporting sidewall and a second supporting sidewall, has an opening adapted to receive a corner portion of a mail bundle.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0017] The accompanying figures are provided by way of example, without limiting the broad scope of the invention or various other embodiments.

[0018] FIG. 1(A) is a schematic diagram illustrating existing manual loading processes for mail feeding systems and FIG. 1(B) is another schematic diagram illustrating existing manual loading processes for mail feeding systems.

[0019] FIG. 2(A) is a schematic side view of a system according to some embodiments of the invention and FIG. 2(B) is a rear-side elevational view of portions of some preferred embodiments of the invention demonstrating independent drive mechanisms.

[0020] FIG. 3 is a perspective view of a mail automatic induction system according to some preferred embodiments of the invention.

[0021] FIGS. 4–9 show an illustrative operation of an automatic feed system shown in FIG. 3.

[0022] FIG. 10(A) is an elevational view of a system wherein carriers are moved generally vertically to-and/or-from a feeder or other system; FIG. 10(B) is a perspective view of a mail automatic induction system according to some other preferred embodiments of the invention; FIG. 10(C) shows one illustrative and non-limiting mail processing system

in which embodiments of the present invention can be implemented; and FIG. 10(D) is an enlarged view of the preparation operator section shown in FIG. 10(C).

[0023] FIGS. 11(A)–11(C) show one embodiment of a carrier having a pivotally mounted front wall.

5 [0024] FIG. 12 shows another embodiment of a carrier having a pivotally mounted front wall.

[0025] FIG. 13 shows another embodiment of a carrier having a pivotally mounted front wall.

[0026] FIG. 14 is a perspective view of another embodiment of a carrier having a
10 pivotally mounted front wall.

[0027] FIG. 15 is a perspective view of an embodiment of a carrier having a pivotally mounted front wall similar to that shown in FIG. 14.

[0028] FIG. 16 is a schematic side view of an illustrative bundled mail embodiment.

[0029] FIG. 17 is a schematic side view of some illustrative embodiments for inhibiting
15 slump.

[0030] FIG. 18 is a perspective view of a portion of a system with a removable carrier door upon an illustrative destacker.

[0031] FIG. 19(A) is a bottom perspective view showing a carrier employing a removable door 260C, FIG. 19(B) is a top perspective view of the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A) and

20 FIG. 19(C) is a bottom perspective view showing an illustrative carrier having a position registration mechanism.

[0032] FIG. 20(A) is a top perspective view of an upper portion of the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A) with the carrier door in a partially inserted position in the carrier; FIG. 20(B) is a top perspective view of a lower portion of the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A) with the carrier door in a partially inserted position in the carrier; and FIG. 20(C) is a schematic cross-sectional view taken in the vicinity of the arrows C-C in FIG. 20(A) depicting the interrelationship between a dog-ear-tab on the carrier door and a receiving slot in a side wall of the carrier.

[0033] FIG. 21 is a front view of a carrier 260 that is generally similar to, but having a number of variations as shown, to the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A) with a door 260D removed.

[0034] FIG. 22 is a side view of a carrier 260 that is generally similar to the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A).

[0035] FIG. 23 is a schematic diagram depicting the operational relationship between a carrier door 260D and a reciprocating grabbing mechanism in some illustrative embodiments.

[0036] FIGS. 24(A)–24(M) are a plurality of views of an automatic induction system configured to operate with a carrier 260 similar to that shown in FIG. 19(A) at various stages of operation.

[0037] FIGS. 25A and 25B illustrate a preparation operator flex-station according to some illustrative embodiments.

Detailed Description of the Invention

[0038] While the present invention may be embodied in many different environments, a number of illustrative embodiments of such environments are described herein with the

understanding that the present disclosure is to be considered as providing examples of various principles of the invention and such examples are not intended to limit the invention to preferred embodiments described herein and/or illustrated herein.

[0039] The preferred environments involve novel carriers that can be used in a variety of mail applications, such as, e.g., in the automatic loading of prepared mail onto mail processing systems. The following description includes, among other things, descriptions of a) some preferred embodiments of carriers according to the present invention and b) some preferred embodiments of systems and methods in which carriers can be employed.

[0040] The preferred carrier embodiments can be employed in mail applications that provide, among other things, a substantially or entirely automated system for use in the processing of thin objects (including, e.g., three-dimensional objects having a size in first dimension that is substantially smaller than sizes in second and third dimensions). While preferred embodiments can be used to process mail (including, for example, flats, envelopes, letters, postcards and/or other mail), and the most preferred embodiments can be used to process mail flats, various embodiments can also or can alternatively be used to process other thin objects, such as, e.g., sheets, boards, panels, planar materials, paper goods and/or other thin objects.

[0041] Various embodiments can be employed in a variety of systems and devices. In some non-limiting examples, embodiments can be employed within systems similar to that shown in U.S. Patent No. 6,443,311 (the '311 patent), assigned to Northrop Grumman Corporation, entitled Flats Bundle Collator, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety as though recited herein in full, such as, e.g., to upgrade the feeder 10 shown in FIG. 1 of the '311 patent.

[0042] Additionally, various embodiments can be employed, in other non-limiting examples, within an AFSM100™ flats sorting machine built by Northrop Grumman Corporation and Rapistan Systems and used by the United States Postal Service (U.S.P.S.). The AFSM100 flats sorting machine is a mail sorting system that can process, e.g., large
5 pieces of flat mail, such as for example magazines, in large volumes. Each AFSM100 system has three mail-feeding units and embodiments of the present invention can be utilized to improve one or more, preferably all, of these mail-feeding units. In some preferred embodiments, an AFSM100 system is adapted to employ automatic flats stack correction by, e.g., splitting a mail delivery system into two separately controlled components such that,
10 e.g., the machine can deliver mail more efficiently to a sorting unit. Preferably, this is accomplished substantially independently of an operator.

[0043] While some embodiments can be used, e.g., with feeders that feed mail, such as that of the AFSM100 system, various other embodiments can be used with feeders that feed other objects or materials. The terminology feeder includes, as per Webster's II New
15 Riverside Dictionary, "[a] device that supplies ... material" and is not limited to any particular form of feeding or to any particular object fed.

[0044] In some embodiments, a delivery system that delivers carriers to a feeder can include one or more transporter and/or one or more conveyor (such as, e.g., supply conveyor 110 described below). The terminology delivery system includes any system that
20 delivers objects and encompasses one or more, e.g., transporter(s), conveyor(s) and/or the like.

[0045] FIG. 2(A) shows an illustrative stack induction and correction apparatus 10 that can be employed in some preferred embodiments. In these preferred embodiments, the stack induction and correction device includes a transporter 20 and a pusher 30 as shown in
25 FIG. 2(A). As described below, the stack induction and correction device can preferably a)

automatically induct mail to create a mail stack and b) automatically correct the stack during operation. With respect to this stack correction, a system's performance can be enhanced or degraded by the "quality" of a stack as it is presented to a downstream system, such as a destacking system. For example, mail that is either too loose or that is too tight can cause problems, such as for example, system jams, multi-feeds (where, e.g., more than one piece is inducted into the system), system and/or mail damage, adverse effects on the system throughput and/or other problems. In many cases, the orientation angle of the mail (e.g., relative to the face of the pusher) can significantly affect the system. For example, if the mail is slumped (such as, e.g., in a manner similar to that denoted by dashed lines A shown in FIG. 2(A)) the system's performance can substantially degrade. In some instances, it can be helpful to present the mail to the destacking system such that it is generally uniformly aligned with an angle of the pusher system (such as, e.g., in a manner similar to that shown in FIG. 2(A)).

Pusher

[0046] While in some illustrative embodiments, the pusher includes a paddle as shown in FIG. 1, the pusher can have a variety of configurations and can, for example, be made with at least one block-shaped member, at least one wedge-shaped member, a plurality of sub-members (such as, e.g., cross-bars, fingers, tines, etc.), at least one blade member and/or any other appropriate structure capable of defining an object holding surface 25. In some preferred embodiments, the object holding surface 25 can have a single contact section, while in other preferred embodiments it can have a plurality of contact sections. In some preferred embodiments, the object holding surface 25 can be generally planar, while in other preferred embodiments it can be substantially non-planar. It should also be noted that the pusher itself need not be tilted so long as it is configured to define a mail holding surface 25 having an appropriate orientation. In some preferred embodiments, the surface

25 is oriented at a non-perpendicular angle relative to a transport surface 23 of the transporter 20. In various embodiments, any appropriate angular orientation can be selected based on circumstances and may involve an recline, no angle, a forward tilt or any other angle.

5 [0047] In some embodiments, the pusher is adapted to move fore-and-aft in the direction of the arrows A3, while retaining a substantially non-perpendicular or reclined orientation as shown in FIG. 2(A). In some preferred embodiments, the angle of recline can vary from about 10° from perpendicular to about 20° from perpendicular; however, the angle of recline can vary from 0° (i.e., perpendicular) to over 20° based on circumstances.

10 [0048] In some embodiments, the pusher can be mounted such that, when desired, it can be raised upward and moved back to a left side of the transporter 20 to support additional mail or the like.

Transporter

[0049] With respect to the transporter 20, various embodiments can employ any
15 appropriate structure that is known or available. The terminology transporter includes any device that transports or conveys from one place to another. In some embodiments, the transporter 20 can include a conveyor, a sliding plate, a laterally moved support, a trolley, a plurality of rollers, an inclined plate (such as, e.g., an inclined plate having a low friction surface along which objects can slide due to gravitational or other forces) and/or any other
20 appropriate transporter mechanism known or available having, e.g., a transport surface 23 with which objects may be transported. In that regard, the transport surface 23 can include, e.g., one or more conveyor belt surface(s), one or more sliding plate surface(s), one or more laterally moved support surface(s), one or more trolley surface(s), one or more roller surface(s), one or more inclined plate surface(s) and/or other appropriate surfaces. In

some preferred embodiments, the surface 23 can include a single section (such as, e.g., an outer surface of a single conveyor belt as shown), while in other preferred embodiments it can have a plurality of sections (such as, e.g., outer surfaces of a plurality of separate conveyors, rollers or the like). In some preferred embodiments, the surface 23 can be generally planar and generally horizontal (see, e.g., FIG. 2(A)), while in other preferred embodiments it can be substantially non-planar and/or substantially non-horizontal.

[0050] In the embodiment shown in FIG. 2(A), the transporter 20 can be configured to transport mail, such as, e.g., flats F towards a downstream system 40. The system 40 can include any appropriate system, and, in some preferred embodiments, the system 40 is a destacking system. A destacking system can, e.g., singulate and/or feed flats to other systems or devices. In some preferred embodiments, the transporter 20 can include a conveyor belt 21 that is rotatably supported on rollers or pulleys 22 in a continuous manner to define an upper run or surface 23 upon which a stack of mail can be placed. The mail transport surface 23 is preferably parallel to a direction of travel of the pusher 30 as indicated by arrows A3 but may be otherwise oriented (such as, e.g., at a slight angle) relative to the direction of pusher travel based on circumstances.

[0051] As shown in FIG. 2(A), a moving device 50 (such as, e.g., a motor and/or another mechanism for effecting movement of the transporter 20) is preferably included. In one illustrative example, the moving device 50 can include a motor that is connected so as to rotate the pulley(s) 22. In addition, a second moving device 60 (e.g., at least one motor and/or another mechanism for effecting movement of the pusher) is also preferably included. The pusher can be, for example, supported on a support block that is mounted so as to laterally move along a generally horizontal track (such as, e.g., via roller bearings or the like) and so as to upwardly move along a generally vertical track (see, e.g., embodiments described below). In some embodiments, track(s) and/or a support block can

be located adjacent the transporter surface and behind a retaining wall 30R that helps maintain flats upon the transporter (such as, e.g., shown in FIG. 2(B)). In other embodiments, various other mechanisms can be used to move the pusher fore-and-aft and/or up-and-down to follows a desired path, such as screw shafts, hydraulic cylinders, robotic mechanisms, reciprocating arms, mechanical linkages and/or various other mechanisms.

Non-Synchronous

[0052] In preferred embodiments, the pusher and transporter systems are adapted to be capable of moving non-synchronously and/or independently from one another in a manner to correct for poor stack angle and to allow the pusher to be independently directed to assist in the automatic loading of mail or the like from carriers. In preferred embodiments, the moving devices 50 and 60 include independent devices, such as, e.g., independent servomotors. As discussed above, a variety of mechanisms can be used to effect movement of the transporter and the pusher.

[0053] In the embodiment shown in FIG. 2(A), the moving devices 50 and 60 are both operated via a common controller 70. The controller can include, for example, an electronic control means, such as a computer (e.g., a personal computer [PC], a network computer, a server and/or any other computer device, such as any device that accepts information [e.g., in the form of, e.g., digital data] and processes it based on programming or a sequence of instructions), a processor (e.g., a microprocessor), an integrated circuit, or the like. In some embodiments, separate controllers can be employed to operate each respective moving device 50 and 60 and/or components thereof. In some embodiments, the controller 70 can include a plurality of controllers.

[0054] In some embodiments, the controller 70 can include software to control separated pusher and transporter mechanisms using, for example, programmable logic controllers (PLCs), one or more external personal computer (PC) or the like, one or more programmable servo drive and/or other devices. In addition, in preferred embodiments, control is carried out based on input from one or more sensor device(s) D. The sensor device(s) D can be used to sense, detect, estimate and/or otherwise evaluate the condition of the flats (such as, e.g., flat orientation). In some embodiments, the sensor device(s) D can sense flat orientation at a plurality of positions along the transporter 20, or along substantially the entire length of the transporter 20, or along the entire length of the transporter 20. In the illustrated embodiment, two sensor devices D are depicted. However, any appropriate number of sensor device(s) D can be selected depending on circumstances. In some embodiments, the sensor device(s) D can include one or more photo-light beam sensor, one or more photo-light sensor array, one or more pressure sensor, one or more camera and/or one or more appropriate sensor device to, e.g., detect when the flats (e.g., mail flats) are not being presented or delivered properly (e.g., to a sorting unit or the like).

[0055] When certain conditions are detected by these sensors, separate drive systems on the delivery system can be adapted to correct for, e.g., poorly loaded mail. For example, the moving devices 50 and 60 can be adapted to alter respective speeds, accelerations, relative positions and/or the like. In this manner, an improved efficiency can be achieved. This can also enable a higher throughput, a reduction in damage to mail, such as, e.g., flats and/or to the system, a reduction in the amount of multi-fed pieces of mail and/or various other advantages.

[0056] In some embodiments, an operator (such as, e.g., an operator OpF shown in FIGS. 10(A) and 10(C)) can affect or can partly control corrections (such as, e.g., via

operator interfaces and/or by manually moving the pusher, etc.), such as by receiving operator input to control the manner of correction, to control the extent of correction, to override operation and/or the like. However, substantial advantages can be obtained, in some preferred embodiments, by substantially or entirely eliminating the dependency of a machine's performance on an operator's ability to groom the mail while the system is loaded. In some preferred embodiments, a substantially automatic or entirely automatic stack correction is provided, as well as a substantially automatic or entirely automatic induction of mail or the like (discussed below).

[0057] In some preferred embodiments, a "decoupled" delivery system can thus be provided in which a pusher (e.g., a paddle) and a transporter (e.g., a transport system) can be moved independently to, e.g., correct against stacking errors and to effect automatic induction of mail. With respect to stacking errors, in some illustrative cases, stacking errors can include one or more of the following: a) excessive forward lean of one or more flat (such as, e.g., illustratively depicted in dashed lines at B in FIG. 2(A)); b) excessive rearward lean of one or more flat (such as, e.g., illustratively depicted in dashed lines at A in FIG. 2(A)); c) excessive spacing between flats; d) excessive movement of flats independent of transporter movement (such as, e.g., shifting or the like); e) variation in flat height (such as, e.g., variation of height between adjacent flats and/or variation of height of a specific flat); f) variation in pressure (such as, e.g., lateral pressure upon a pusher and/or upon a system downstream of the pusher, such as a destacking unit); g) slippage or movement of flats during transport; and/or h) other conditions as would be now or later apparent to those in the art based on this disclosure. These and/or other error conditions can be sensed by a number of different methods including, e.g., that described above, such as, e.g., pressure sensors (which can be used, e.g., to sense lateral stack pressure at a destacker system and/or at a pusher system), cameras and/or photo arrays (which can be used, e.g., to sense the stack angle or the like), electromagnet wave or light beam sensors (which can include,

e.g., sensing via through beams, reflective beams and/or a combination of thereof for detecting stack angle or the like). As discussed above, the system can further include PLCs, external PCs, programmable servo drives and/or other devices that can be used to control and adjust a stack of flats (e.g., mail flats) on the transporter.

5 [0058] Among other things, as discussed above, decoupling the transporter and pusher components and placing them on separate drive systems can enable movement the pusher system independently of the transporter system and vice versa. In some embodiments, if the system sensors detect that the mail is stacked too loosely (e.g., leaning away from the destacking surface), the pusher can be actuated to "tighten" the stack by moving toward the
10 destacking system at a greater velocity than the transporter. In some embodiments, if the system sensors detect that the stack is "over tilted" (e.g., leaning towards the destacking system), the transporter can also be moved forward at a greater rate than the pusher. For example, when a stack of mail has been poorly loaded, since the pusher system is uncoupled from the transporter system, a sensing mechanism (e.g., located, for instance, at
15 or proximate a downstream end of the transporter [e.g., at a destacking system]) can send a signal causing, e.g., the pusher to move forward until a good mail stack condition is achieved (e.g., is sensed).

[0059] Preferably, the transporter and the pusher can continue to move at a generally consistent velocity (such as, e.g., at a "normal" velocity corresponding to a particular
20 apparatus "feed" rate) and the relative velocity there-between can be increased and/or decreased during such movement (e.g., via respective corrections). In this manner, the preferred embodiments should be able to increase throughput of the system and avoid errors that may decrease throughput. In less preferred embodiments, stack correction can include stopping the transport system as the pusher is moved forward and/or stopping the
25 pusher as the transport system is moved forward. While these latter embodiments may be

readily programmed and implemented, in some circumstances, these can be less preferable because, e.g., there may be a slight decrease in throughput of the system due to stoppage of respective devices.

[0060] FIG. 2(B) illustrates some components of an automatic stack induction and correction system in some illustrative embodiments. In these illustrative embodiments, portions of the apparatus (e.g., enclosure walls and the like) are omitted to reveal internal structure. These illustrative, and non-limiting, embodiments can include: asynchronously geared motors 60 and 50 with separate drive chains 30DC and 20DC, respectively, that drive the pusher and transporter systems independently; photo-light sensors (not shown) that signal when conditions exist for the systems to correct the stack angle; and a stand-alone computer (not shown) with software that controls the two independent systems.

[0061] As depicted in FIG. 2(B), in some preferred embodiments, the moving device 60 can include a motor 60 that drives a drive chain 30DC or the like to effect fore-and-aft movement of a block 30S (e.g., via a link or the like 30L), the block preferably being mounted for reciprocating movement along a generally horizontal track 30T (shown in dashed lines), and an elevating mechanism (such as, e.g., a second motor 60B and a generally vertical track [not shown] guiding the pusher 30 upon the support block 30S) to effect generally up-and-down movement of the pusher 30 with respect to, e.g., the support block 30S, which together effect desired movement of the pusher.

Method of Upgrading

[0062] According to some preferred embodiments, a method of upgrading an existing system (such as, e.g., an existing AFSM100 system) having synchronously coupled transporter and a pusher mechanisms can include modifying the existing system to include independently controlled drives for the transporter and the pusher mechanisms, such as

discussed above. In this manner, an advantageous upgrade can be effectively and efficiently implemented. For example, a method of upgrading can include modifying an existing feeder 100 so as to replace the drive mechanisms with features depicted in, e.g., FIG. 2(B). Additionally, the method of upgrading can also include modifying a path followed
5 by a pusher to enable the pusher to be automatically moved to a position to facilitate transfer of objects, such as, e.g., flats out of a carrier (e.g., to laterally slide the flats out of a carrier positioned proximate the feeder as described below).

Implementation In Illustrative Mail Processing Systems

[0063] FIG. 10(C) shows an illustrative and non-limiting mail processing system in which
10 embodiments can be implemented. Embodiments can be employed in a variety of systems, such as, e.g., within systems disclosed in the above-noted co-pending application 60/469,828 (see, e.g., by way of example FIGS. 9-10, etc.).

[0064] In the illustrative system shown in FIG. 10(C), one or more preparation operator OpP can fill empty carriers 160 at an upstream loading zone. Among other things, the
15 preparation operator can facilitate efforts of a feed operator OpF by preparing flats for processing. In some embodiments, the preparation operator can, e.g., de-bundle bundled flats fed to the preparation operator along a conveyor (such as, e.g., feeding bundled flats conveyed from a hamper under the lower supply conveyor 110 shown in FIG. 10(C)) and can re-orient and place them inside a carrier (e.g., the preparation operator can start with,
20 e.g., bundles laying flat, debundle the same and place the debundled mail in a generally vertical orientation on a carrier).

[0065] It is contemplated that in some embodiments, some or all of the preparation operator's manual tasks may be automated. For example, a substantially and/or entirely

automatically controlled mechanism could be provided to cut bundles and/or to reorient mail from a horizontal orientation to vertical orientations inside carriers.

[0066] Thus, the system preferably eliminates the need for feed operators OpF to 'face' and 'orient' the mail during the loading process into the feeder. In some mail handling systems, orienting and facing is desirable because, e.g., mail-processing equipment typically processes mail in specific orientations (such as, e.g., with bindings down and addresses to the right or bindings forward and addresses to the left, etc.). Among other things, orienting and facing can be desirable due to, e.g., the particular nature of how a particular system transports mail in process and, e.g., the location of any automatic address reading equipment relative to the mail in transport (since, e.g., reading is performed as the mail is moving).

[0067] FIG. 10(A) illustrates some aspects and features of mail processing systems in which some preferred embodiments can be implemented. While FIG. 10(A) does not show a pusher that pushes flats or the like off of carriers, FIG. 10(A) does show various other features, such as, e.g., supply and return conveyor systems, that can be employed in some illustrative embodiments. Various features shown in FIG. 10(A) can be employed in embodiments in which, e.g., a pusher is used to push or slide flats or the like off of carriers (as discussed further below).

[0068] In the embodiments shown in FIG. 10(A), a generally vertical elevator 200 is provided. In preferred embodiments, the elevator 200 includes a conveyor system for moving carriers up-and-down between a supply conveyor 110 and a return conveyor 120. In this disclosure, the terminology elevator can include any system or device that can move an object upward and/or downward. Elevators can include a) supports (such as, e.g., platforms or the like that are used to support the object(s) to be moved and/or any other support structure), b) any form of power, such as, e.g., fuel powered motors, electronic

motors, hydraulic motors and/or the like and c) any type of drive mechanisms, such as, e.g. extendable cylinders, rotated screw shafts, conveyor belts or chains and/or the like. In some illustrative embodiments, a full carrier supply conveyor 110 can include a powered-roller, zone-accumulation conveyor to queue and transport full carriers from a preparation operator OpP loading zone to a feeder 100 or the like. The conveyor 110 can include, e.g., a plurality of powered rollers 111. In other embodiments, any other conveyor(s) can be employed, such as, e.g., one or more rotary belt(s), one or more pusher(s), one or more moving platform(s) and/or any other appropriate conveyor(s). In preferred embodiments, the return conveyor 120 can be substantially similar to the supply conveyor 110, but usable to return empty carriers. While the conveyors include powered rollers in some illustrative embodiments, one or more other conveyor(s) could be employed in various other embodiments. For example, one or more conveyor belt(s) and/or other conveyor can be included. The terminology "conveyor" used in this application includes any mechanism by which carriers or other items can be moved, such as, e.g., one or more rotary belt(s), one or more pusher(s), one or more moving platform(s) and/or any other appropriate conveyor(s). In preferred embodiments, the conveyors are configured to have differentiated carrier movement between a plurality of zones along the conveyors.

[0069] In some preferred embodiments, the elevator conveyor system includes two platforms, including an upper platform 140E for conveying empty carriers 160E and a lower platform 140F for conveying full carriers 160F. In some illustrative embodiments, the platforms 140E and 140F can be mounted together so as to remain a fixed distance from one another (e.g., a distance substantially equal to the distance between the conveyors 110 and 120). In FIG. 10(A), the leftmost elevator shows an empty carrier 160E and a full carrier 160F in transport together. In some instances, however, the platform 140E may be without another carrier during transport of a full carrier 160F to the feeder 100. Then, upon transfer of the objects to the feeder, the emptied carrier can be transferred to the platform

140E. The elevator can then raise the platforms such that the empty carrier 160E is laterally discharged to the conveyor 120, and, such that a full carrier is laterally moved to the platform 140F. Then, the elevator can lower the new full carrier to continue the process. In other embodiments, the platforms 140E and 140F can be controlled so as to move independently from one another. In other embodiments, the platforms could be located adjacent one another (e.g., with a modified elevator 200 having, e.g., plural elevator shafts) so that upward and/or downward movement may occur independently of one another. However, mounting both platforms to move along a path having a common axis can, e.g., enhance space saving characteristics and improve egress around the feeder 100.

[0070] In the illustrative embodiment shown in FIG. 10(A), the elevator 200 includes a support frame 141. Preferably, the elevator has transparent and/or translucent walls or windows (such as, e.g., made of glass, plexiglass, plastic or the like) to enable the interior to be viewed during operation. Preferably, the conveyors 110 and 120 include lateral guide rails (as shown), support edges or the like to help retain the carriers thereon. Preferably, carriers 160E and/or 160F are delivered between the conveyors 110 and/or 120 via pop-up lateral transfer mechanisms (such as discussed below with reference to FIG. 10(C)). Additionally, in some preferred embodiments, sensors or detectors can be used to facilitate control of the system based on carrier positioning. For instance, the lateral transfer mechanisms can be controlled based on carrier presence within the elevators 200 and the like in some embodiments.

[0071] In some illustrative embodiments, the platforms 140E and 140F can include mechanisms to facilitate transfer to and/or from the platform(s). For instance, in some embodiments, the platforms can include powered rollers or powered casters to facilitate movement along one or two axes (e.g., parallel to the platform). In this manner, the carriers can easily be transferred to and/or from the platforms (such as, e.g., at their upper

positions proximate the conveyors 110 and 120 and/or at their lower positions proximate the feeder operator OpF). In some preferred embodiments, the front of the elevators 200 in front of the operator OpF will include openings, doors, gates or the like to enable access to the platforms 140E and/or 140F. In some preferred embodiments, fixed and/or pop-up stops can be used to limit movement of the carriers from the elevator until desired.

[0072] With reference to the system shown in FIG. 10(C), pop-up transfers PT can be used, for example, to transfer carriers to and/or from supply and return conveyors 110 and 120, respectively. FIG. 10(C) shows an illustrative system in which full conveyors are conveyed from the preparation operator OpP location(s) via the supply conveyor 110 to the feeders and in which empty carriers are returned to preparation operator OpP location(s). In the embodiment shown in FIG. 10(C), the elevators 200 can operate substantially like that described above with reference to FIG. 10(A). In some embodiments, elevators 200 may be located substantially over the feeder console. In other embodiments, elevators 200 may be located adjacent, such as, e.g., directly behind the feeder console as shown in FIGS. 10(B) and 10(C). In the latter cases, a mechanism is preferably used to laterally transfer the carriers onto reciprocated carrier supports CS on the feeder console. For example, as shown in FIG. 10(B), the feeder console can include a pop-up transfer conveyor TC that can be moved upward to engage a bottom of the carrier for lateral transfer and that can be lowered to enable reciprocation of the carrier support. In this regard, the carrier support can, e.g., include a generally rectangular frame (such as, e.g., generally similar to a picture frame) with an open interior to allow the transfer conveyor to pop-up there-through to engage the carrier while securely supporting the carrier around the perimeter thereof upon the generally rectangular frame.

Preferred Automatic Induction Embodiments

[0073] According to some preferred embodiments, existing equipment can be modified and/or new processing equipment can be developed that provides the capability for that system to automatically load mail or the like from material handling equipment directly onto, e.g., systems (e.g., consoles of feeders) for processing. The preferred embodiments enable the processing equipment (e.g., feeders) to, for example, run more mail, at higher rates, with fewer operators, and without degrading system performance.

[0074] According to preferred embodiments, the system(s) can be run with operators functioning in manual-loading modes to, for example, facilitate current operations and/or delivery and/or to facilitate handling mail pieces that cannot be pre-packaged into carriers and/or the like.

[0075] FIGS. 3-10 show an illustrative automatic induction system embodiment that includes a retractable paddle and delivery apparatus that can preferably perform some or all of the following tasks: a) automatically present and/or integrate new mail on a carrier to a mail stack being processed; b) automatically remove an empty mail carrier; c) automatically process the mail from the feeder or destacking system while the automatic induction system is in operation (in some cases, however, mail can be pre-loaded at a time when the feeder system is not operated and the mail can simply be loaded onto the console and remain there until the feeder system is started).

[0076] FIG. 3 shows elements of an illustrative automatic feed system implemented in, by way of example, a standard feeder (e.g., a standard flats feeder). As shown, a modified automatic feed pusher, or paddle P, is provided. As shown, the paddle is preferably movably supported upon the support block SB via a generally vertical guide so as to move up-and-down along a z-axis via operation of a motor M1. As shown, the support block SB is preferably movably supported via a generally horizontal guide so as to move fore-and-aft generally along an x-axis via operation of a motor M2. In addition, a carrier support CS is

provided that receives carriers C of mail from an outside delivery system and that moves the carriers toward the stack of mail MS for unloading against the stack. As shown, the carrier support CS is similarly supported along a generally horizontal guide for fore-and-aft movement along a delivery axis generally parallel to the x-axis via operation of a motor M3.

5 In preferred embodiments, the motors M1, M2 and M3, the transfer conveyor TC and/or various other elements can be controlled via a controller or the like, such as, e.g., similar to the controller 70 in FIG. 2(A).

[0077] In various embodiments, the delivery of the carriers C to the carrier support CS can be effected using a variety of mechanisms, such as, e.g., using: manual delivery,
10 conveyor delivery, elevator delivery, robotic delivery, transfer roller delivery and/or other appropriate mechanisms. In various embodiments, the system can be configured to accept carriers (e.g., to receive carriers upon a carrier support) from any direction (e.g., from a front side, from a back side, from above and/or from below the processing system) to minimize encroachment into the available space around or near the processing system.

15 [0078] FIGS. 4-9 show an illustrative operation of an automatic feed system shown in FIG. 3. In the event that there is no mail on the feeder (such as, e.g., at a start of a run or after the feeder has run dry during processing), the carrier support CS will preferably laterally deliver the mail to adjacent the pickoff of the destacking area (such as, e.g., to accommodate a position similar to that of the mail stack MS in process shown in FIG. 3).

20 [0079] First, as shown in FIG. 4, a full carrier C is positioned on the carrier support CS (shown in FIG. 3 without a carrier loaded thereon). As described below, various carrier designs can be employed. In some preferred embodiments, carriers are configured to enable a) mail to be supported thereon and b) mail to be laterally slid off of the carrier in the direction of the destacking area. In some examples, carrier designs may or may not
25 include covers, one or more side wall(s) and/or one or more movable side support

member(s) (e.g., walls, doors, retaining members or the like) to retain the mail in a carrier C until it is unloaded onto the feeder console (e.g., proximate a back of the mail stack in process). Then, as shown in FIG. 5, the full carrier CS is conveyed to a position proximate the back of the mail stack where it is ready to be unloaded. Then, as shown in FIG. 6, the paddle is raised or retracted (i.e., in the direction of the z-axis shown in FIG. 3) from the back of the mail stack MS (i.e., so as to disengage the mail stack). Then, as shown in FIG. 7, the paddle is moved rearwardly (i.e., in the direction of the paddle x-axis shown in FIG. 3) to adjacent the rear of the mail on the carrier. During the time that the paddle moves laterally to the rear of the mail on the carrier, the carrier helps to support and maintain the orientation of the mail stack and the mail can continue to be processed. Then, as shown in FIG. 8, the paddle is lowered into the carrier to a position behind the mail thereon. In this regard, in the illustrated embodiment, the carrier preferably includes a plurality of generally vertical grooves that receive a plurality of depending fingers or tines of the paddle (e.g., providing a generally fork-shape paddle). In this manner, support of the mail can be readily transferred between the carriers and the paddle during operation. Then, as shown in FIG. 9, the carrier is moved rearwardly away from the mail stack by retracting the carrier support in the direction of the delivery axis of the carrier support shown in FIG. 3. At this time, the empty carrier can be removed and a full carrier can be loaded thereon to continue processing. For example, a transfer conveyor TC (such as, e.g., shown in FIG. 4) can laterally transfer the empty carrier C to an elevator for discharge along a return conveyor path. Then, a new full carrier C can be supplied from a supply conveyor path and can be laterally supplied to the support CS via the transfer conveyor TC.

[0080] FIG. 10(B) shows one preferred embodiment employing an elevator delivery system (which can, e.g., operate similar to the elevator delivery system shown and described with reference to FIG. 10(A)). In this illustrative embodiment, the elevator delivery system lowers a full carrier to a position proximate a rear side of the feeder. At this

position, rollers upon the support 140F can move the carrier C laterally to the carrier support CS. In this embodiment, the carrier support CS is mounted so as to reciprocate along a guide G having a delivery axis in an x-direction similar to that shown in FIG. 3. In addition, as shown, if desired, a lateral conveyor mechanism TC can be integrated in the feeder console to assist in supply of full carriers upon the feeder and/or the return of empty carriers from the feeder.

Carriers

[0081] In various embodiments, the carriers 160 can have a variety of constructions (e.g., depending on the characteristics of the objects, such as, e.g., mail, to be carried). In some preferred embodiments, the carriers are made with plastic material. In some preferred embodiments, the carriers are formed by a molding process, such as, e.g., by injection molding. In some preferred embodiments, the carrier size is preferably selected so as to fit a single carrier upon the feeder console.

[0082] As described above, in some preferred embodiments, carriers are configured to enable a) mail to be supported thereon and b) mail to laterally slide off of the carrier in the direction of the destacking area. For example, some carrier designs may or may not include covers, one or more side walls and/or one or more movable side support members (e.g., walls, doors, retaining members or the like) to retain the mail in the carrier until it is unloaded onto the feeder console (e.g., proximate a back of the mail stack in process). For example, carriers can have an omitted front wall, such as, e.g., certain carriers described in the above co-pending patent applications or can include a movable front wall. In some embodiments, mail can be automatically and/or manually slid off of the carriers and onto the feeder (preferably, the mail is automatically slid off the carrier as described herein by relative movements of a paddle and a carrier support during processing, while a user can, in some instances, still manually effect such sliding)(although not detailed herein, in some

embodiments, a lateral transfer slide, such as, e.g., described in the above co-pending applications can be included and/or the feeder console itself can be inclined to facilitate manual and/or automatic sliding of the mail with respect to the carrier).

[0083] While some illustrative carrier designs have been depicted and described, various
5 embodiments of systems and methods can accommodate various embodiments of carrier designs. For example, various systems may operate with a variety of carrier types and designs.

[0084] FIGS. 11-15 show some carrier designs according to some illustrative and non-limiting embodiments. While, in some examples, carriers shown in these figures can be
10 made with either natural or non-synthetic materials (such as, e.g., wood) or synthetic materials, in preferred embodiments, the carriers are made with molded plastics.

[0085] In the embodiment shown in FIGS. 11(A)-11(C), the carrier 160 includes a floor 160FL, a back wall 160B, a left wall 160L, a right wall 160R and a front wall 160FR. In this embodiment, the front wall 160FR is adapted to provide support of mail or the like contained
15 within the carrier during handling but to be moved out of the way to facilitate removal of mail or the like (such as, e.g., removal by sliding the carrier and the mail relative to one another such that the mail is relatively moved laterally past the front of the carrier). In this illustrative embodiment, the front wall 160FR is supported so as to pivot about left-side and right-side pivots 160P. In this illustrative embodiment, the left and right walls 160L and
20 160R include upper portions that separate from lower portions as shown in FIG. 11(C) when pivoted.

[0086] In order to effect pivotal movement of the carrier, a variety of mechanisms can be employed. In some illustrative embodiments, the front wall 160FR of the carrier can be moved via the pusher 30. In this regard, the front wall 160FR and the pusher 30 can be

adapted to include engagement members that engage together upon being brought against one another. By way of example, as shown in FIG. 11(B), one or more male protrusion can be supported along the front wall 160FR that engages with one or more respective female receptacle (such as, e.g., formed proximate the lower end of the pusher and sized to
5 engage the male protrusions as shown in FIG. 11(C)). In various embodiments, male and female portions can be provided on either the front wall 160FR or the pusher or vise-versa. Additionally, it should be understood based on this disclosure that any other appropriate form of engagement members can be used in various other embodiments.

[0087] FIGS. 12 and 13 show other illustrative carrier designs with some modifications
10 from that shown in FIGS. 11(A)-11(C). In the embodiment shown in FIG. 12, the entire left and right sides 160L and 160R are pivoted along with the front wall 160FR. In the embodiment shown in FIG. 13, a number of modifications are employed, including: a) a plurality of handles 160H to facilitate manual handling of the carriers (in some embodiments, a latch [not shown] can be included to inhibit the front wall 160FR from
15 pivoting to facilitate carrying – for example, the latch can be configured to release upon contact with the pusher 30); b) a plurality of upwardly extending tines 160T (rather than merely forming grooves in the rear wall); and/or c) a plurality of receptacles or recesses 160S engagable with respective protrusions on the lower end of the pusher 30. In the illustrative embodiments shown in FIGS. 11-13, the pusher 30 includes seven downwardly
20 extending tines that fit between respective grooves and/or tines of the carriers 160. In fork-shape pusher embodiments, any number of tines can be employed, such as, by way of example, between about 3 and 10 tines in some illustrative examples.

[0088] FIGS. 14-15 show other illustrative carrier designs including, e.g., a plurality of upwardly extending tines 160T, a plurality of receptacles or recesses 160S engagable with
25 respective protrusions on the lower end of the pusher 30, a plurality of handles 160H to

facilitate manual handling of the carriers, an a pivotably upper section including a pivoted front wall which pivot around a pivot 160P. FIGS. 14-15 both illustrate that in some embodiments, the tines 160T may include a varied size (e.g., height). FIGS. 14-15 also both illustrate that in some embodiments, the carrier can be formed with ribs 160R to enhance strength characteristics. As shown in FIG. 15, in some embodiments, the floor of the carrier can include plurality of grooves in a fore-to-aft direction. These grooves preferably receive the ends of the tines of a pusher 30 so that the tines extend very close to or beneath a top surface of the bottom of the carrier.

[0089] The operation of the carriers 160 shown in FIGS. 11-15 can be generally alike in some embodiments, such as for example: a) first, a full carrier (note: objects within the carriers are omitted in the figures) can be in a closed state such as, e.g., shown in FIG. 11(A); b) second, the full carrier can be brought against the lower ends of the tines of the pusher so as to engage with respective engagement mechanisms (e.g. receptacles, protrusions and/or the like); c) third, the pusher can be raised such as, e.g., described above with reference to FIG. 6 (such that as shown, e.g., in FIG. 11(C) the front wall 160FR is moved away); d) fourth, the pusher continues to move the wall rearward as it traverses from a position similar to that described above with reference to FIG. 6 to a position similar to that described above with reference to FIG. 7 (see, e.g., FIG. 12 showing an approximately midway position and FIG. 13 showing a substantially fully open position); e) fifth, with the carrier fully open, the pusher descends to engage the rear of the mail, such as, e.g., shown in FIG. 13 (showing the tines in a lowered position); f) sixth, once the tines of the pusher are in a fully lowered position, the carrier can be moved laterally to the left so as to slide the mail off of the carrier; g) seventh, when the carrier and the mail is separated, the carrier is caused to pivot back to a closed position (such as, e.g., using another mechanism to cause the carrier to close [such as, e.g., an abutment mechanism and/or springs {such as, for example, using springs like that shown in FIGS. 12-13}]). Thereafter,

the carriers can be returned and/or further handled, such as, e.g., returned to the system in accordance with embodiments described herein.

Bundled-Mail Embodiments

[0090] While in some preferred embodiments, the mail is delivered to the feeder in a non-bundled state, in some preferred embodiments, the mail can be delivered in a bundled state, such as, e.g., as shown in FIG. 16. In this illustrative embodiment, the mail (shown in dotted lines) includes a strap B or the like wrapped around it to create a bundle of mail. In some embodiments, this strap could actually be placed on the mail by a preparation operator OpP or the like to facilitate handling of the mail being automatically fed at the feeder. In some embodiments, an automatic cutter is employed to cut the straps. In some embodiments, a modified pusher 30c can be provided that includes a cutter *c* located proximate a lower end thereof. In this manner, the pusher can preferably cut the straps during operation (such as, e.g., when removed from the mail stack). In some embodiments, the cut straps can be automatically removed and/or an operator can assist in the removal of such straps. In some embodiments, straps B could be employed instead of having carriers with front retaining walls. That is, the straps can be used to support the mail during transport in some embodiments.

Slump Inhibiting Embodiments

[0091] FIG. 17 illustrates features that can be employed in some illustrative embodiments. In this regard, a modified pusher 30d can be employed that includes sensors or detectors *d* on a rear side (e.g., facing a new stack of mail on a carrier CC to be added to the existing mail stack in process on the transporter 20). The sensors or detectors preferably include a plurality of sensors, but could potentially include a single sensor or

detector. A variety of sensors or detectors could be used, such as, e.g., pressure sensors, proximity sensors and/or various other sensors or detectors.

[0092] Among other things, the detectors d can be used to help reduce forward and/or backward slump of mail that can occur in the event that excess space is present in the carrier CC. For example, upon the simultaneous removal of a carrier front wall and lifting of the pusher, excess space can result in slumped mail (see, e.g., illustrative slump shown in FIG. 17).

[0093] In some preferred embodiments, the front wall is moved, removed or not present prior to removal of the pusher. Then, when mail slumps against the pusher, the carrier C position can be adjusted (or other means can be employed, such as, e.g., another pusher [not shown]) to move the mail towards the pusher to reduce or remove the slump in the mail. In the illustrated embodiment, sensors or detectors d can be used to determine when the mail is properly positioned against the pusher (such as, e.g., when an even pressure is applied against the rear of the pusher). While detectors or the like can be provided on the pusher, it is contemplated that detectors can be located in a variety of other locations as desired. Additionally, in some embodiments, the mail can be moved forward until a particular torque or force characteristic is achieved (e.g., based on experiment or the like, a torque value, a change in torque, and/or a force value on a drive mechanism [such as, e.g., a servo-motor or the like] can be used to identify proper mail orientation). In some embodiments, as illustrated in FIG. 17, a carrier CC can include a mechanism to enable relative movement between a rear wall (e.g., to push the mail stack on the carrier) and mail supporting surface (e.g., such as a floor of the carrier) as a carrier support CS is moved towards the pusher to accommodate for excess space in the carrier. In some embodiments, another pusher (not shown) could be used to push mail out of the carrier towards the pusher 30d.

Removable Door Embodiments

[0094] In some embodiments, rather than pivoting away from the carrier and/or otherwise being movably attached to the carrier, a front wall of the carrier can be entirely detachable or removable. In such embodiments, a mechanism is preferably provided to a) replace the door upon the same carrier it was removed from (such as, e.g., prior to returning the empty carrier) or b) forwarding the removable door to a common return location for replacement on other carriers. In some embodiments, the doors can be manually removed and/or replaced. However, in preferred embodiments, the doors would be automatically removed and/or replaced.

[0095] In some preferred embodiments, the removable doors can have dimensions within a range of mail being processed by the feeder (such as, e.g., comparable to flats mail sizes) and/or within a range capable of being handled by the mail processing equipment. For example, in some embodiments, a substantially planar door CRD (shown in FIG. 18) can be supported in grooves on left, bottom and right sides of the carrier and a mechanism can be provided to release the door from the carrier (such as, e.g., upon contacting the pusher or other member).

[0096] In some preferred embodiments, the released door can be supported within the side-by-side mail stack on the feeder (e.g., along with other mail in the mail stack). Then, the carrier release door CRD can preferably be singulated or destacked at a destacker. For example, FIG. 18 illustrates an illustrative carrier release door CRD after entry into an illustrative and non-limiting destacker. In this illustrative and non-limiting example, the destacker includes one or more lateral conveyors D-C and may include suction ports D-A to apply intermittent suction to items (e.g., mail) to be singulated or destacked. In this illustrative and non-limiting embodiment, the singulated items are laterally conveyed (see arrow pointing left). Once the carrier release door CRD is removed and delivered via the

destacker, the door CRD can preferably be conveyed via the mail processing system to a particular location for automatic and/or manual replacement onto carriers. For example, in some embodiments, the doors can be automatically replaced onto carriers prior to a preparation operator's filling of the carriers. In some embodiments, the preparation
5 operators can themselves manually replace the removable doors. In some embodiments, the doors can include bar coding or the like to enable scanning and/or other identification of the doors within the system (e.g., using existing address reading equipment).

[0097] FIGS. 19-24(K) show some preferred embodiments in which a carrier employs a removable door. In this regard, FIG. 19(A) is a bottom perspective view showing a carrier
10 employing a removable door 260D. FIG. 19(B) is a top perspective view of the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A). FIG. 19(C) is a bottom view of an illustrative embodiment of a position registration mechanism that may be employed in the embodiment shown in FIG. 19(A) and/or in various other embodiments. FIG. 20(A) is a top perspective view of an upper portion of the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A) with the carrier door 260D in a partially inserted
15 position in the carrier 260. FIG. 20(B) is a top perspective view of a lower portion of the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A) with the carrier door 260D in a partially inserted position in the carrier 260. FIG. 20(C) is a schematic cross-sectional view taken in the vicinity of the arrows C-C in FIG. 20(A) depicting the interrelationship between a dog-ear-tab on the carrier door and a receiving slot in a side wall of the carrier. FIG. 21 is a front view of a
20 carrier 260 that is generally similar to, but having a number of variations as shown, to the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A) with a door 260D removed. FIG. 22 is a side view of a carrier 260 that is generally similar to the carrier shown in FIG. 19(A). FIG. 23 is a schematic diagram depicting the operational relationship between a carrier door 260D and a reciprocating grabbing mechanism in some illustrative embodiments. And, FIGS. 24(A)–
25 24(M) are a plurality of views of an automatic induction system configured to operate with a carrier 260 similar to that shown in FIG. 19(A) at various stages of operation.

[0098] With reference to FIGS. 19(A) and 19(B), the carrier 260 can be substantially similar to carriers 160 described above. In preferred embodiments, the carriers 260 include one or more, preferably all, of the following unique features.

1. Removable Door Structure

5 a. Releasable Latch Mechanism

[0099] As shown in FIG. 19(B), in some embodiments, a releasable latch mechanism is provided that includes a spring biased rod 260SBR, as shown. Preferably, the spring biased rod is normally biased so as to have an tip end thereof extending outwardly from a side of the door 260D, such as to be receivable within a respective receiving slot (not shown) in the carrier side walls. As shown, the spring biased rod 260SBR is preferably configured to be gripped along with the gripping of the gripping element 260GE, such as, e.g., being substantially L-shaped in some embodiments as shown. Although one illustrative spring biased rod 260SBR is shown, in some embodiments two such rods can be implemented at opposite sides of the door, such as, e.g., shown in dashed lines in FIG. 23.

15 [0100] Preferably, the latch mechanism does not provide substantial structural support for the door 260D on the carrier 260, but merely operates to retain the door 260D thereon, such that the latch mechanism will be relatively free from external forces that may otherwise damage the latch mechanism.

b. Alignment Bores and Sensor Studs

20 [0101] As best shown in FIG. 20(A), the top edge of the door 260D preferably includes a plurality (such as, e.g., two in some embodiments) of alignment bores 260DAB that are adapted to receive projection rods 300R that are supported alongside the pusher 300 and/or the gripping mechanism 300GM (discussed below) so as to help maintain the orientation of the door 260D with respect to the pusher 300 and/or the gripping mechanism 300GM.

Preferably, the top of the door 260D also includes at least one detection member, such as, e.g., at least one metal stud 260MS, to facilitate sensing by a sensor mechanism so as to enable the pusher 300 and/or the gripping mechanism 300GM to be located properly with respect to the door 260D.

5 c. Gripping Element

[0102] As shown in FIG. 19(B), the door 260D preferably includes a gripping element 260GE that is configured to be readily gripped by a gripping mechanism within the automatic induction apparatus, such as, e.g., using a gripping mechanism 300GM as shown in FIG. 23. As shown in FIGS. 19(B) and 23, in some preferred embodiments, the gripping
10 element is generally T-shaped, such that a gripping mechanism can readily engage the T-shaped gripping element. The gripping mechanism shown in FIG. 23 is merely illustrative and any appropriate gripping mechanism components, such as, e.g., clamps, teeth, arms, wrench-like grippers, and/or the like can be employed in various embodiments. As shown, in some preferred embodiments, the gripping element 260GE is displaced a distance D from
15 an upper end of the door 260D. Among other things, this displacement helps to inhibit rotational displacement of the door 260D during operation, such as, e.g., to maintain a desired angle of the door 260D. In some preferred embodiments, the pusher 300 is at an angle of about 75 to 85 degrees, or more preferably, about 80 degrees from vertical, with such orientation having been determined to advantageously facilitate separation at a
20 destacker downstream of the pusher.

[0103] As best shown in FIGS. 19(B) and 23, the door 260D preferably includes an upper recess 260UR inside of which the gripping element 260GE is preferably located. In some preferred embodiments, a thin protective wall 260GEW is provided within at least a portion of the recess, such as, e.g., adjacent the gripping element 260GE such that the

gripping mechanism 300GM can be shielded from the flats upon the carrier 260 so as to avoid inadvertently snagging, gripping and/or otherwise interfering with mail on the carrier.

d. Tapered Bottom

[0104] In some embodiments, the outside edges of the door 260D are slightly tapered to facilitate insertion within the carrier, such as, e.g., by including tapered lateral edges 260TLE as shown in FIG. 20(B).

e. Dog-Ear-Connection Tabs

[0105] In some preferred embodiments, the outside edges of the door 260D include Dog-Ear-Connection Tabs 260DET, such as, e.g., shown in FIG. 20(A). In the preferred embodiments, the Dog-Ear-Connection Tabs 260DET help to secure and maintain the door 260D on the carrier 260. Preferably, the Dog-Ear-Connection Tabs 260DET include a plurality of inclined or tapered surfaces that a) facilitate insertion of the Dog-Ear-Connection Tabs into respective receiving sockets 260RS (e.g., due to a wider entry opening upon initial insertion) and b) draw the side walls of the carrier 260 inward to the side edges of the door 260D (e.g., due to a wide entry opening and inclined edges on the receiving slot and/or Dog-Ear-Connection Tabs that draw the side walls inward in the direction of the arrow AA shown in FIG. 20(A)). For reference, FIG. 20(C) illustrates how the inclined surface 260DETi of the Dog-Ear-Connection Tab can interact with an inclined surface 260RSi of the receiving socket so as to cause the wall of the carrier to move in the direction of the arrow AA upon insertion of the tab into the socket.

f. Bottom Locating Teeth

[0106] As best shown in FIGS. 19(A) and 20(B), the carrier door 260D preferably includes a plurality of bottom locating teeth 260DT that are received within receiving holes

in the floor of the carrier 260. Preferably, the locating teeth are tapered slightly or include a chamfer to facilitate insertion into the receiving holes.

g. Sensing Opening

[0107] As best shown in FIGS. 19(B) and 23, in some preferred embodiments, the carrier door 260D includes a sensing opening 260SO through which the position of the mail or the like contents thereon can be sensed. Specifically, in some embodiments, the carrier can be positioned with the rear wall of the carrier in a downward position, such that mail flats or the like rest against the rear wall, whereby in this state, a sensor can sense the distance to the top of the mail flats or the like through the sensing opening 260SO. In this manner, the amount of mail flats or the like located within the carrier 260 can be well determined, with the mail flats or the like laying closely adjacent one another due to the weight thereof.

[0108] With reference to FIG. 10(D), in some preferred embodiments, mail flats can be sensed at a point in time during the operation of a system when an carrier is positioned at an operator preparation station, such as, e.g., shown at OpP in FIG. 10(B). In this regard, FIG. 10(D) shows an operator preparation station OpP, including an empty carrier return conveyor OpPR, which can be used to direct carriers 260 to the inclined ramp OpPi. In some embodiments, the empty carrier located on the inclined ramp can be manually filled with mail flats or the like. In some embodiments, bundled or debundled mail flats can be delivered to a lower conveyor from a hamper or bin OpPB and conveyed up to a position adjacent the preparation operator via a flats conveyor OpPFC. After the preparation operator fills the empty carrier 260 with the flats, a sensor (such as, e.g., sensor 260S shown schematically in FIG. 23) can be used to sense the amount of flats on the carrier via the sensing opening 260SO. In this regard, the carrier is preferably located on the inclined ramp OpPi with the rear wall of the carrier in a downward position. In some embodiments,

as shown in FIG. 10(D), when a full carrier is to be delivered from the preparation operator station, the inclined ramp OpPi can be pivoted so as to tilt downward such as to enable delivery of the full carrier to the supply conveyor OpPS (see, e.g., leftmost ramp OpPi shown in FIG. 10(D)). Then, the inclined ramp can be raised to receive another empty carrier to
5 repeat the operation.

[0109] In various embodiments, the sensor(s) employed can include any appropriate sensor(s) as now or later known in the art, such as, e.g., any distance measuring sensor, including, e.g., ultrasonic sensors, laser sensors, pressure sensors and/or the like.

2. Floor Structure

a. Grooves

Friction Reduction and Tin Receiving

[0110] In the preferred embodiments, the floor of the carrier 260 includes a plurality of grooves configured to receive the ends of tines 300T of the pusher 300. Among other things, in this manner, the tines can surely extend to the bottom or below the bottom edge
15 of the flats on the carrier so as to surely push the mail with respect to the carrier without mail slipping between the tines 300T and the carrier floor. In addition, the provision of such grooves also helps to reduce friction between the carrier floor and the flats thereon.

ii. Motion-Inhibiting Steps or Ridges

[0111] In the preferred embodiments, the floor of the carrier includes a plurality of
20 stepped-up ridges 260RD extending in a fore-to-aft direction as best seen in FIG. 21. Preferably, the locations of the stepped-up ridges are selected to be at locations slightly farther from the mail alignment wall 260MAW than an outer edge of common-size mail (see, e.g., illustrative mail flats F shown in dashed lines in FIG. 21). In this manner, while mail is located on the carrier, during transport along the conveyors, etc., the mail or flats located

thereon will be retained in a consistent position upon the carriers without sliding laterally within the carrier. In some illustrative embodiments, the ridges 260RD can extend upward a height of about 1/8 to 1/4 of an inch, or, more preferably, about 3/16 of an inch.

iii. Insertion Facilitating Chamfers

5 [0112] In some preferred embodiments, the sides of the ridges between the floor grooves facing the right side wall 260R of the carrier 260 can include an incline or chamfer as shown in FIG. 21. Among other things, the inclusion of such inclines or chamfers can facilitate placement of the flats within the carrier by the operator. For example, upon locating flats within the carrier, such an incline or chamfer can help to inhibit snagging of a
10 bottom corner of the flats or mail as the operator places the flats or mail on the carrier floor and slides it towards the mail alignment wall 260MAW (in the illustrated and non-limiting exemplary embodiments, the mail alignment wall 2260MAW is the left wall 260L).

b. Viewing Holes

[0113] In some preferred embodiments, the bottom of the carrier can also include a
15 plurality of through holes therein so as to enable operators and other persons to visually observe whether such a carrier is full or empty from a location beneath the carrier (such as, e.g., when the carrier is on an overhead conveyor or upon an elevator). By way of example, in some embodiments, a plurality of holes (such as, e.g., about four or so holes in some cases) could be distributed within the bottom, having diameters of about 1/2 to 1 1/2 inches to
20 enable visual observation. In some embodiments, rather than or in addition to visual observation, such holes could also be used to accommodate for automatically sensing the presence or absence of flats thereon, such as, e.g., using sensors.

c. Position Registration Mechanism

[0114] FIG. 19(C) illustrates another preferred embodiment of the carrier 260, wherein the carrier contains a position registration mechanism. As shown in the example of FIG. 19(C), the registration mechanism can be implemented by providing location holes 191, location slots 193, or any combination thereof, in the bottom surface of the carrier 260. The position registration mechanism is registered with a corresponding position registration mechanism on the carrier support bracket CS (*See*, e.g., FIGS. 3, 10(B) and 24(A)).

[0115] According to one preferred embodiment as shown, one hole 191 and one slot 193 are provided near an edge of the bottom surface of the carrier, with corresponding locating pins being provided on the carrier support bracket CS. However, the mechanisms could be placed at various locations on the carrier to achieve the desired attributes. One such attribute is to ensure proper alignment and positioning of the carrier on the carrier support CS (*see* FIGS. 3, 10(B) and 24(A)), so that the forked or tined paddle 30 (*see* FIGS. 11(C), 13 and 24(L)) may properly interface with the grooved and/or tined surface of the carrier 160/260 as shown in FIGS. 13 and 24(L). Another desired characteristic is to provide a positive engagement force between the carrier and the carrier support bracket to ensure that the force generated during the retraction step of the feeder load cycle (*e.g.*, as shown in FIGS. 9 and 24(M)) is transferred to the carrier. In a preferred embodiment, the locating pins that mate to the position registration holes/slots are tapered. The taper facilitates proper location of the carrier on the carrier support bracket as the carrier is lowered or otherwise brought into contact with the carrier support bracket. The locating pins and vertical walls of the carrier support bracket act together to ensure proper positioning of the carrier in the x-y direction. Use of a slot allows the retracting force for the carrier to be more evenly distributed. According to one preferred embodiment, a hole/slot combination is provided as the slot allows for greater machine tolerance, and a second hole is not required for proper position registration of the carrier with respect to the paddle.

3. Rear Wall

a. Tines 260T

[0116] The Tines 260T are preferably configured to support the mail therein, while at the same time allowing the pusher 300 to pass behind a stack of mail flats on the carrier

5 260. The Tines 260T distal from the mail-alignment wall 260MAW are, in some embodiments, substantially wider and longer than the times 260T adjacent the mail-alignment wall 260MAW. In this manner, smaller mail, such as, e.g., smaller letters, etc., located adjacent the mail alignment wall 260MAW (such as, e.g., by the prep operator OpP at preparation operator locations) may have a narrower spacing, and the size of the tines
10 300T of the pusher 300 at locations adjacent smaller mail can be commensurately reduced so as to enable the smaller mail to be well supported by a plurality of tines 300T during use. As shown in FIG. 19(B), in some embodiments, the height of the narrower tines 260T at the right side of FIG. 19(B) can be reduced slightly, such as, e.g., to reduce materials used, and to avoid creating handle-like projections that users may be compelled to improperly use to
15 manually lift the carrier.

[0117] As shown in FIG. 19(B), the forward sides of the tines 260T along the rear wall are preferably inclined at an angle that is the same or substantially the same as the angle of the pusher 300 so as to support the mail in the carrier at the same or substantially the same angle as the pusher 300.

20 4. Side Walls

a. Hand Holds

[0118] In preferred embodiments, the side walls 260L and 260R each include respective hand holds, such as, e.g., through holes 260HH shown in FIG. 19(A). Among other things, in preferred embodiments, operators will only or will substantially only carry or manipulate

the containers via the hand holds so as to avoid inadvertently damaging other portions of the containers (as described herein, the tines 260T are preferably either too wide [at the left side of FIG. 19(B)] and/or too short [e.g., at the right side of FIG. 19(B)] to be conducive to use as handles for average operators).

5 b. Nesting Tabs

[0119] In some preferred embodiments, the carrier 260 includes a plurality of nesting tabs 260NT on left and right lateral side walls 260L and 260R of the carrier. In some preferred embodiments, the nesting tabs 260NT of a first carrier can be nested with similar nesting tabs of a second carrier that is located thereover in an inverted state. As shown, 10 e.g., in FIGS. 19(B) and 21, the two fore and aft nesting tabs are preferably oppositely inclined, such as to enable similar nesting tabs on another similar carrier to nest therewith. In this manner, the two carriers can together form a substantially cube-shape combined structure, which substantially cube-shaped structures can be readily stacked upon one another for storage. Notably, the irregular wall structures of the carrier 260 in the 15 illustrated preferred embodiments may not facilitate having carriers nested in a bottom-on-top relationships (i.e., in which all carriers are nested in a similar orientation). Nevertheless, in some alternative embodiments, the carriers could be nested together in a bottom-on-top relationship (i.e., in which the tops of the carriers, or the nesting tabs of the carriers, are received within the bottoms of similar carriers).

20 Automatic Induction Apparatus

[0120] As described above, FIGS. 24(A) to 24(M) show a plurality of views of an illustrative automatic induction system configured to operate with a carrier 260 similar to that shown in FIG. 19(A) at various stages of operation. FIGS. 24(A) to 24(M) show some of the illustrative sequential steps during operation of the system.

[0121] In this regard, FIG. 24(A) shows the automatic induction system with a pusher 300 located behind a stack of flats F upon a conveyor 200 of a feeder 1000.

[0122] FIG. 24(B) shows a subsequent stage in operation, following that shown in FIG. 24(A), with a full carrier 260, supported on a carrier support CS is positioned adjacent
5 the rear of the pusher 300.

[0123] FIG. 24(C) shows a subsequent stage in operation in which the full carrier has been moved laterally by the carrier support CS over the conveyor 200 at substantially the same rate as the pusher 300 and the gripping mechanism 300GM has engaged a gripping element on the door 260D and has begun to retract the same, which retraction preferably
10 occurs substantially parallel to the angle of incline of the pusher 300 and door 260D (the rate of the pusher is preferably substantially equal to the rate of the conveyor 200 for the mostpart, with some variance as described herein).

[0124] FIG. 24(D) shows a subsequent stage in operation in which the gripping mechanism 300GM has raised the door 260D a greater extent.

15 [0125] FIG. 24(E) shows a subsequent stage in operation in which the door 260D has been fully removed, but the pusher 300 still remains in front of the carrier.

[0126] FIG. 24(F) shows a subsequent stage in operation in which the pusher 300 has been raised, while a rake member 300R extends downward to prevent flats from moving upward along with the pusher 300. Preferably, the rake 300R essentially operates to block
20 or scrape the mail from following upward along with the pusher 300 (such as, e.g., if the material of the flats sticks to the pusher), and, in some embodiments, the rake can include projection fingers that extend in between the tines of the pusher to help inhibit movement of flats in between such tines.

[0127] FIG. 24(G) is a subsequent stage in operation in which the rake 300R is in a position over the flats while the pusher 300 has been fully retracted. In some preferred embodiments, the rake 300R can be raised and/or lowered so as to position the rake over the flats prior to raising the pusher 300 and so as to move the rake out of the way at other times. However, in some preferred embodiments, the rake 300R can be located at a substantially fixed or fixed location over the flats sufficient to allow flats to fit thereunder while at the same time to inhibit flats from moving upward along with movement of the pusher.

[0128] FIG. 24(H) is a subsequent stage in operation in which the rake 300R has been retracted.

[0129] FIG. 24(I) is a subsequent stage in operation in which the pusher 300, the rake 300R, and the gripping mechanism 300GM have all moved rearward (e.g., substantially in unison in some embodiments, such as, e.g., by being mounted upon the same support mechanism) to a position just behind the carrier.

[0130] FIG. 24(J) is a subsequent stage in operation in which the pusher has been moved downward such that the tines 300T extend downward a distance substantially corresponding to a distance of the respective tines 260T of the carrier.

[0131] FIG. 24(K) is a subsequent stage in operation in which the pusher has been moved forward such that the tines of the pusher move toward the tines of the carrier.

[0132] FIG. 24(L) is a subsequent stage in operation in which the pusher has been moved forward such that the tines of the pusher move in between the tines of the carrier, and the pusher has begun to move downward within the carrier (the pusher will preferably move downward in the carrier until the ends of the tines 300T extend into the respective grooves formed in the floor of the carrier).

[0133] FIG. 24(M) is a subsequent stage in operation in which the carrier has been moved forward, such that flats are slid off the carrier onto the conveyor, such that the front of the carrier has been aligned beneath the door 260D, and such that the door has been moved downward so as to begin to be re-attached upon the carrier 260D.

5 [0134] In some preferred implementations of a system similar to that shown in FIGS. 24(A) to 24(M), the mechanisms for lateral, upward and/or reciprocating movement of the pusher, the rake, the gripping mechanism, etc., can be implemented in a similar manner to that of other embodiments described herein above, such as, e.g., mechanisms shown in FIGS. 2(B) to 9. In some embodiments, however, the pusher, the rake and the gripping
10 mechanism can include separate vertical and/or other drives which can be controlled independently. In various other embodiments, any appropriate moving mechanisms can be employed by those in the art as long as desired motions can be achieved.

1. Pusher Control Methods

[0135] In some embodiments, the pusher 300 can be controlled so as to adjust for stack
15 discrepancies using methodologies described above. In addition, in some embodiments, the position of the pusher can be adjusted so as to accommodate for, *inter alia*, a) the amount of flats on the carrier (for example, the amount of flats on the carrier can be sensed using techniques described above, which sensing can be used to send a signal that can be used by a controller that drives the pusher so as to accommodate for empty space within the
20 carrier)[such as, e.g., by promptly moving the pusher 300 forward so as to move flats within the carrier towards the door 260D and/or to otherwise make-up for extra space within the carrier before or after the door 260D is removed], b) the thickness of the door 260D [such as, e.g., by promptly moving the pusher 300 forward more quickly so as to make-up for the space created by the lifted door 260D], and/or other spaces or discrepancies that may result
25 in various circumstances.

[0136] In some embodiments, control methods and/or components described in U.S. Published Application No. 2004/0052617 A1, published March 18, 2004, also of the present assignee, can be incorporated, the entire disclosure of which Published Application is incorporated herein by reference as though recited herein in full.

5 2. Moveable Manual Pusher

[0137] In the preferred embodiments, the system can be used, alternately, in either an automatic mode, such as, e.g., shown in FIGS. 24(A)-24(M) or a manual or semi-manual mode in which an operator can, *inter alia*, manually effect movement of a pusher.

[0138] In this regard, in some embodiments, the pusher can be released from a drive
10 source such as, e.g., to be manually movable by an operator.

[0139] As a first example, in some embodiments, the pusher can be de-coupled from a respective drive mechanism when manually lifted and can be counter-balanced to facilitate manual lifting to a rear of the stack on the conveyor 200. As a second example, in some more preferred embodiments, two pushers can be provided: a first pusher can be provided
15 that operates substantially similar to the pusher 300 described in the later embodiments above; and a second pusher can be provided that operates substantially similar to the pusher 30 described above with respect to earlier embodiments. In this regard, the pusher 30 is preferably mounted so as to be pivotal between an operation orientation that is generally perpendicular to the conveyor 200 (such as, e.g., shown in FIG. 10(A), by way of
20 example) and a non-use orientation that is substantially parallel to the direction of motion of the conveyor 200 and that is laterally to the side of the path of motion of the conveyor. By way of example, FIG. 24(A) shows an illustrative handle 30H that extends from such an illustrative pusher 30 (not shown) that has been pivoted out of the way to a non-use position. Preferably, the pusher 30 will include a latch mechanism to retain the pusher in a

use position when desired and to enable the decoupling of the pusher from its associated drive mechanism when the pusher is moved (e.g., pivoted away) to a non-use position.

[0140] FIGS. 25A and 25B illustrate a preparation operator flex-station 2500 according to some illustrative embodiments. Station 2500 can be used as a preparation operator
5 station and, thus, can operate in substantially the same manner as the preparation operator station shown in FIG. 10(D) and described above. In some illustrative embodiments, station 2500 may include, *inter alia*, the following features.

[0141] Generally, bundled mail, e.g., bundled flats BF or the like, can be conveyed or delivered onto the table PT. As shown in FIG. 25A, the table PT can include a slightly
10 angled flat surface PT-1, and a more angled flat surface PT-2 proximate a bottom end thereof.

[0142] The table PT can include left and right side walls W1 and W2, respectively, to support flats or the like thereon. As shown in FIG. 25B, which is an exploded partial view of station 2500, the bottom corner of the table PT preferably includes an opening PTO via
15 which an operator can readily grasp the bundled mail, with the bundle having a corner BC protruding from the opening PTO (with reference to dashed lines labeled "extension" in the exploded view, in some preferred embodiments, the bundled mail will actually extend over the corner of the table PT to facilitate handling).

[0143] In some embodiments, the left wall W1 (or right wall W2 in other embodiments)
20 can include a slightly cut-out region to facilitate handling by an operator, such as, e.g., when the operator is left (or right in other embodiments) handed.

[0144] In addition, the height of the side walls W1 and W2 are preferably selected so as to be of sufficient height to retain and support the bundled mail. In some embodiments, the bundled mail will extend up about 3 to 6 inches, or, in some embodiments, about 4 inches

or less, and the walls will extend a few inches higher than such mail. In this manner, the mail can be easily located on the table PT, the bundling tape BT or the like can be readily removed (such as, e.g., manually) with minimal disruption of the arrangement of the flats, and the flats can be maintained via the walls and table PT. Then, the operator can manually lift the flats into a mail carrier MC located at the right side (as shown and as described above).

[0145] Preferably, the mail carrier MC will be supported on a pivotal support PS that can be automatically operated and/or controlled by the operator OpP to raised and/or lower as needed to receive and/or deliver empty and/or full carriers (see discussion above).

10 [0146] In the preferred embodiments, the bundling tape BT or other bundling materials (such as, e.g., plastic wrap and/or other materials) can be placed within a trash bin TB, which is preferably connected to a vacuum or other means to convey materials to a distant trash cite or location.

[0147] While the preferred embodiments pertain to systems for handling mail and the most preferred embodiments pertain to systems for handling mail flats, various embodiments can be used for handling all types of thin objects. The terminology "thin objects" includes all types of generally thin articles that are capable of being aligned in a side-by-side manner or stacked (i.e., the terminology "stacked" herein includes, among other things, a side-by-side relationship). In certain preferred embodiments, a given system may handle a multitude of thin objects with different sizes, compositions, flexibilities (such as, e.g., substantially rigid, substantially flexible, etc.) and/or shapes at a given time. However, in the most preferred embodiments, the thin objects preferably fall within a predetermined range of characteristics. For example, in certain preferred embodiments, the system can be adapted to handle mail flats having one or more of the characteristics described in the above-referenced co-pending applications, the entire disclosures of which

have been incorporated herein by reference. While some preferred embodiments involve the handling of flats having characteristics as detailed above, numerous other embodiments can be employed having various other flat configurations or specifications, such as, e.g., that disclosed in the '311 patent. The foregoing illustrative embodiments do not limit the
5 broad applicability of the invention to various objects having other characteristics, which may vary widely depending on the particular circumstances.

[0148] While illustrative embodiments of the invention have been described herein, the present invention is not limited to the various preferred embodiments described herein, but includes any and all embodiments having modifications, omissions, combinations (e.g., of
10 aspects across various embodiments), adaptations and/or alterations as would be appreciated by those in the art based on the present disclosure. The limitations in the claims are to be interpreted broadly based the language employed in the claims and not limited to examples described in the present specification or during the prosecution of the application, which examples are to be construed as non-exclusive. For example, in the
15 present disclosure, the term "preferably" is non-exclusive and means "preferably, but not limited to."

What is claimed is:

1. An apparatus for the preparation of bundled mail for subsequent processing,
comprising:
 - a first flat surface, proximate to a top end, having a downward angle with respect to
5 a horizontal plane;
 - a second flat surface, proximate to a bottom end and adjoining the first flat surface,
having a downward angle with respect to the horizontal plane that is greater than the first
flat surface angle;
 - a first supporting sidewall projecting above the first and second flat surfaces;
 - 10 a second supporting sidewall projecting above the first and second flat surfaces; and
 - a bottom corner, formed from an end of the first supporting sidewall and an end of
the second supporting sidewall, having an opening adapted to receive a corner portion of a
mail bundle.
- 15 2. The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the corner portion of the mail bundle
protrudes from the opening when the mail bundle is received by the bottom corner.
3. The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the first supporting sidewall includes a cut-out
region to facilitate handling of the mail bundle.
4. The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the second supporting sidewall includes a cut-
out region to facilitate handling of the mail bundle.
- 20 5. The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the first supporting sidewall extends above
the mail bundle.
6. The apparatus of Claim 5, wherein the second supporting sidewall extends above
the mail bundle.

7. The apparatus of Claim 1, further comprising a pivotal support adapted to receive a mail carrier into which unbundled mail is deposited.

8. The apparatus of Claim 7, wherein a height of the pivotal support is automatically controlled.

5 9. The apparatus of Claim 7, wherein empty mail carriers are automatically delivered to the pivotal support, and full mail carriers are automatically taken away from the pivotal support, by a mail processing system.

10. The apparatus of Claim 1, further comprising a vacuum trash receptacle into which waste materials are deposited.

10 11. An apparatus for debundling a mail bundle, comprising:

 a distal flat surface, having a downward angle with respect to a horizontal plane, upon which a mail bundle is initially placed;

 a proximal flat surface, abutting the distal flat surface and having a downward angle with respect to the horizontal plane that is greater than the distal flat surface angle, to

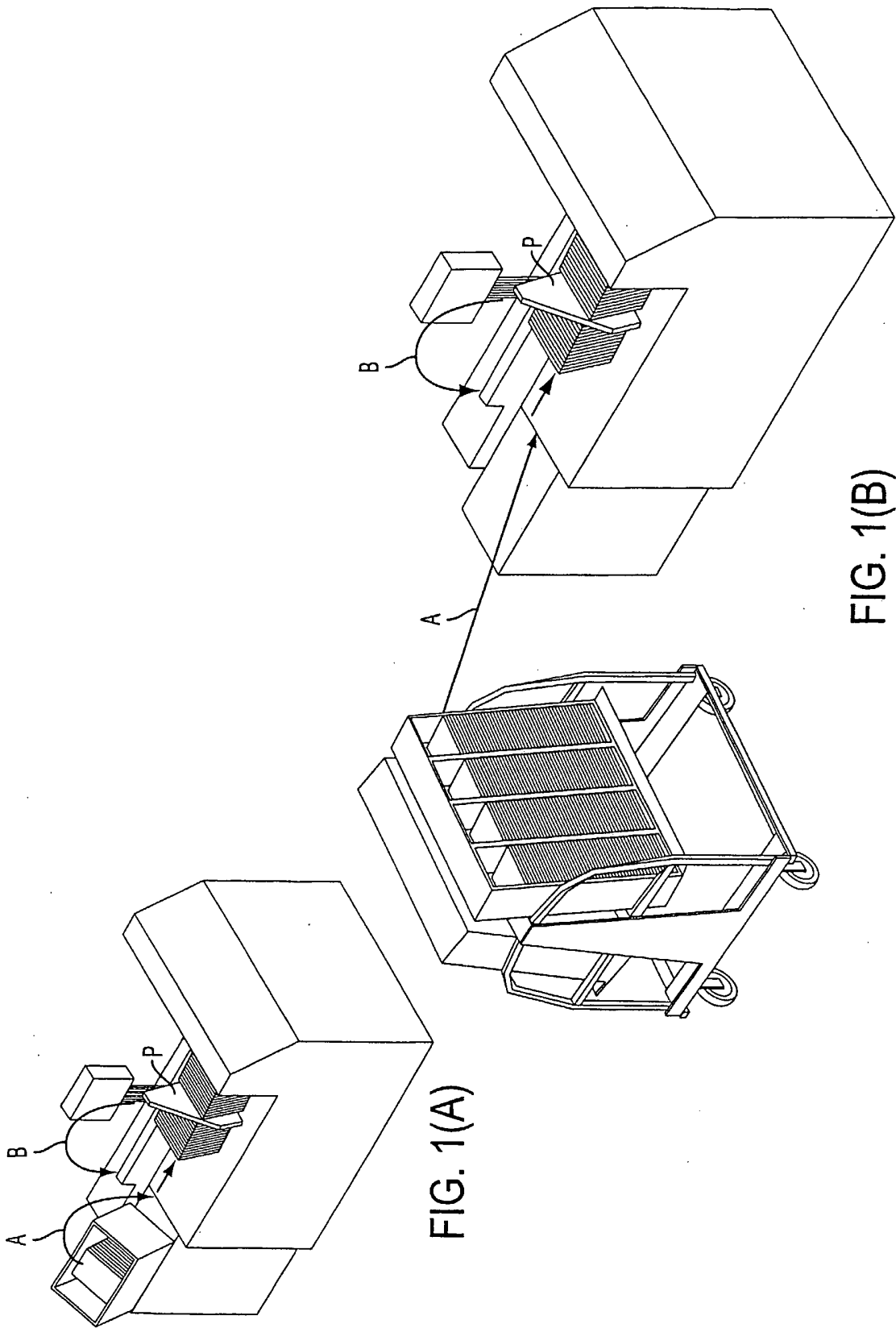
15 receive the mail bundle from the distal flat surface;

 a left supporting sidewall, projecting above the distal and proximal flat surfaces and the mail bundle, having a cut out region to facilitate mail bundle handling;

 a right supporting sidewall projecting above the distal and proximal flat surfaces and the mail bundle;

20 a bottom corner, formed from an end of the left supporting sidewall and an end of the right supporting sidewall, having an opening adapted to receive a corner portion of a mail bundle; and

 a variable-height pivotal support adapted to receive a mail carrier from a mail processing system.



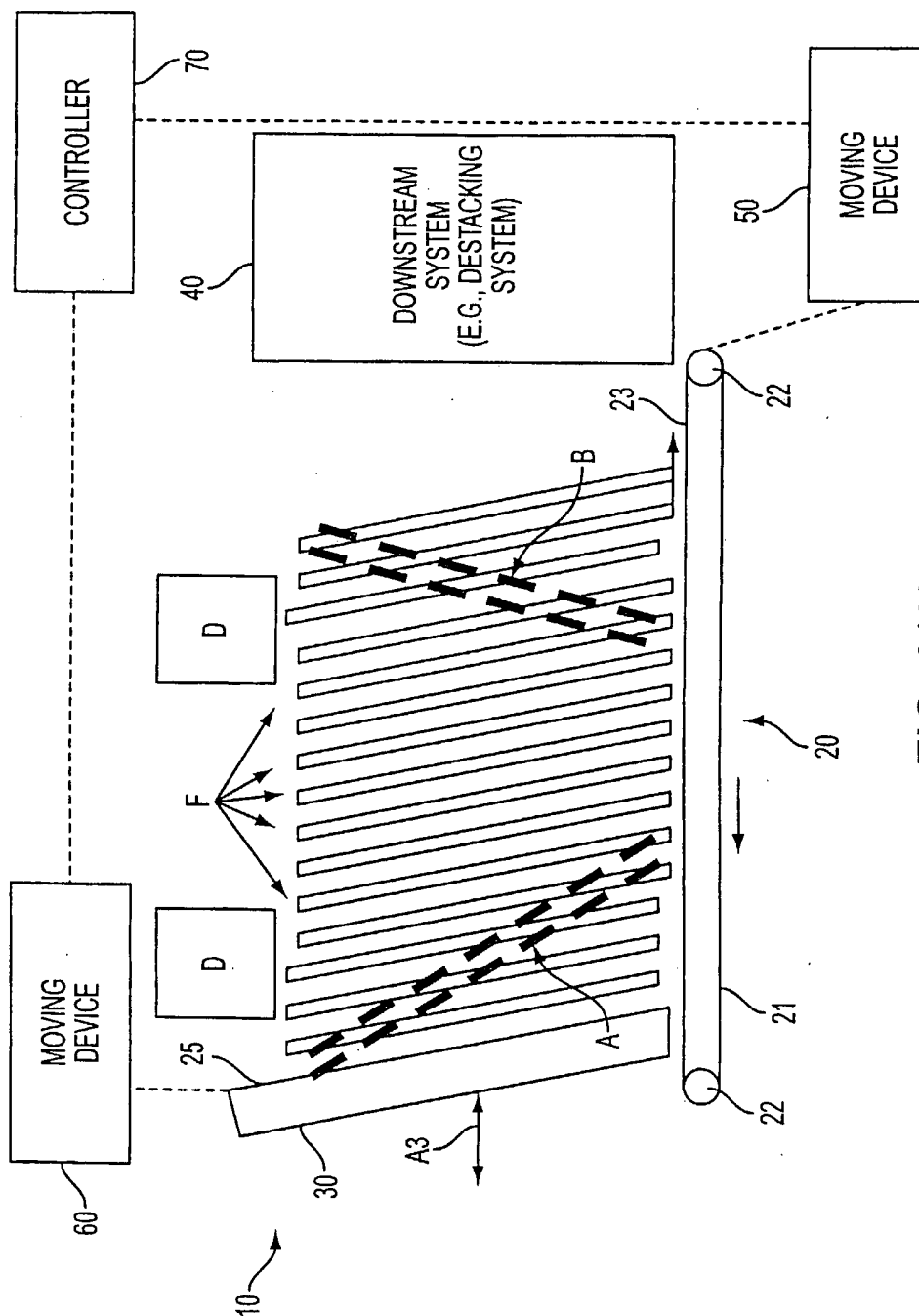


FIG. 2(A)

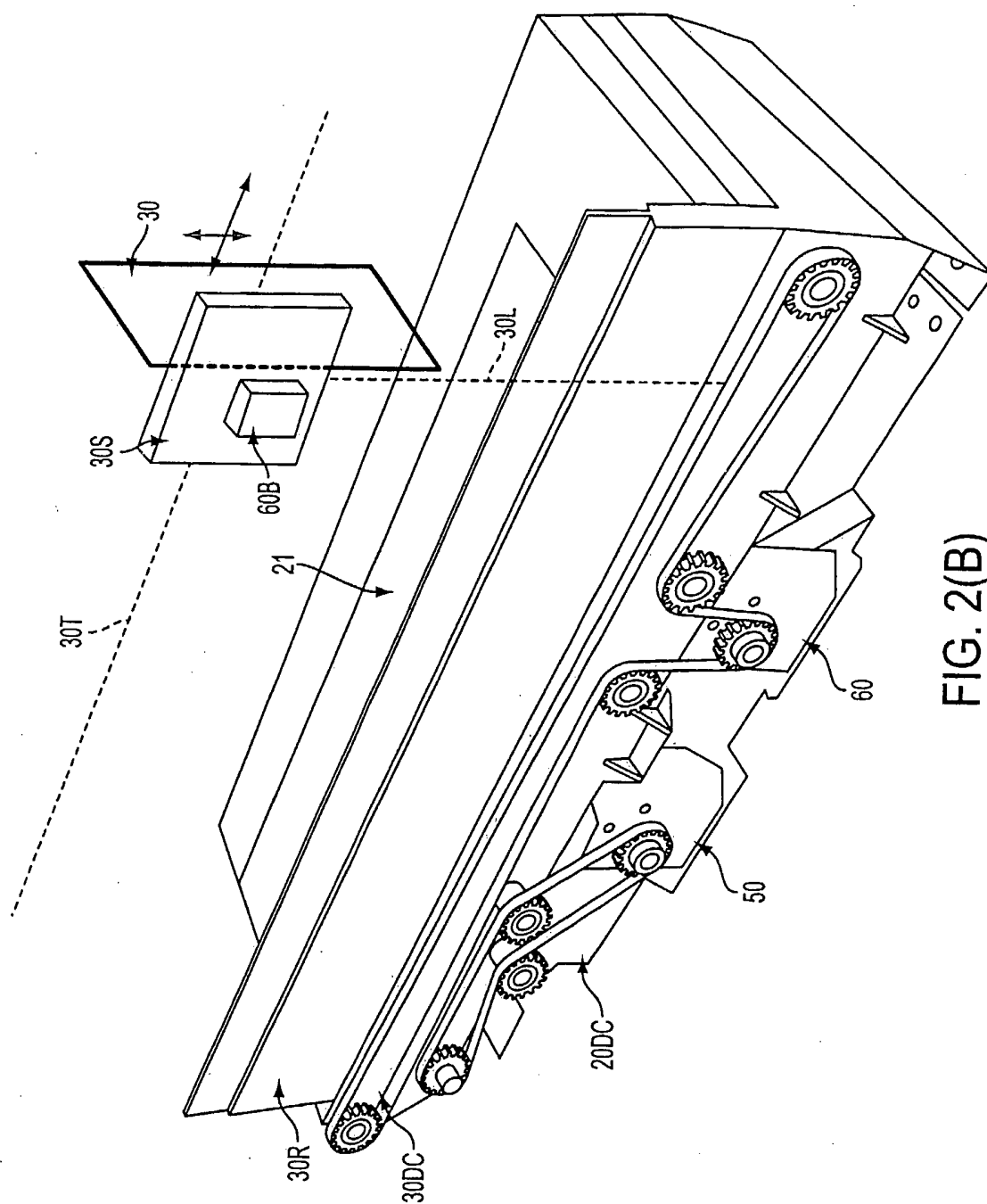


FIG. 2(B)

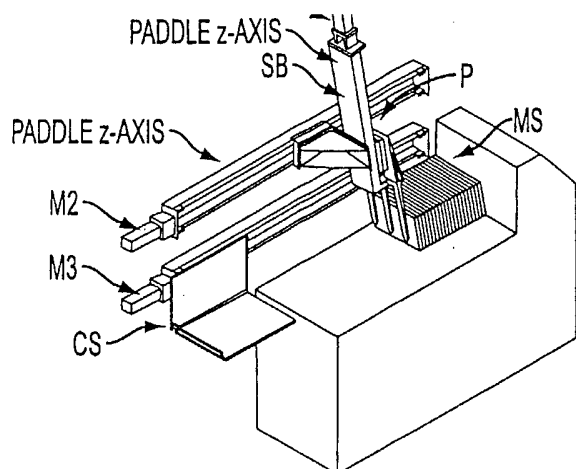


FIG. 3

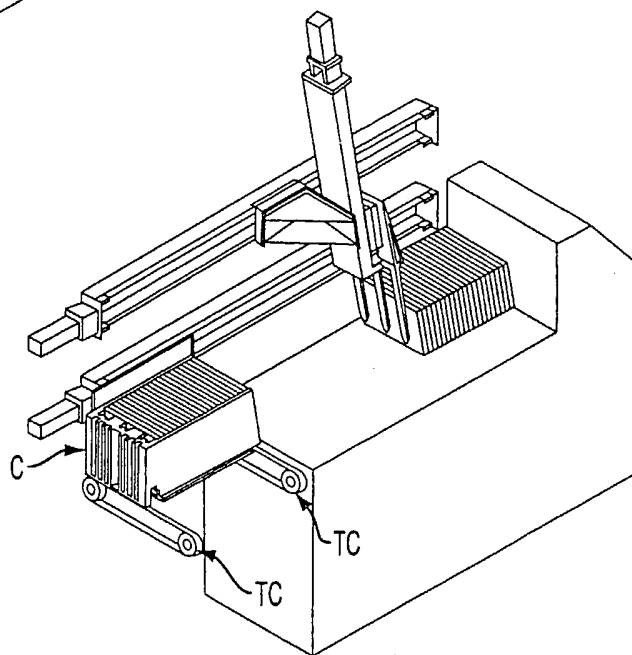


FIG. 4

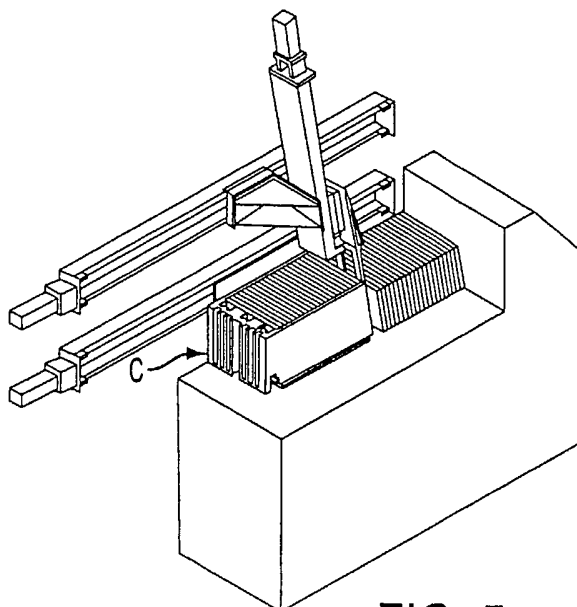


FIG. 5

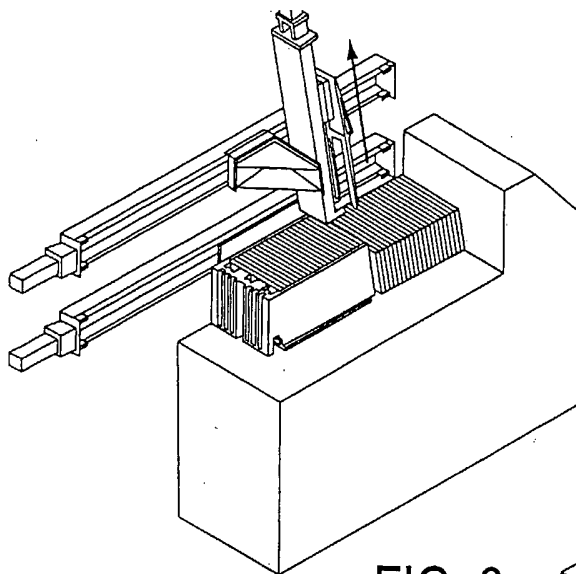


FIG. 6

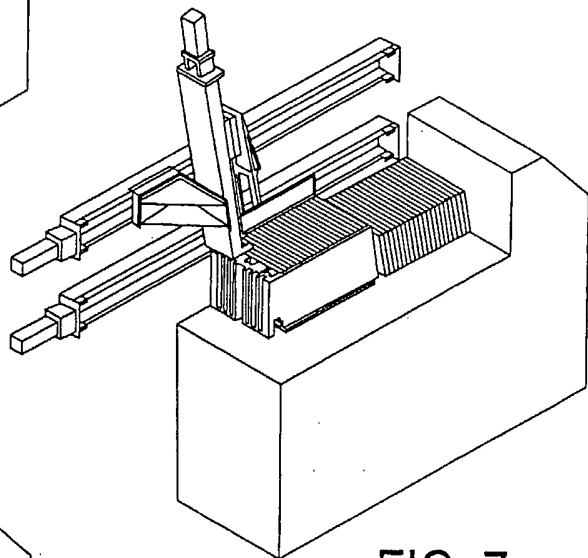


FIG. 7

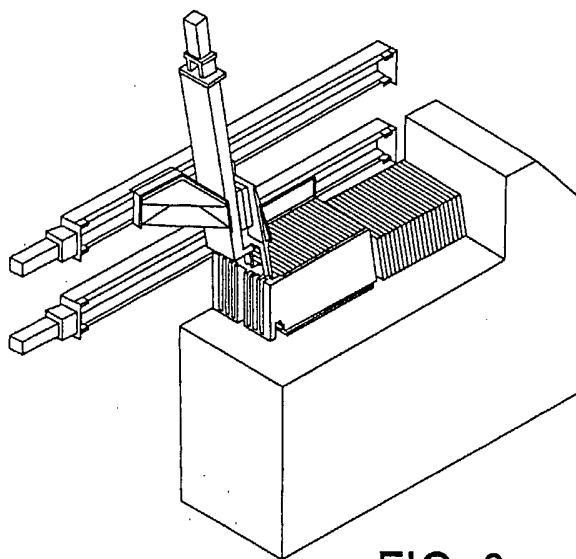


FIG. 8

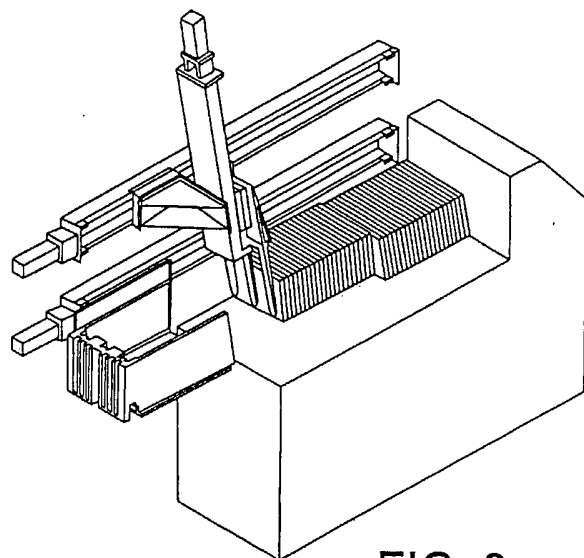


FIG. 9

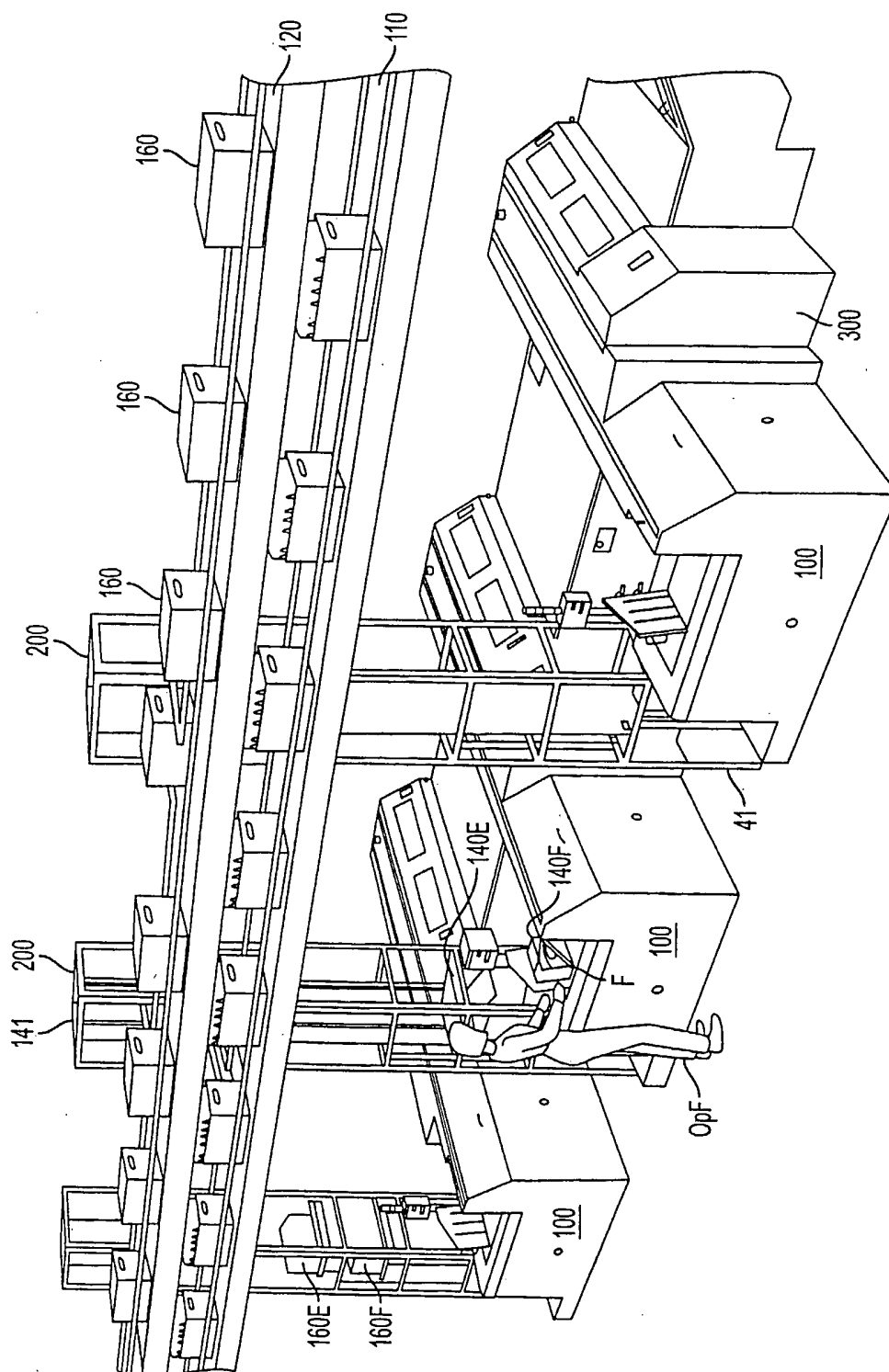


FIG. 10(A)

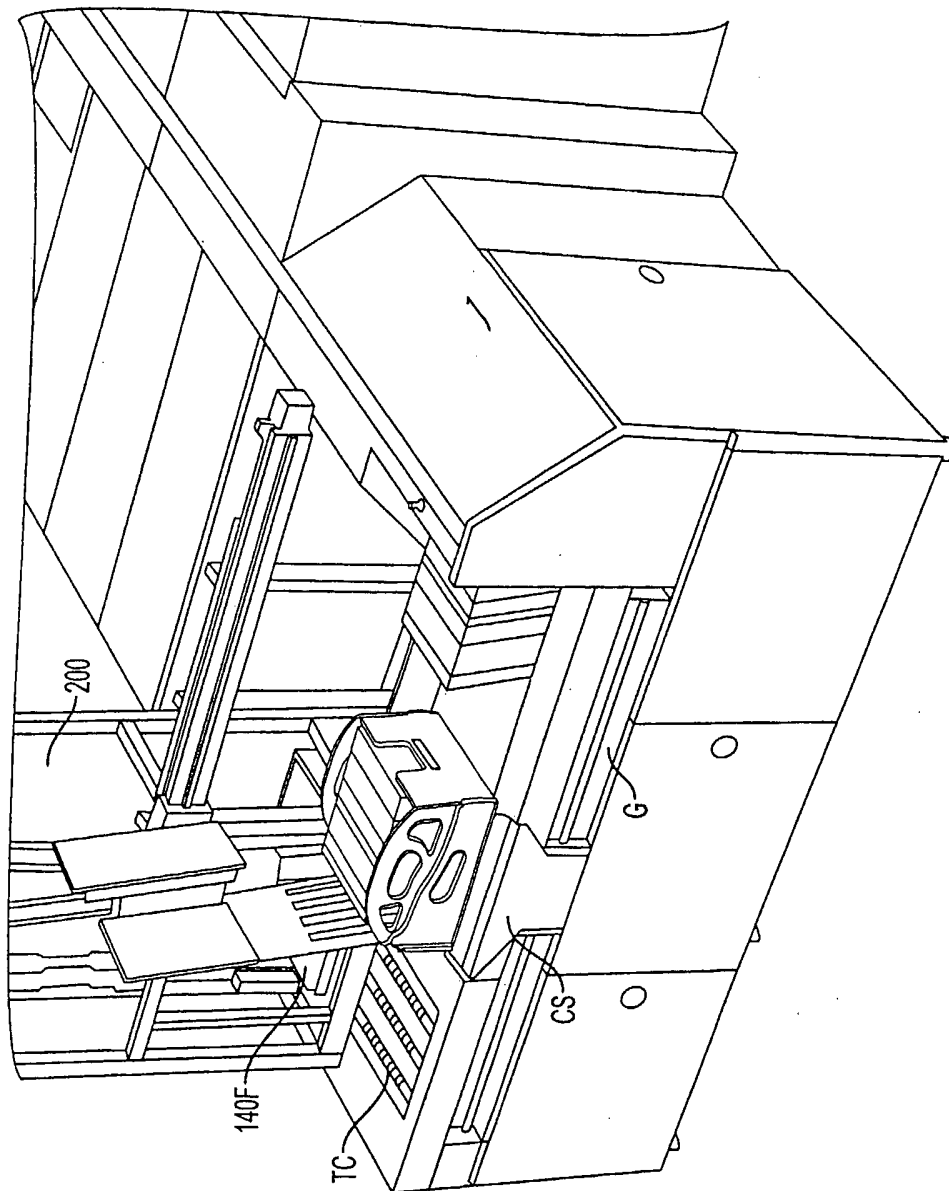


FIG. 10(B)

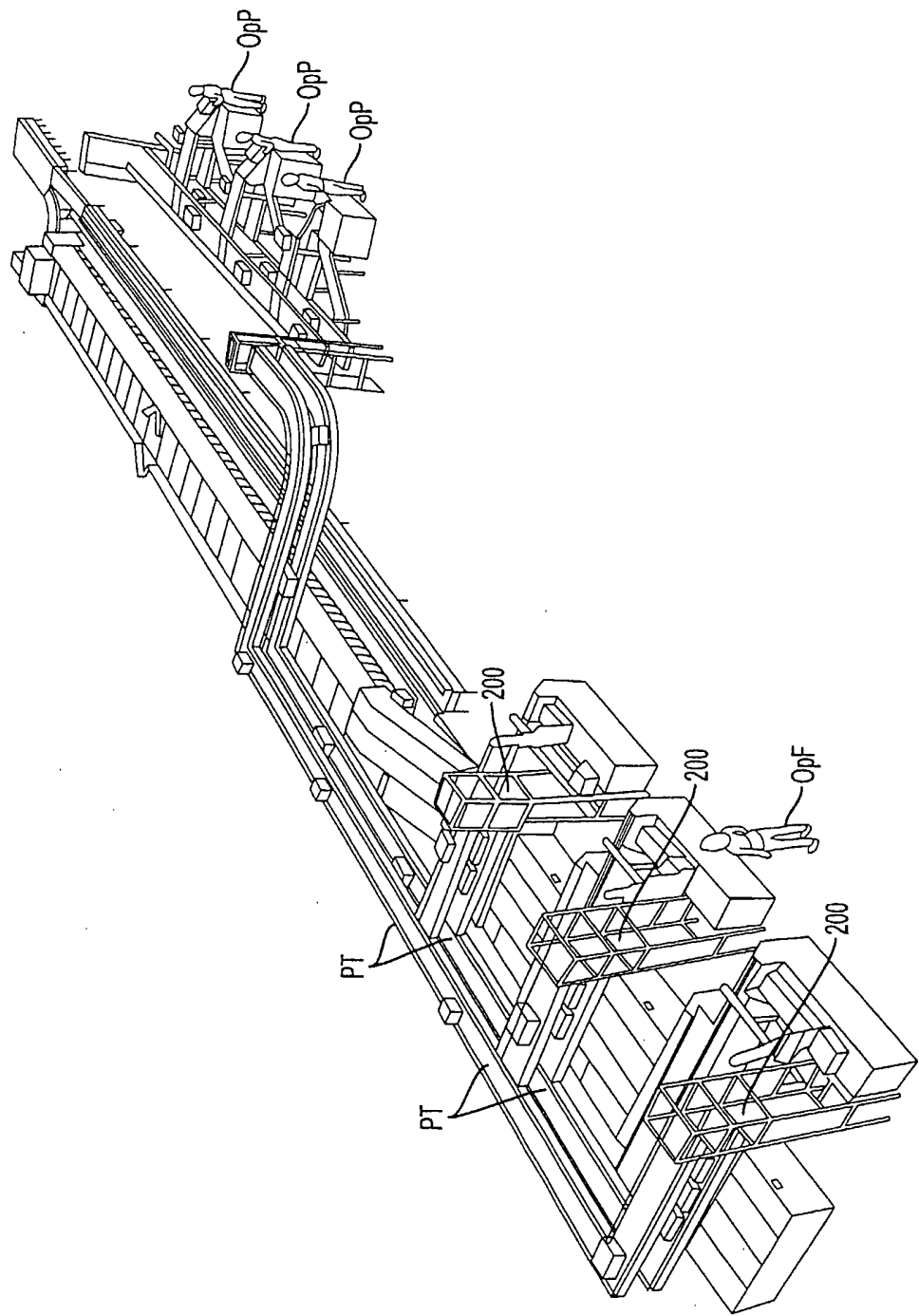


FIG. 10(C)

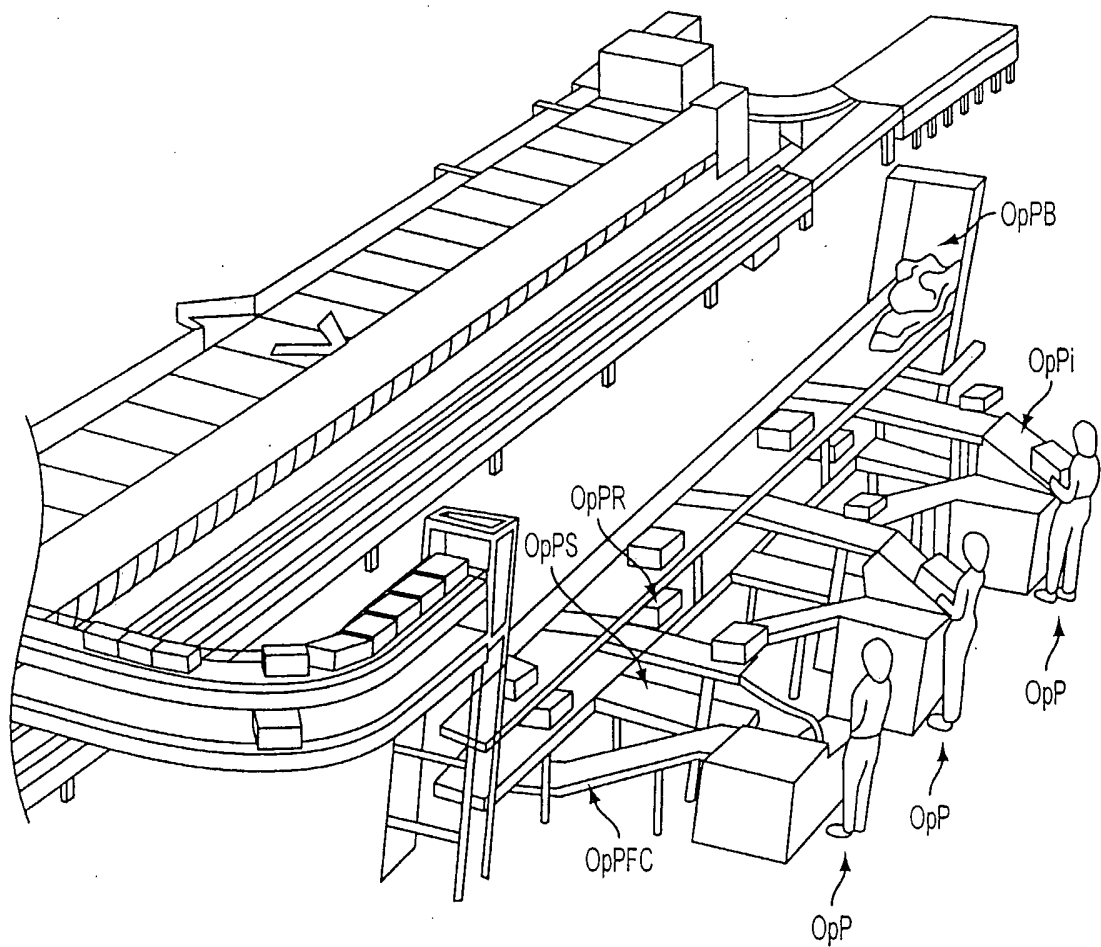


FIG. 10D

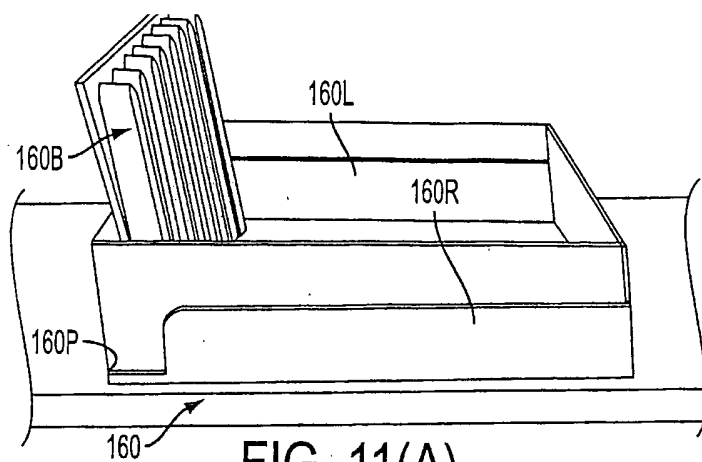


FIG. 11(A)

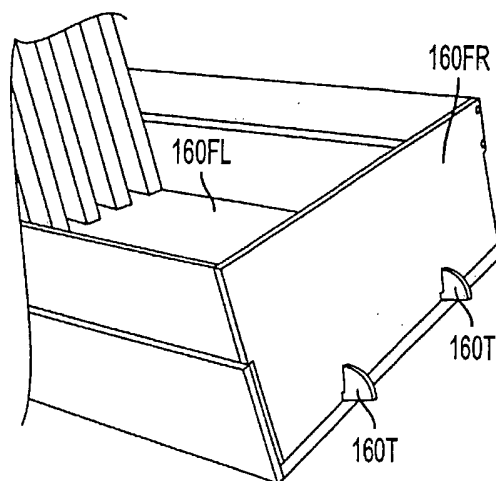


FIG. 11(B)

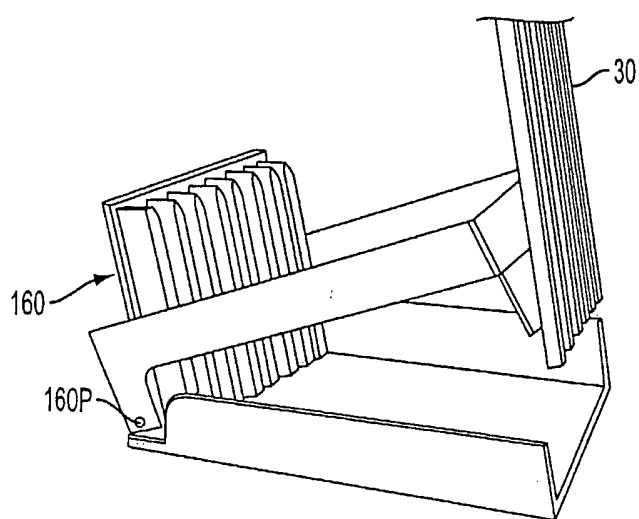


FIG. 11(C)

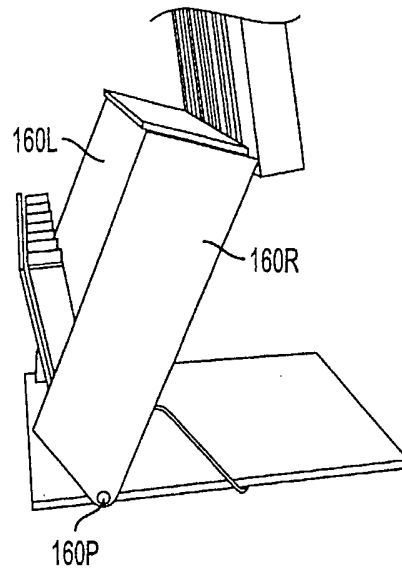


FIG. 12

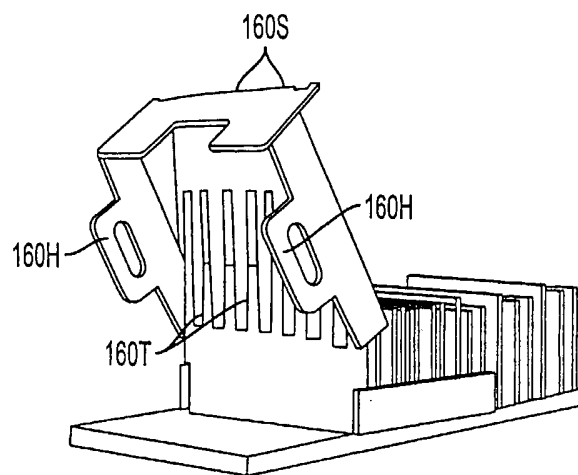


FIG. 13

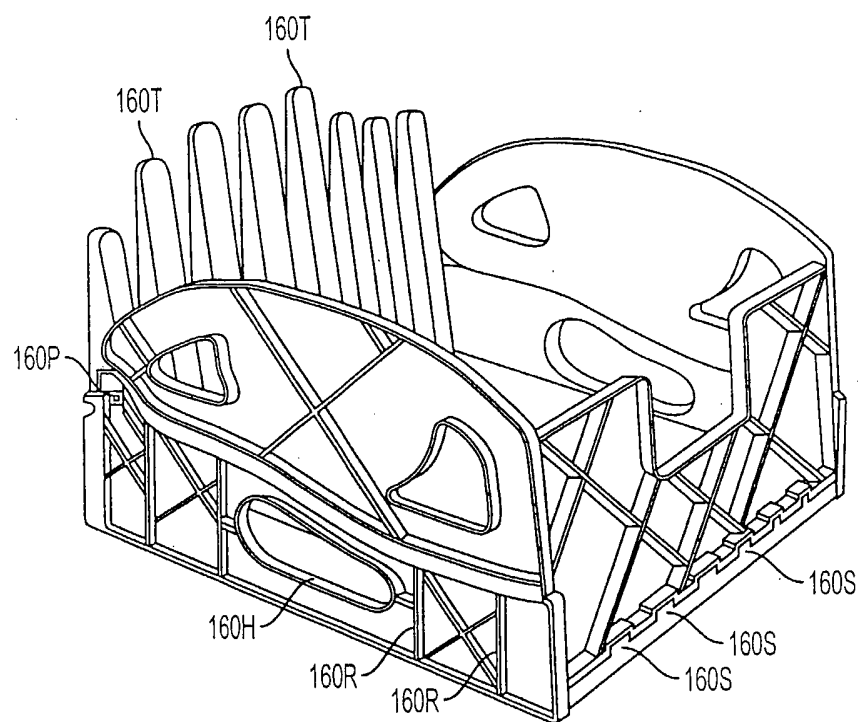


FIG. 14

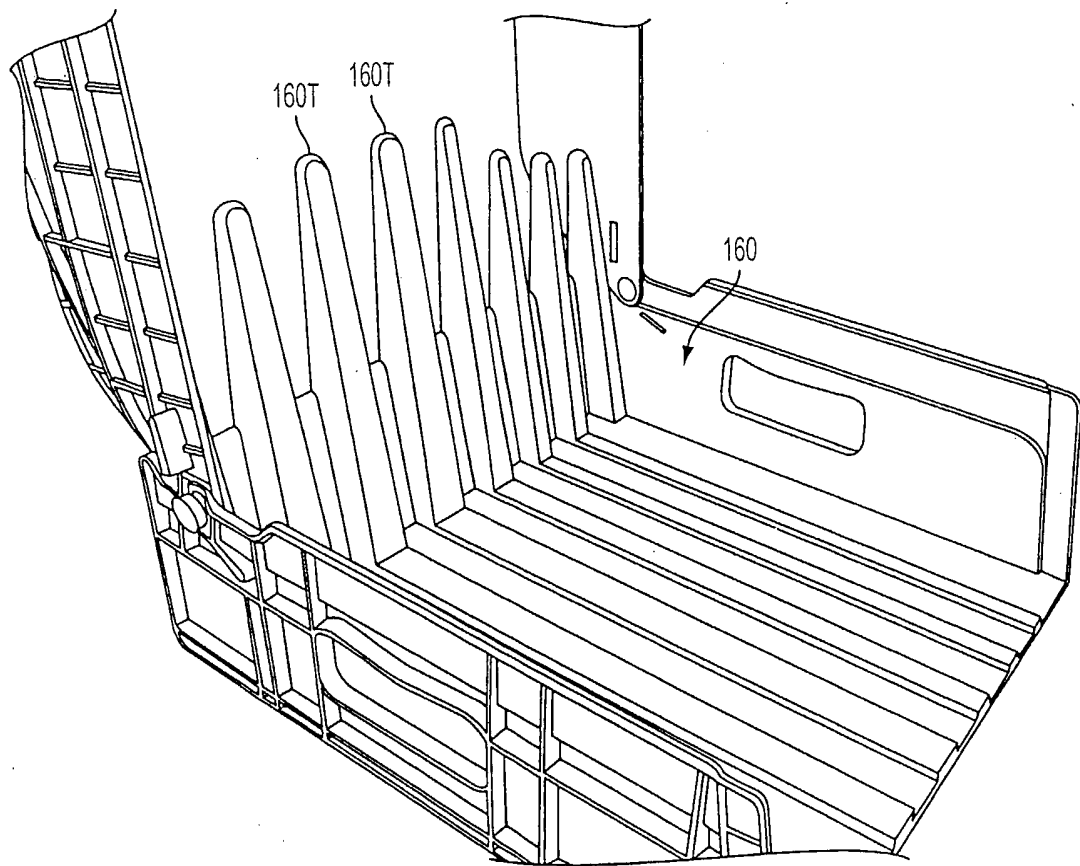
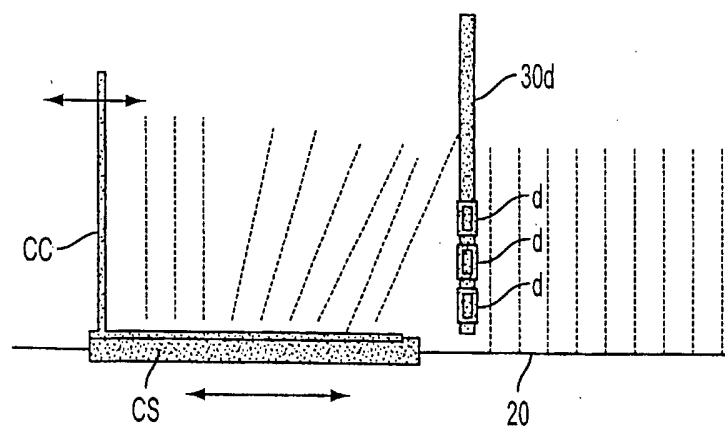
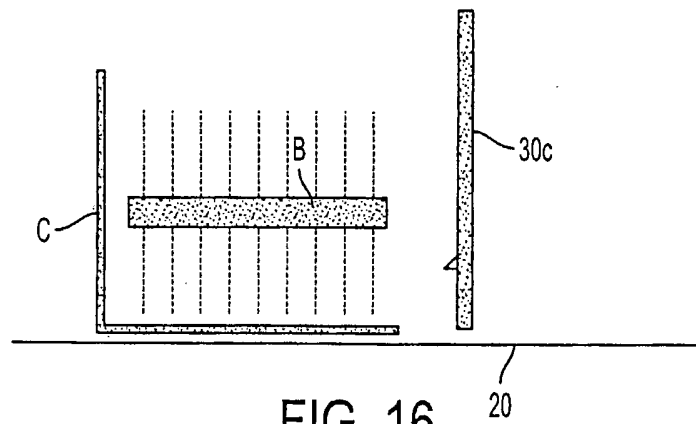


FIG. 15



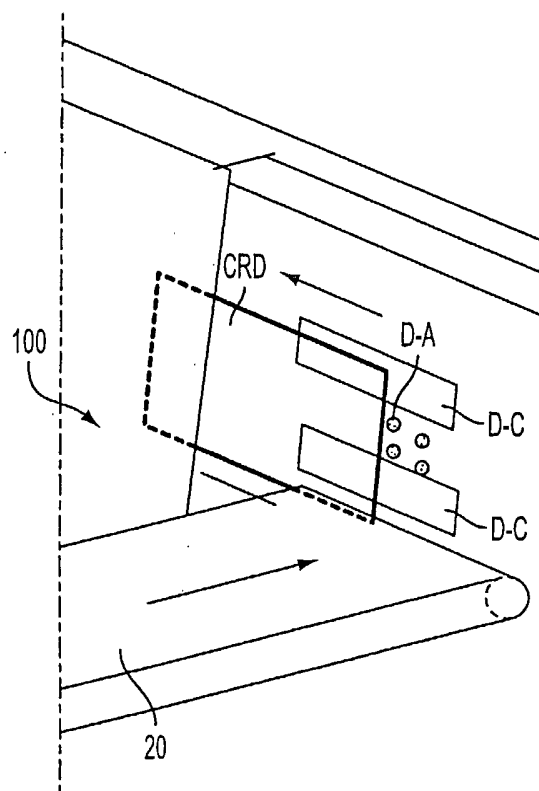


FIG. 18

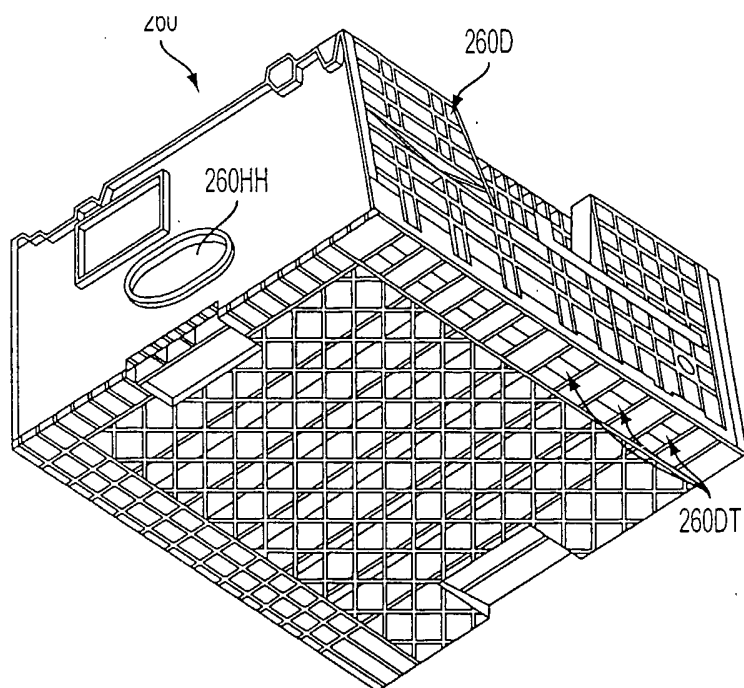


FIG. 19A

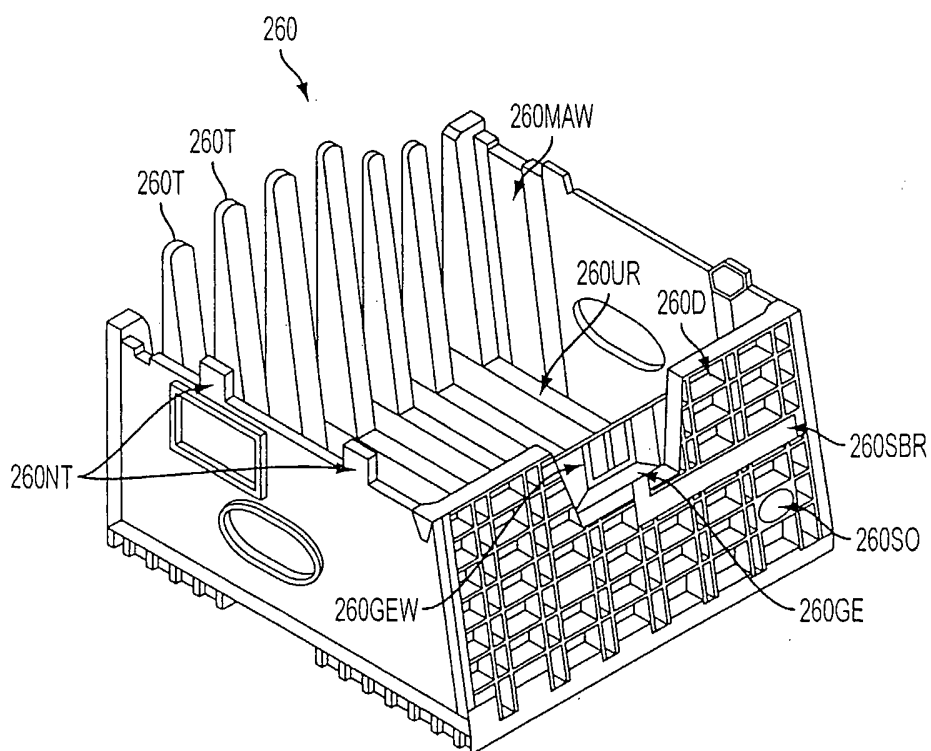


FIG. 19B

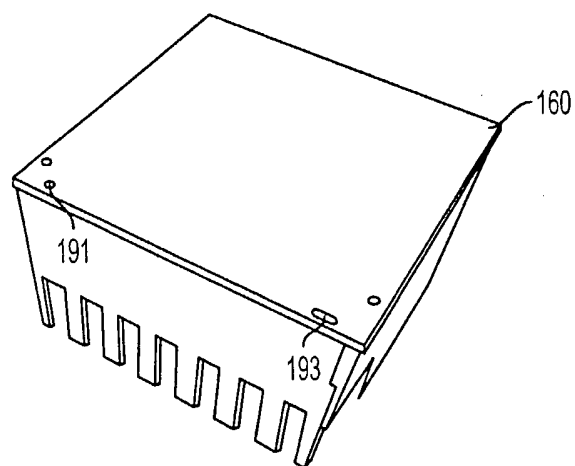
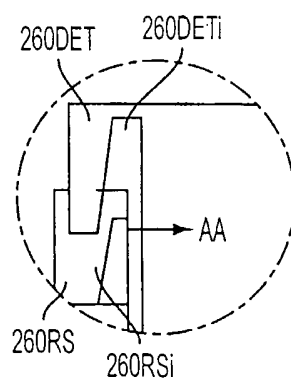
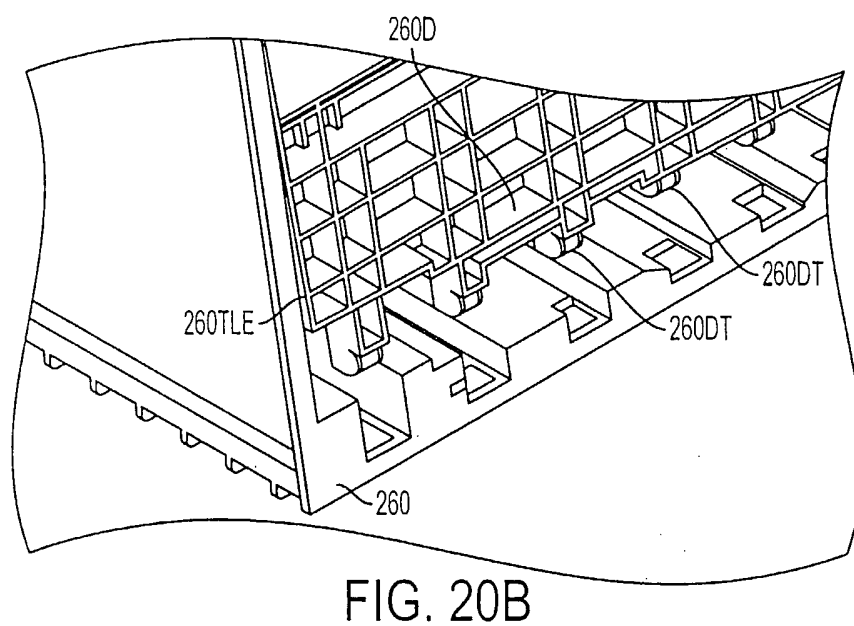
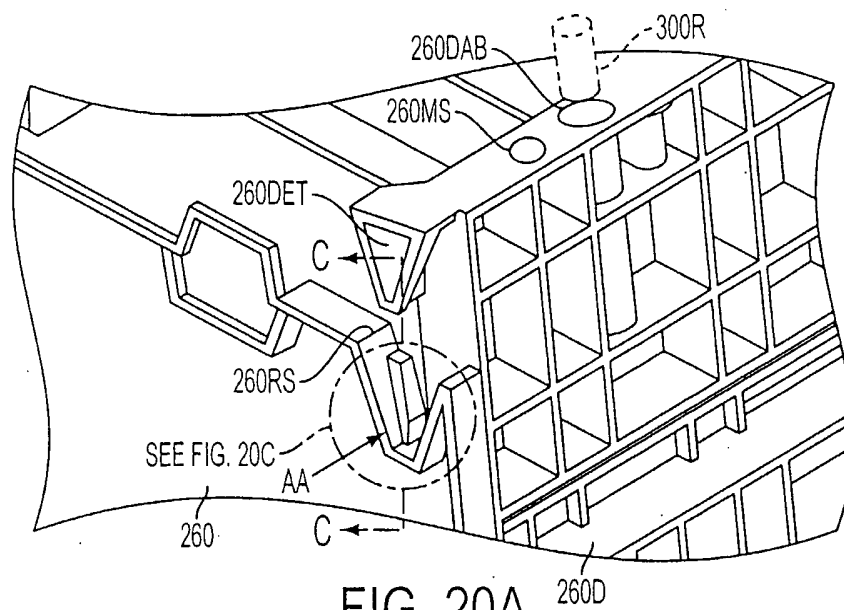


FIG. 19C



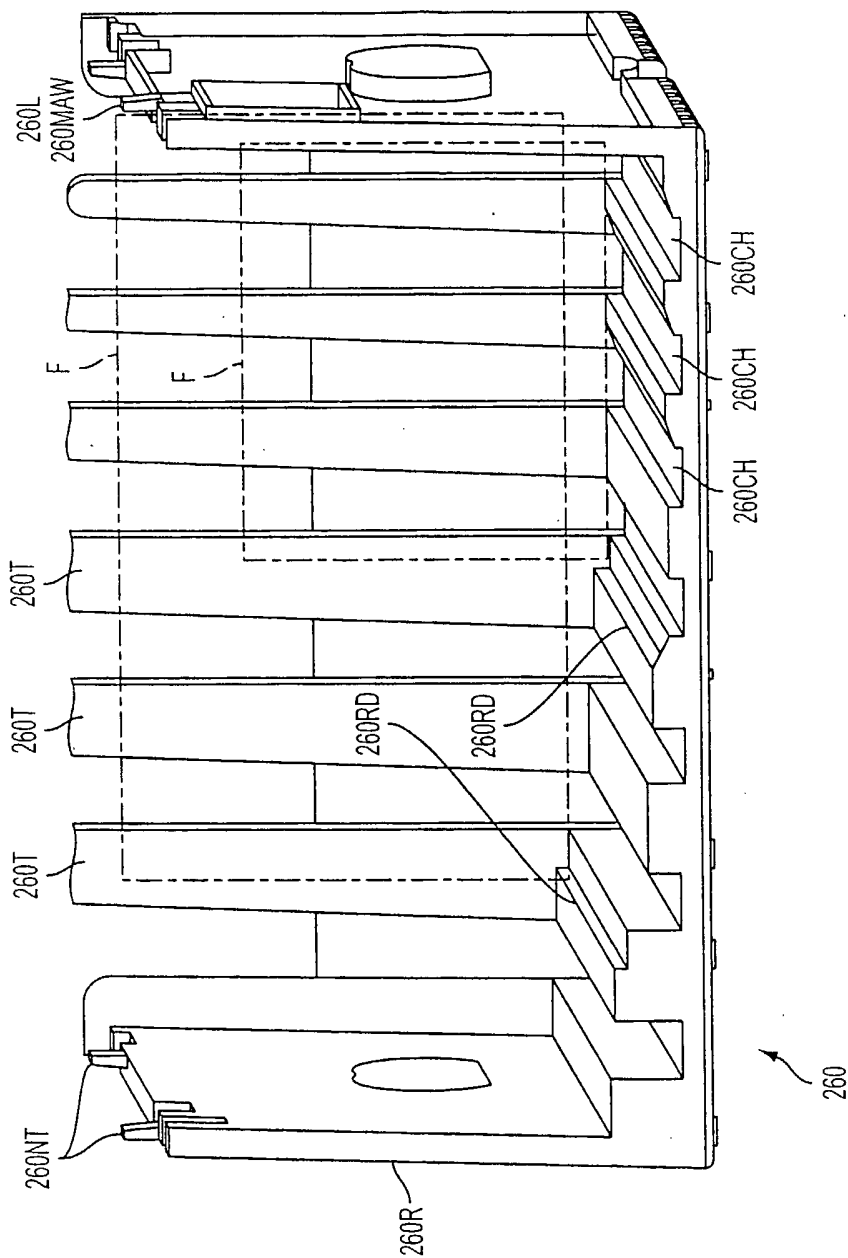


FIG. 21

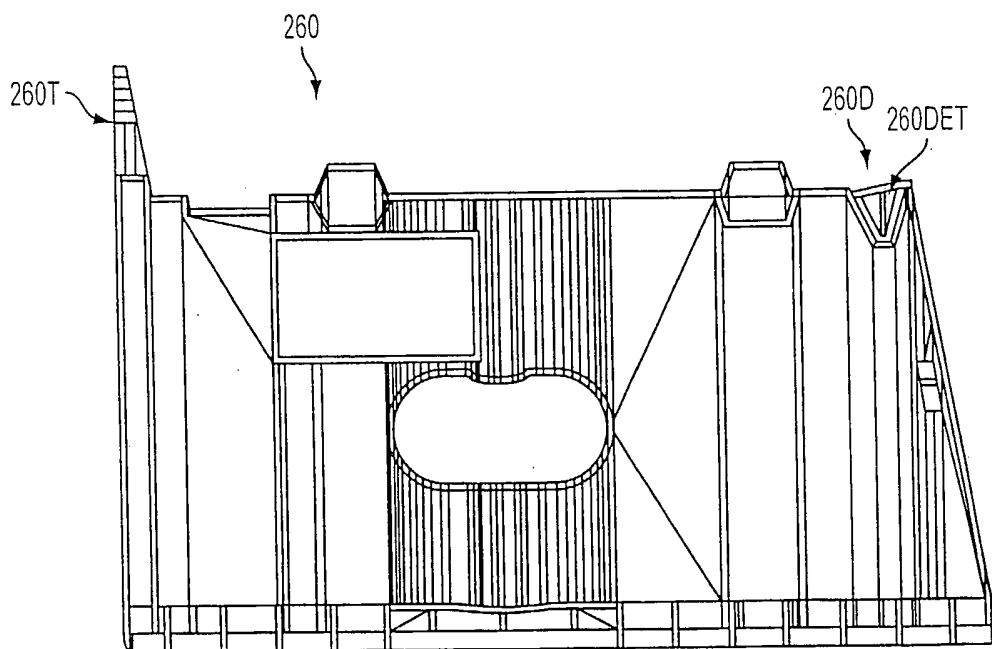


FIG. 22

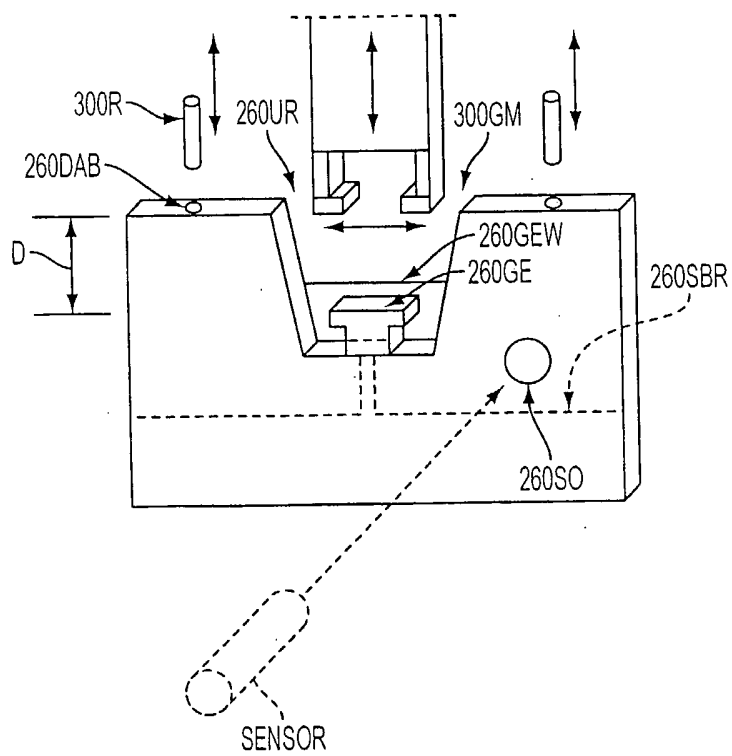


FIG. 23

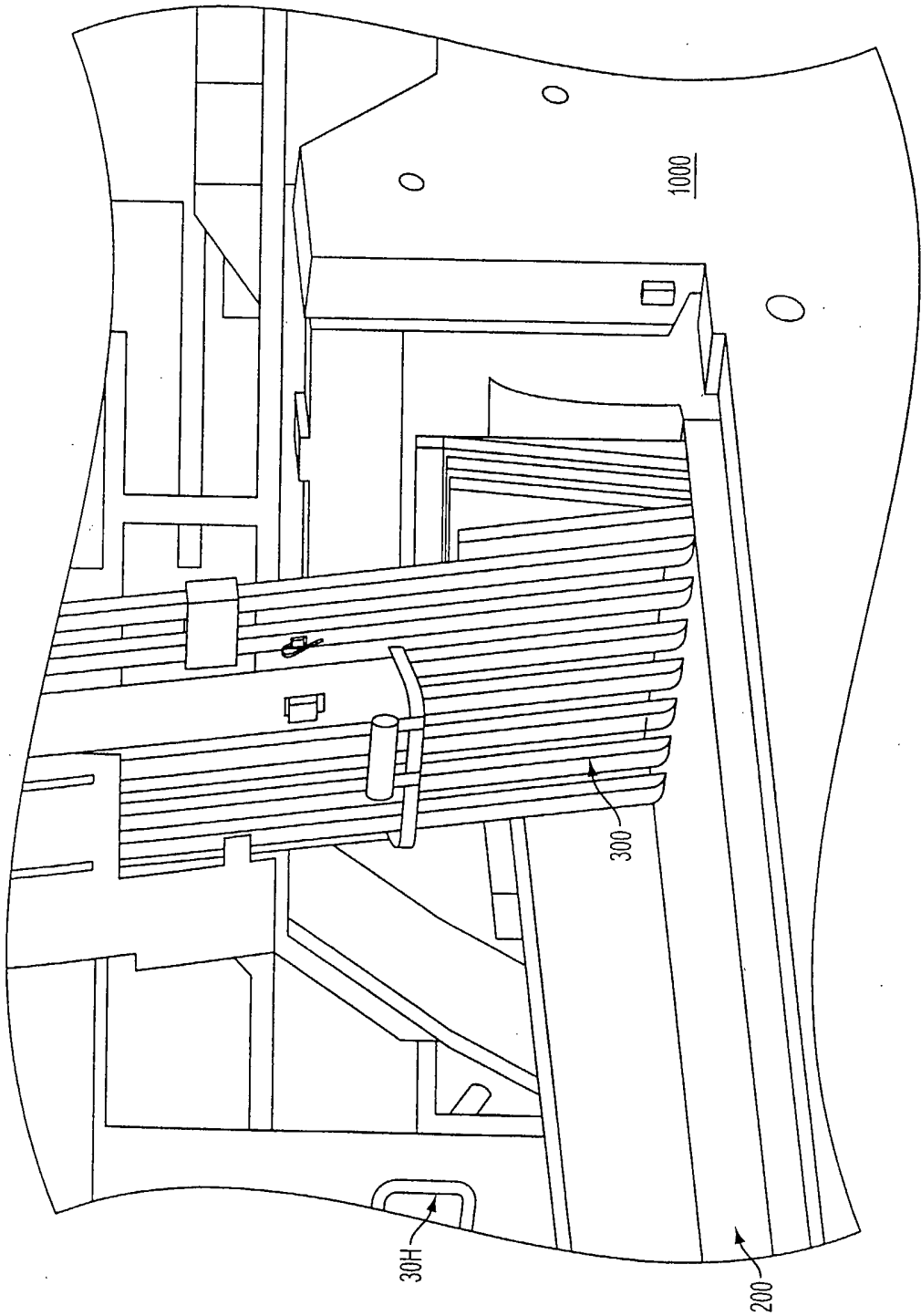


FIG. 24A

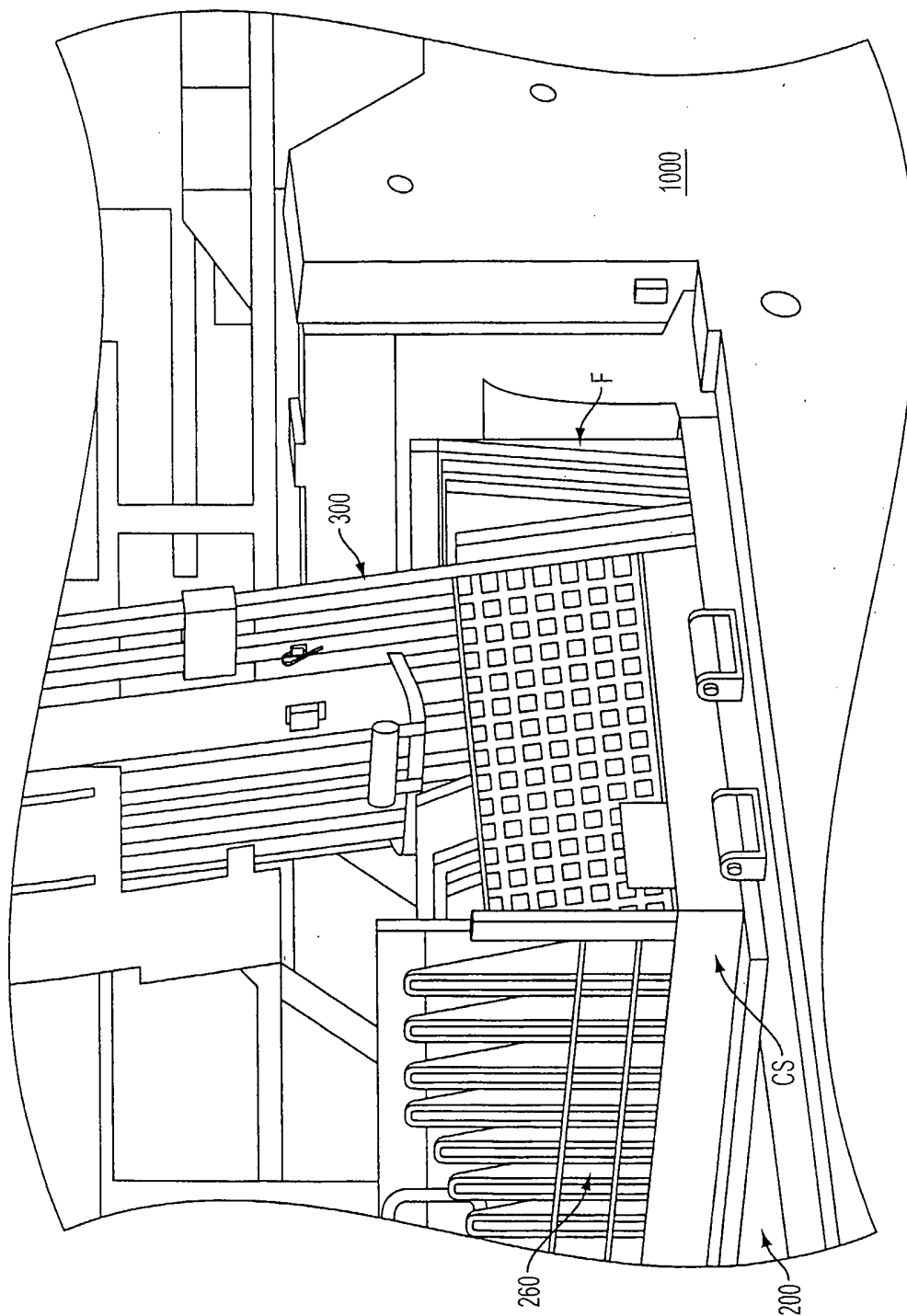


FIG. 24B

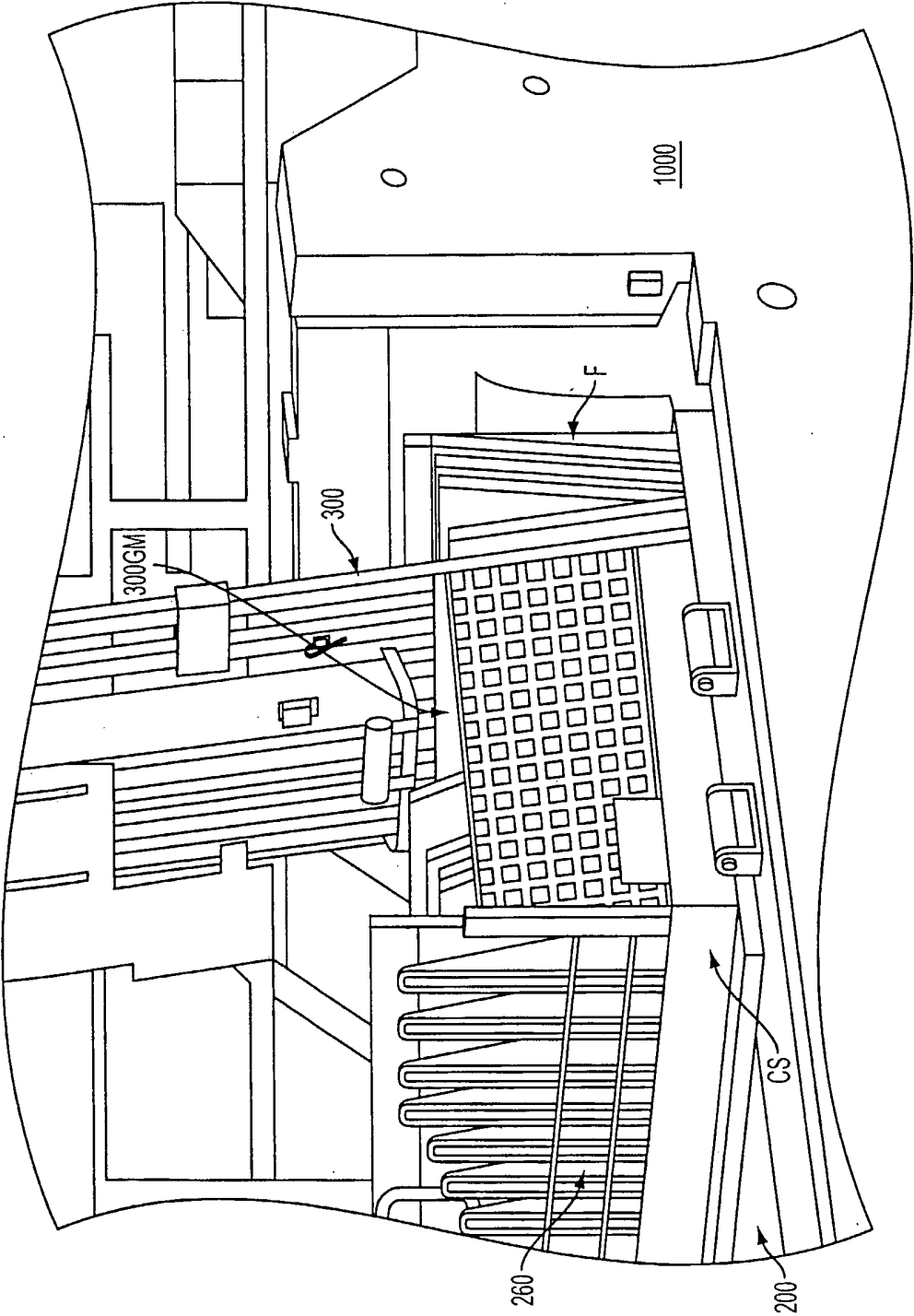


FIG. 24C

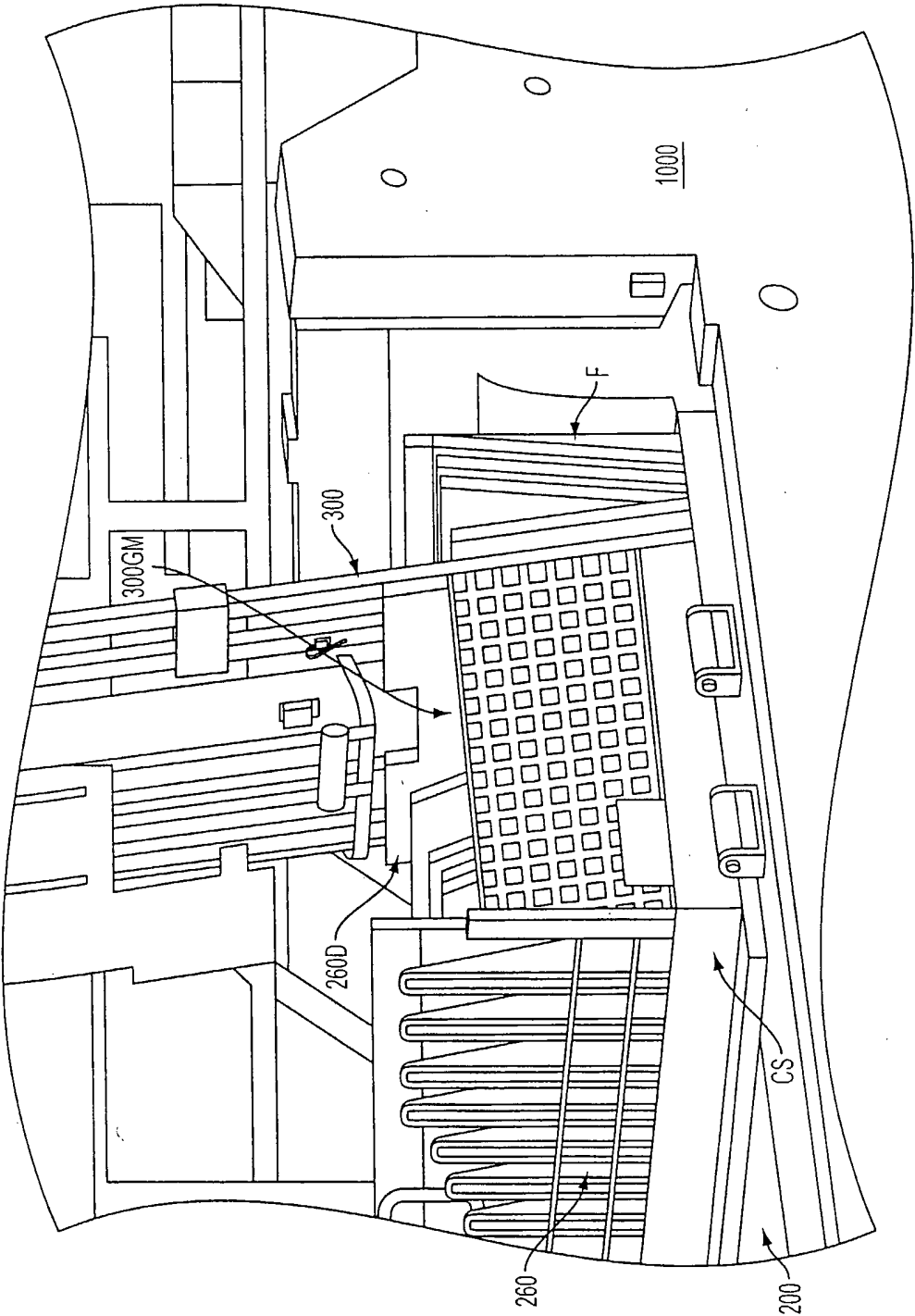


FIG. 24D

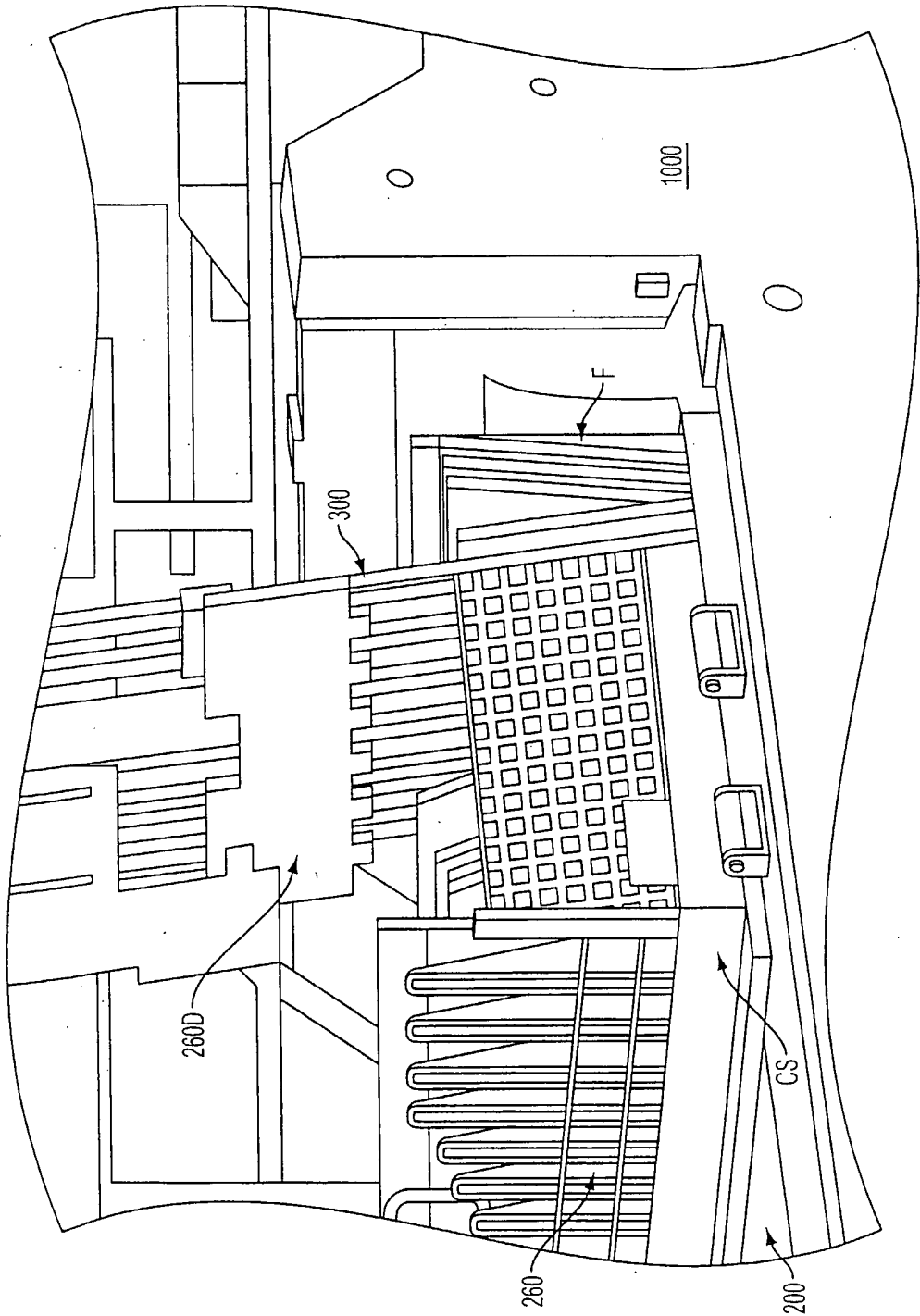


FIG. 24E

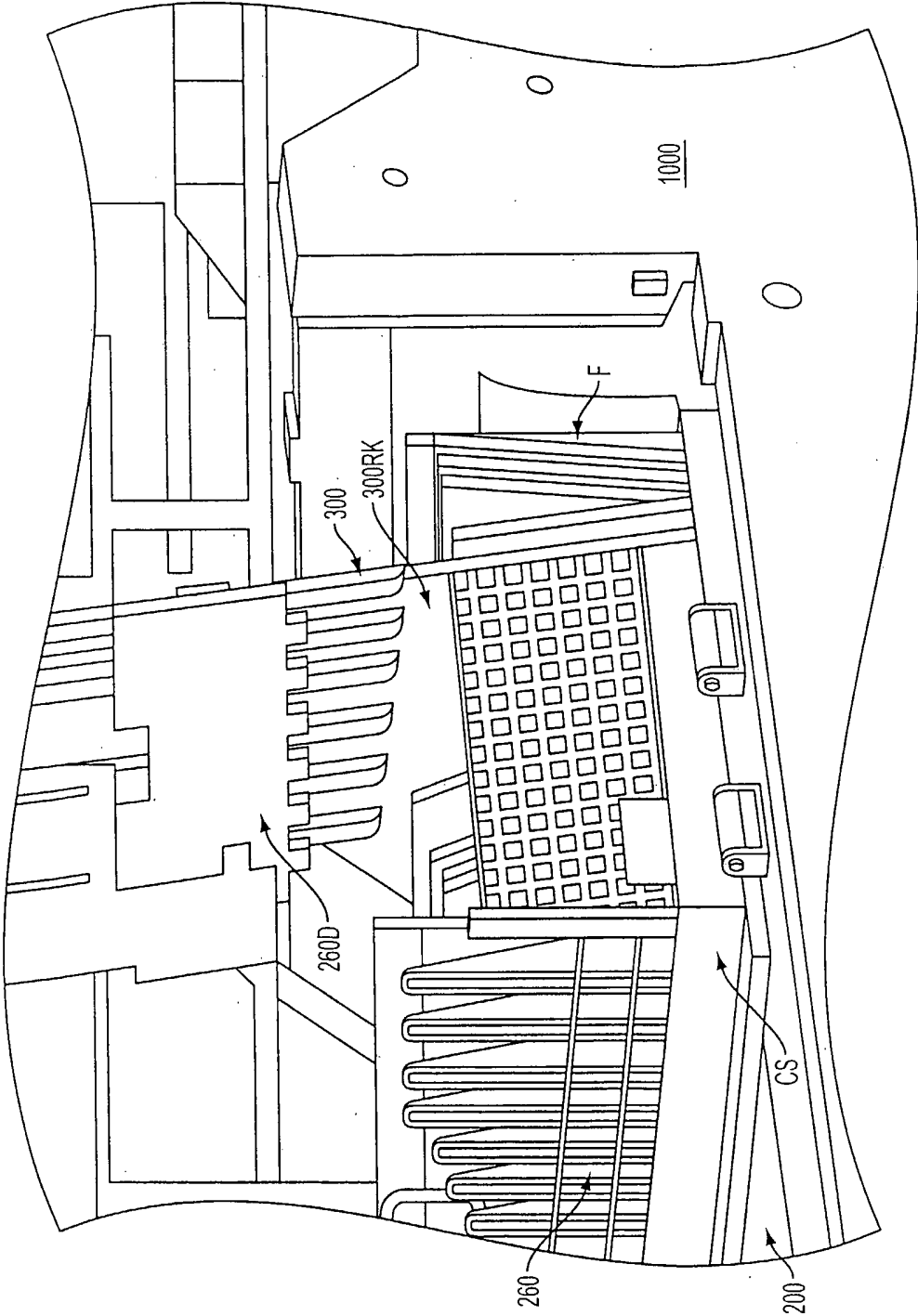


FIG. 24F

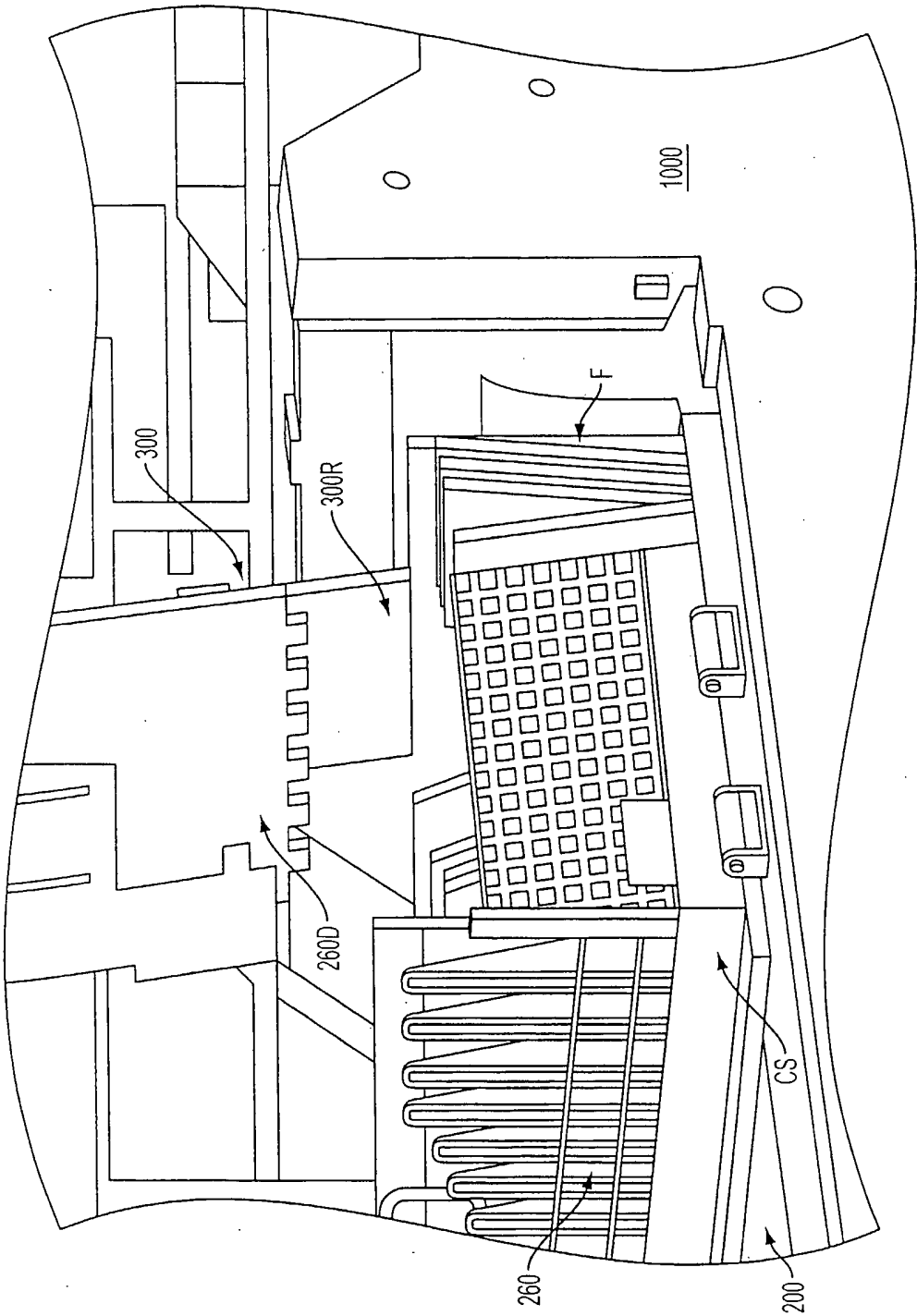


FIG. 24G

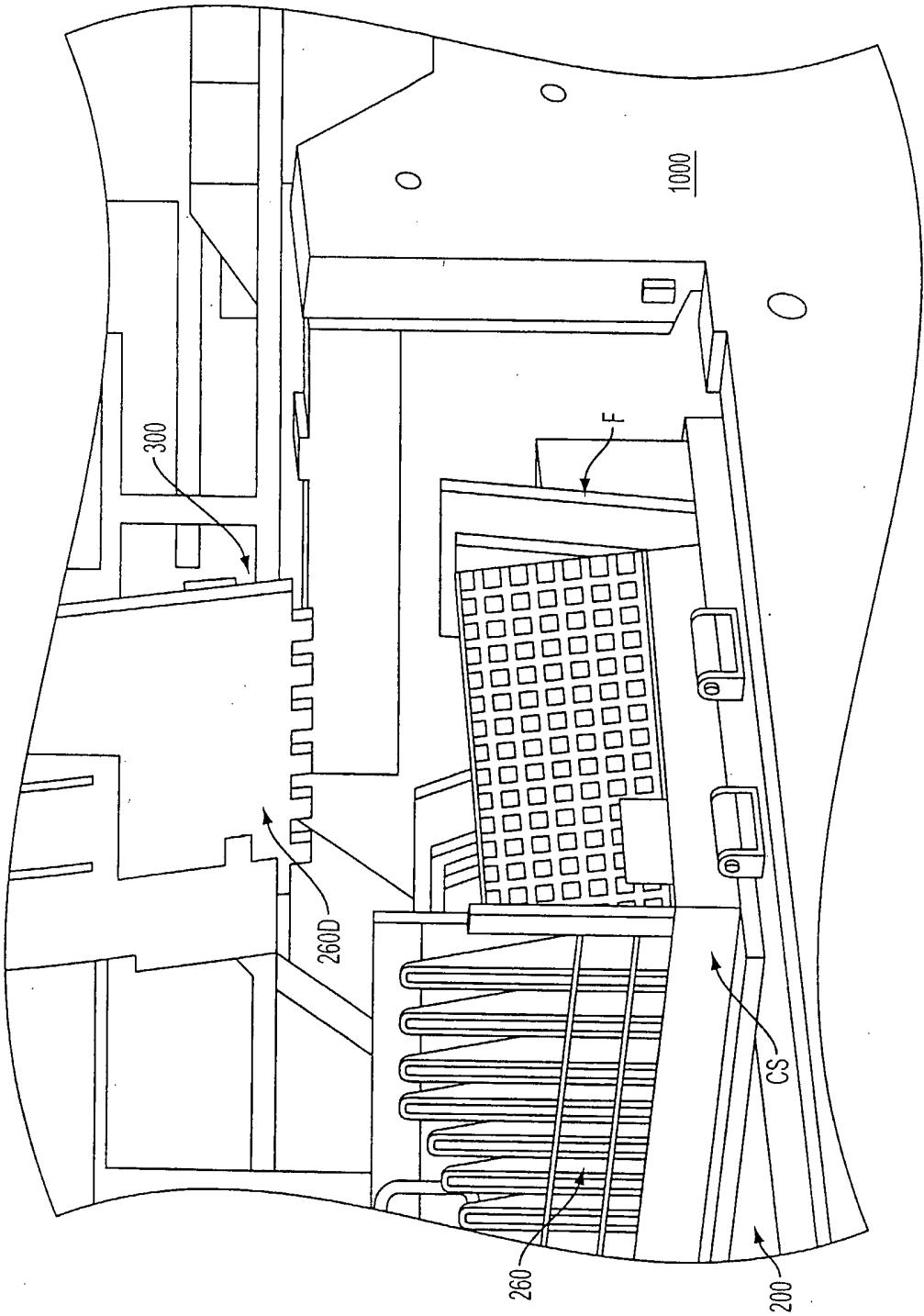


FIG. 24H

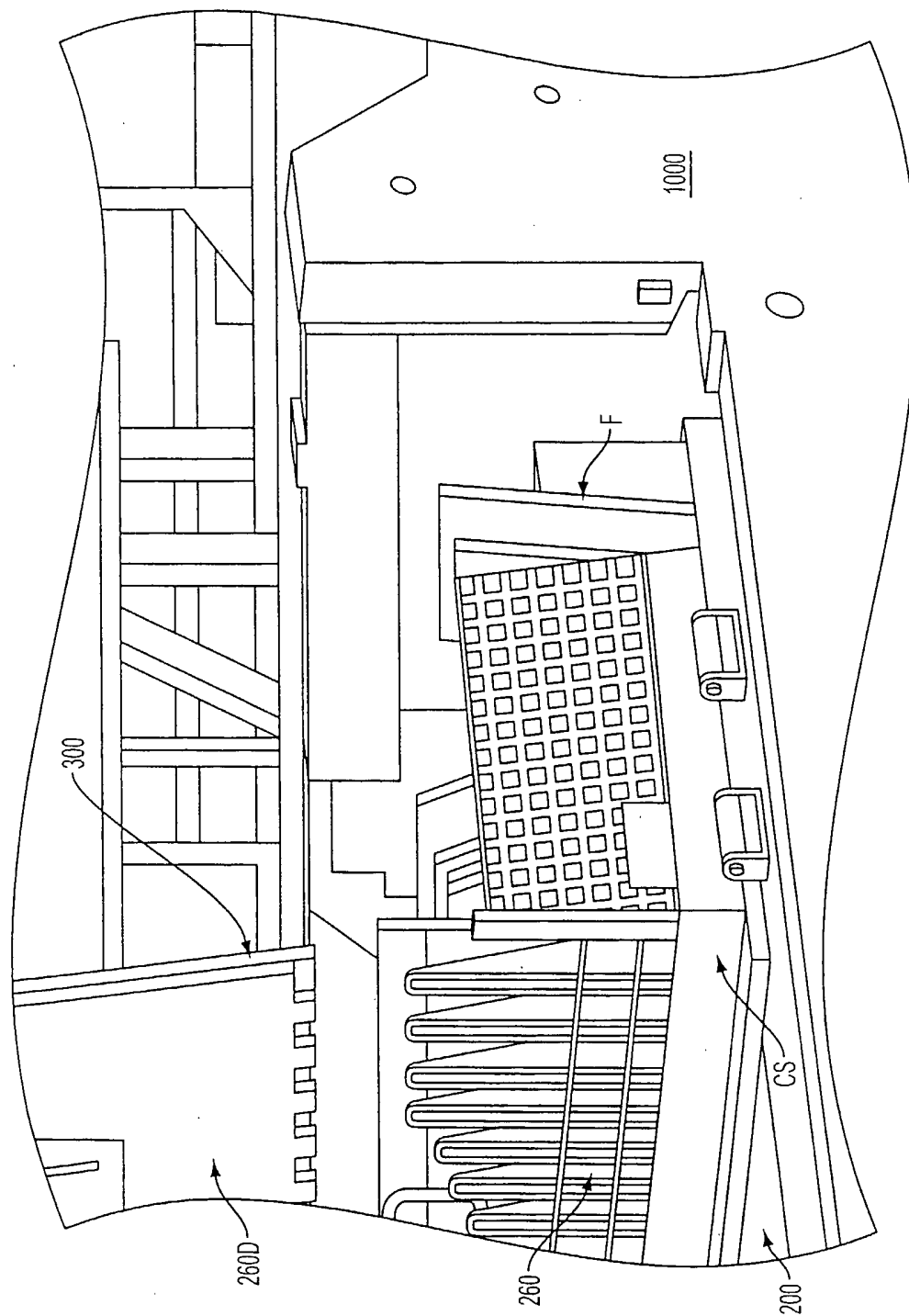


FIG. 24I

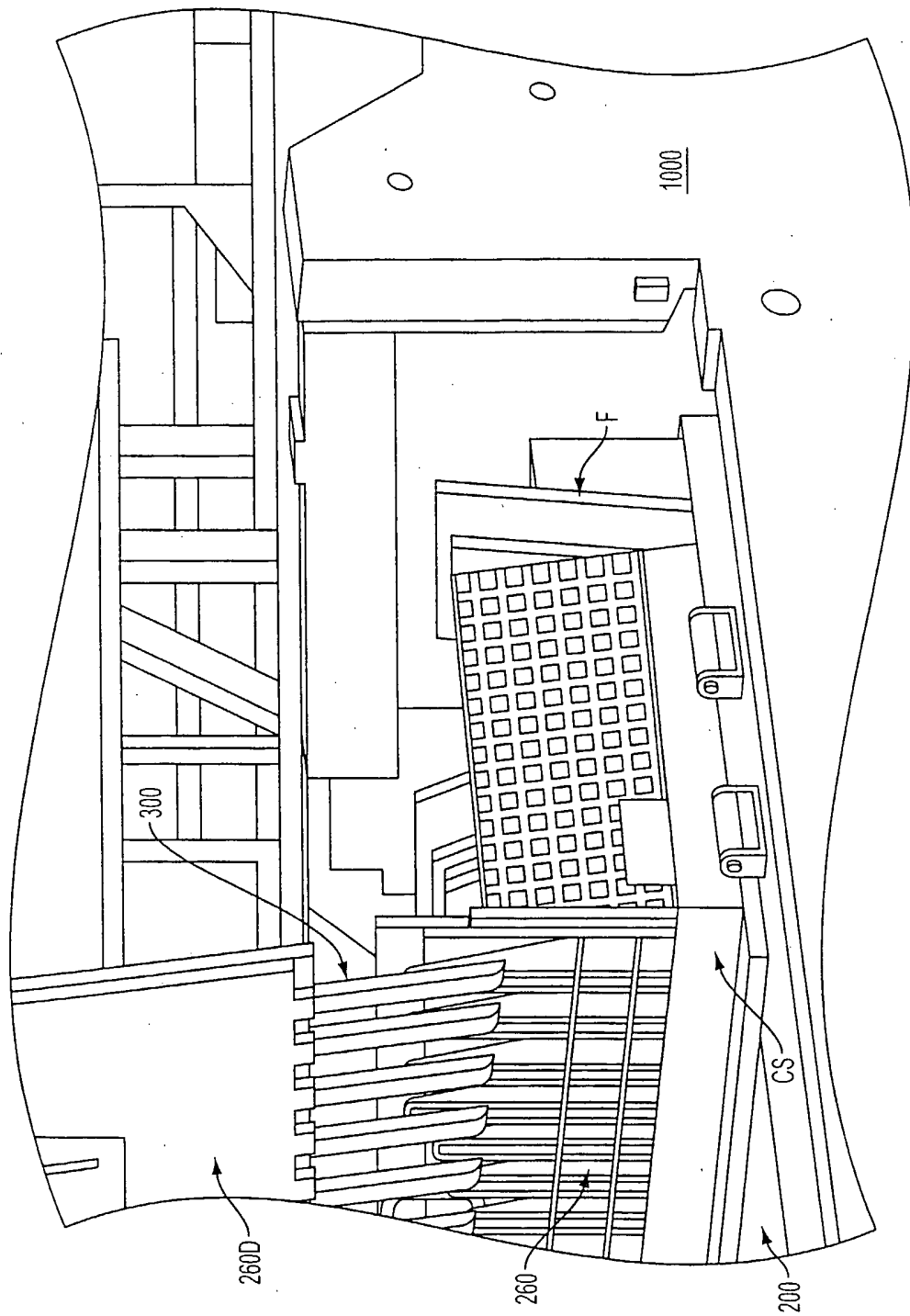


FIG. 24J

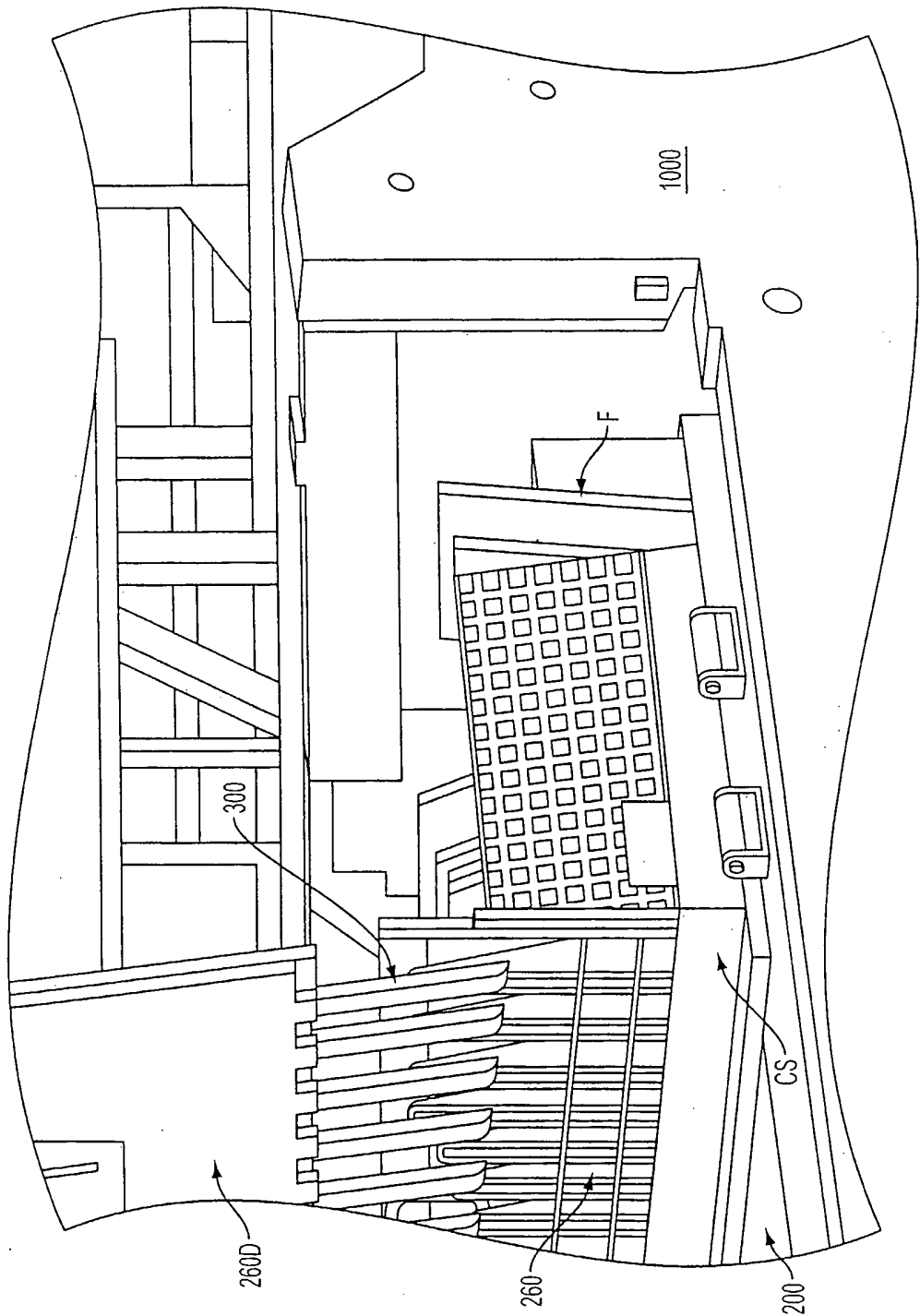


FIG. 24K

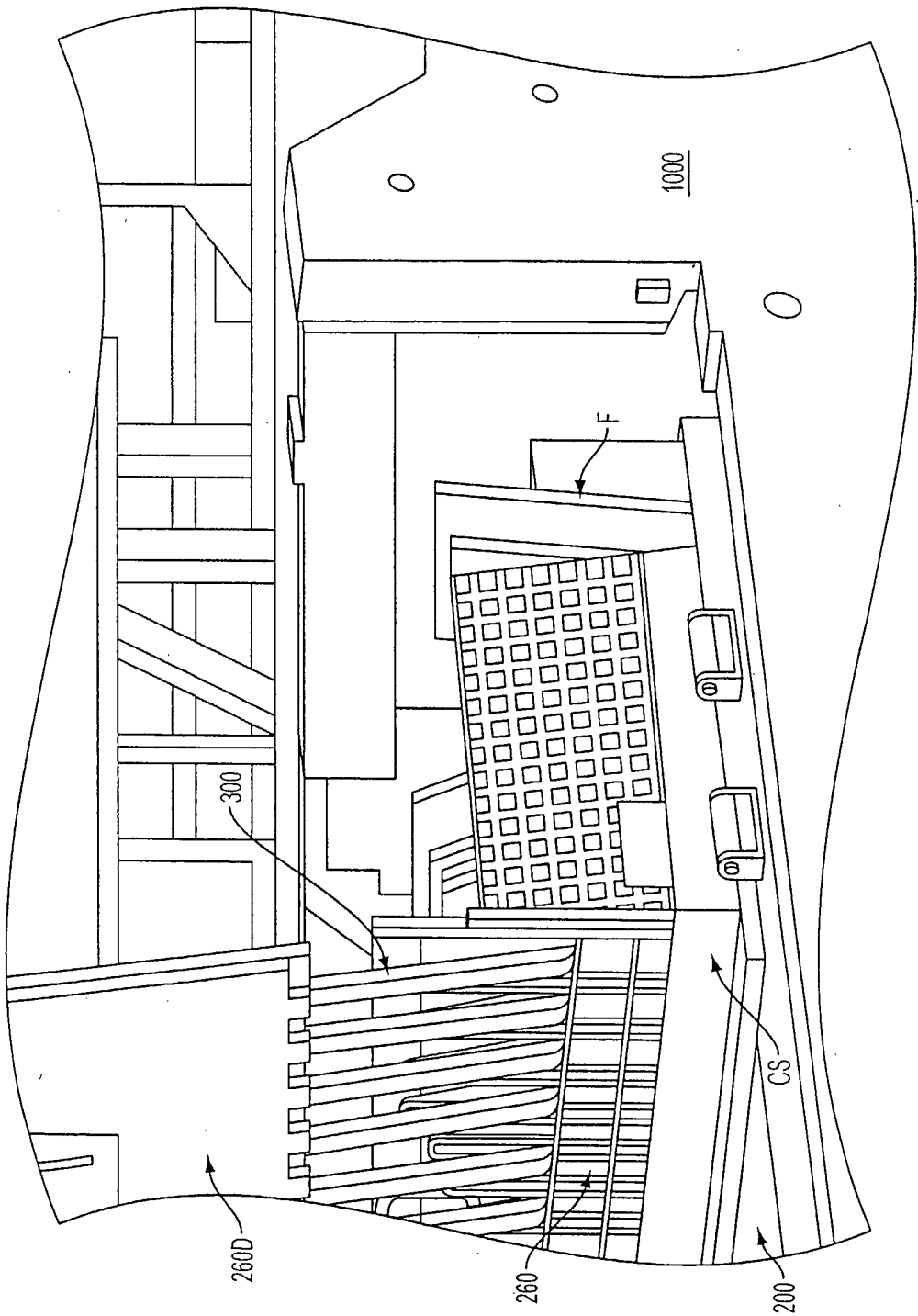


FIG. 24L

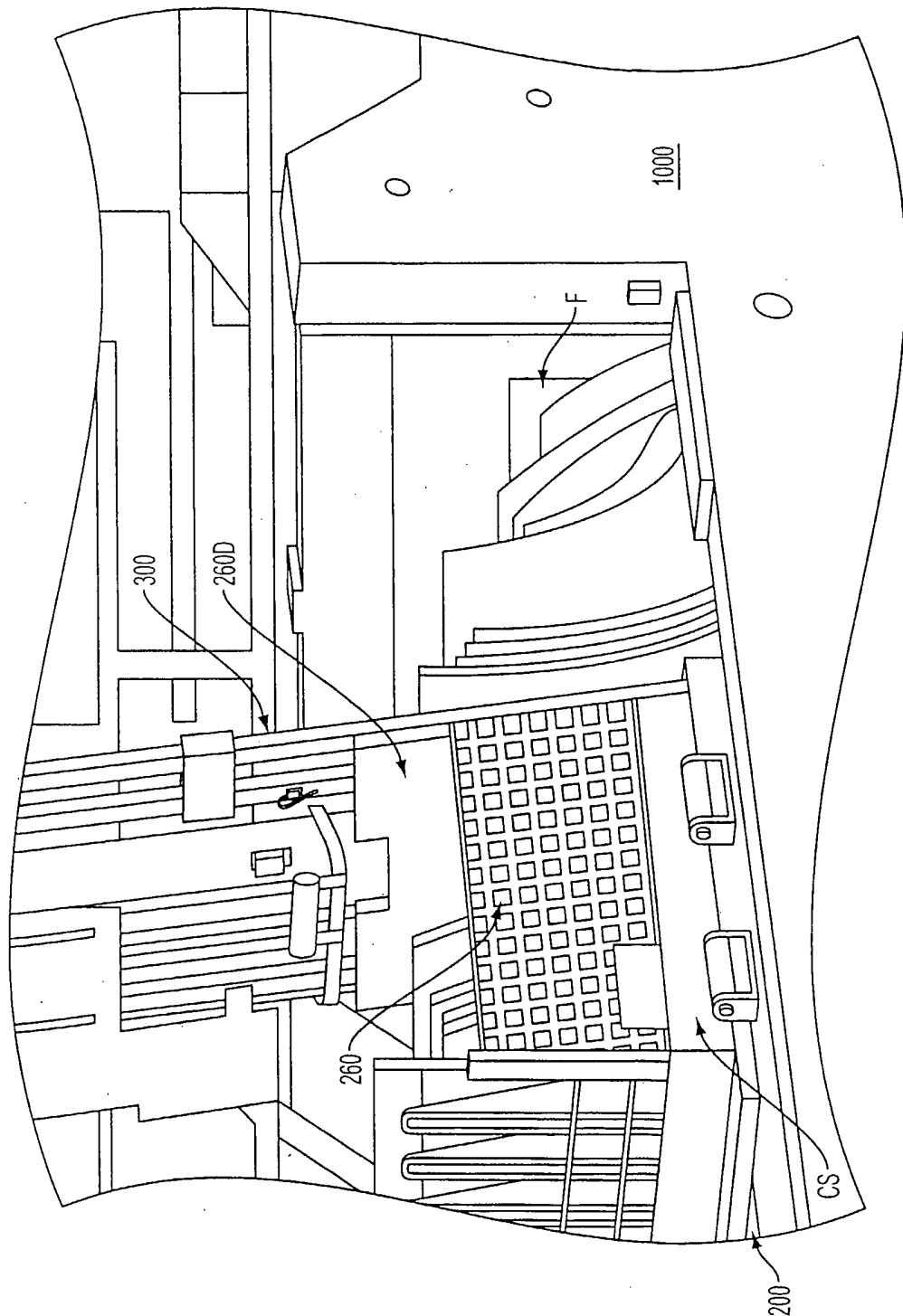


FIG. 24M

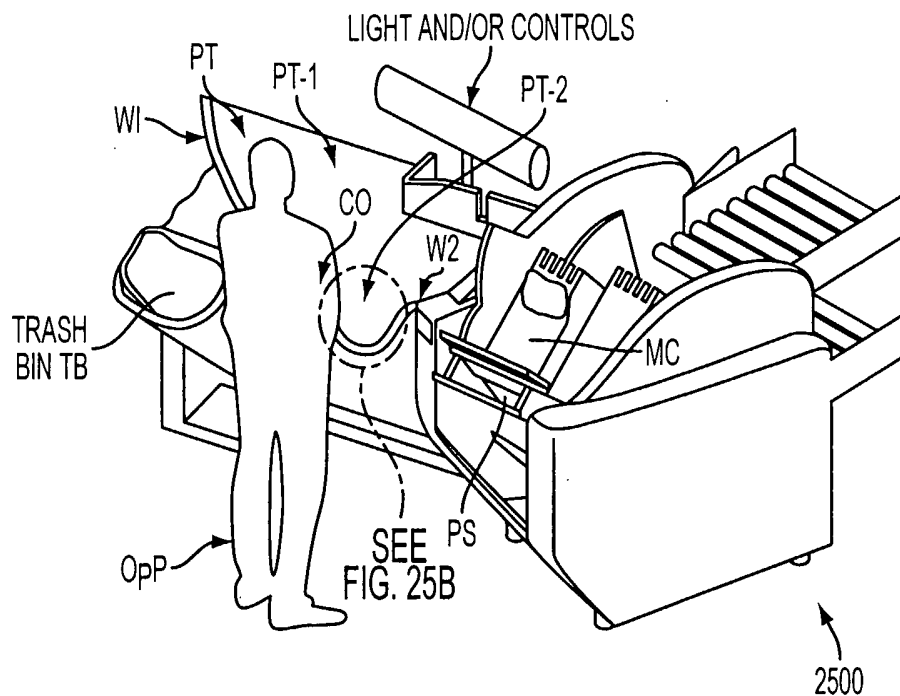


FIG. 25A

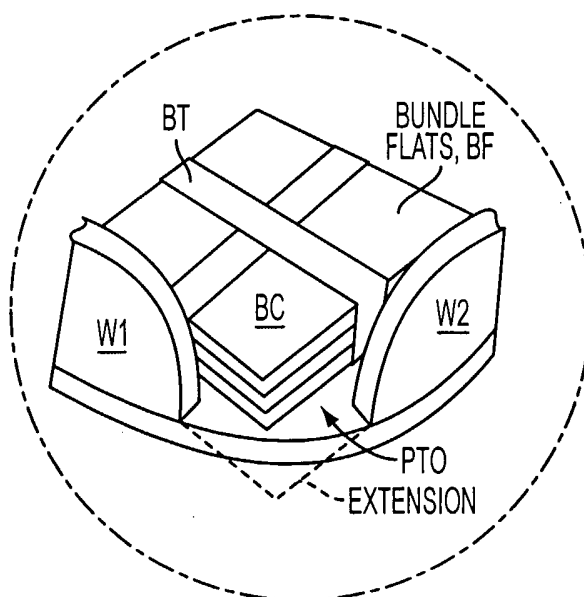


FIG. 25B