

**MARS  
CALLING  
BACK to**



**THE  
WORLD  
FROM  
VIETNAM**

**THE HISTORY OF MILITARY AFFILIATE RADIO  
SYSTEM OPERATIONS DURING THE VIETNAM WAR**

**PAUL A. SCIPIONE**

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Center for Study of the Vietnam War, 6354 N. 12th St., Kalamazoo, MI 49009

**M. A. R. S.**

**CALLING BACK TO 'THE WORLD'**

**FROM VIETNAM**

**The History of Military Affiliate Radio Systems**

**Operations during the Vietnam War**

**Paul A. Scipione, Ph.D.**

**Kalamazoo, MI**

**The Center For The Study Of The Vietnam War**

**in Cooperation with Vietnam-Era Operators of the**

**Army Military Affiliate Radio System  
Navy/Marine Military Affiliate Radio System  
Air Force Military Affiliate Radio System**

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## FOREWORD

by Barry Goldwater  
K7UGA [AFA7UGA Air Force Mars]

I first got interested in amateur radio when I was thirteen years old. The first equipment I ever had was a Ford Spark Coil that I borrowed out of a friend's car. When he found out, he came over and literally beat the daylights out of me for borrowing the part that he needed to keep his car running. The receiver was a crystal, and if I was real good and steady with my hand, I could get stations from as far away as Los Angeles. The first DX I ever worked was a station in Iowa, whose call letters are long forgotten. Later I was heard in Honolulu, but that was after I had put together a 20 watt transmitter, with tubes selling at a dollar a watt. I'll tell you, I sure picked a lot of cotton to get those first tubes.

Amateur radio has long been an obsession with me, as it has with hundreds of thousands of other people. I think the crowning achievement of my ham activities has been our AFA7UGA Air Force MARS station that we put on the air to handle phone patches and other traffic out of Vietnam. Starting in August, 1967, we literally worked around the clock when the bands allowed it and ran over 300,000 actual patches. There were another 50,000 patches that we attempted, but folks weren't home to receive them. So we were a very busy bunch of people! In 1974 we were the gateway station for Pacific RTTY traffic and handled over 200,000 written communications.

The total amateur strength of AFA7UGA was about 30 hams. The years of handling traffic out of Vietnam were pure joy to us. I wasn't able to participate much because I was in the Senate back in Washington, but I always handled the calls from our service men and women on Christmas and New Year's Day. What a joy it was for me to make new friends who have continued to be friends ever since. There is nothing I treasure more than to be stopped by someone on the street and be thanked for patching them in with their loved ones.

There is no way anyone can write completely about MARS. Mars is such a full experience for everyone who is connected, whether they are a licensed operator or just someone else helping put a call through. I can't say enough about Mars. I pray there is never another war, but if we get into trouble and men and women are sent overseas, they can know that no matter what, there will always be an amateur radio operator ready to help them talk with their loved ones. That is what I feel about the whole MARS effort. There is no way participants can be repaid except by getting the chance to help your Fellow Man.

Paul Scipione's book is a remarkable and worthwhile project. Now this important aspect of the Vietnam War will finally be told. 73s, Barry.

## INTRODUCTION

by Paul A. Scipione  
AA2AV [Ex-AAA9PR Army Mars]

"Why would a busy guy like you put in more than a thousand hours writing the history of MARS operations during the Vietnam War?"

I wrote this book (edited in some cases, since much of the book consists of what has been written to me by Vietnam-era MARS operators) for three reasons. First, it is a compelling story that deserves to be told. Second, no one else has written definitively about this important aspect of the war. And third, the hundreds of Vietnam-era MARS operators whose stories are the subject of my book, so richly deserve the recognition that was lacking before publication of this book. It's as simple as that.

You will find stories in this book that seem so incredible you will wonder how they could have possibly happened. But they did. You will find your memories and emotions touched in ways that bring the Vietnam War back as if it had just happened yesterday. Sometimes you will laugh; more often you will cry. Even though I have had to include some technical details, I concentrated on the drama and emotions of this important story, trying to put you into the shoes or boots of the men and women involved.

Unless you are also a Nam vet who got a phone patch home, you probably can't imagine how delicious those few minutes of warm, personal contact were. Letters didn't do it and neither did the audio cassettes that some of us mailed back and forth. You were sitting in a hot, dusty little hooch in the middle of a war zone, 8,000 miles from home. You were lonely and probably scared, feeling much older than your 19 or 20 years, wondering whether you would ever hug and kiss your wife or girl or parents again. Then the MARS operator gave you a nod and pointed to a phone and said "Okay, buddy, we've got your wife/girlfriend/parents on the line." When it was over, you walked back outside and stared up at the bright or dark sky and wondered about the magic of it all. That happened to me half a dozen times while I was in Nam. Everytime, I said to myself, "These MARS operators are wonderful people. I owe them a lot. Maybe someday I can pay them back." *MARS: Calling Back To 'The World' From Vietnam*, is my way of thanking them, one and all!

This is the little book that made it into print in spite of the incompetence and thoughtlessness of the current leadership of Army MARS. The idea to write this book came from a series of articles about MARS in Vietnam by N6KI and myself that was published in *QST* in October and November 1990. There was a groundswell of interest in a complete book. I was contacted by the Chief of Army MARS, Bob Sutton, who asked me to become the national public relations officer of MARS for a term of three years. I agreed, received the special MARS billet callsign of AAA9PR and became the MARS columnist for all three MARS systems in *Worldradio Magazine*. I was incredibly busy in late 1990 and early 1991 arranging many newspaper, magazine, radio and television accounts of MARS operations during Operations Desert Shield and Storm in the Persian Gulf. But I somehow managed to mail out a MARS Nam questionnaire which was completed by nearly 300 Nam and stateside operators of that era. I supplemented the questionnaire data with personal and phone interviews with 100+ Nam ops, three research trips to Washington, DC entirely at my own expense, hundreds of non-compensated phone calls, and many interrupted family dinners and social occasions.

I was promised by Army Mars Chief, Bob Sutton, that he would coordinate the three Mars systems in a combined project to jointly publish the Mars Nam book, not only as an invaluable public relations and recruiting tool, but also as the only, official history of MARS from its inception in 1925. Sutton reiterated his support of the Mars Nam book in Mars meetings at the Dayton Hamvention in 1991 and 1992. When I

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finally finished writing this book in early 1993, complete draft copies were mailed to the heads of all three MARS systems. Well, one month went by, then two, then three -- and still no word. When I went to Dayton in April 1993, I tried hard to pin Sutton down, but his new response was -- "Sorry, but I guess I forgot to tell you that we don't have a book publishing budget." I was incensed, but kept a cool head and finally got him to agree to publish the book using their training budget. But after several additional months, Sutton renigged again. "We have a new commanding general and I don't want to rock the boat. So the only hope is throwing your book into the hopper at the Government Printing Office and hoping it gets published sometime before the end of this century." I confronted him about having lied to me and to the many Vietnam-era MARS ops who so graciously provided stories, photographs and other memorabilia, but Sutton made it clear that he couldn't care less. Of course by then we also faced big Pentagon budget cuts from the Clinton/Aspin "I never inhaled and never got inducted" crowd. My blood pressure soared and new gray hairs sprouted from my head daily.

The reaction from many Nam-era MARS operators was not one of surprise. "I could have predicted that was what Sutton would do," one in-country Nam op wrote from Texas. "He is the stereotypic, double-dipping bureaucrat who spends ninety-nine percent of his time practicing CYA (cover your ass) management. That is exactly the reason why virtually none of us Vietnam War operators are still active in MARS." A former stateside MARS operator from Maine wrote me: "As wonderful a service as MARS provided to GIs in Vietnam and more recently in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, between wars its all smoke and mirrors. Those bean counters are so busy playing digital dimentia and trying to save their hides with a new, more cost-effective military quazi-mission, that they have almost totally forgotten about the traditional health and welfare role of MARS. That's why I quit more than five years ago." But amidst all the pessimism and "I told you so's," a note that I got from a former in-country MARS Nam op from Connecticut was what gave me both the resolve and the idea of how to ultimately get this book published in spite of the indifference of the Bob Suttons of the world: "Hey, don't let the pencil-pushers get you down. This is too important a project and story. The only way for Nam vets to get something done is to rely on each other."

On July 21, 1993, I sent my letter of resignation as AAA9PR (and from Army MARS) to Sutton and developed the plan that ultimately got this book, your book, published. I contacted the Thomson-Shore Printing Company of Dexter, MI, who agreed to print, collate and bind the MARS Vietnam book for a very favorable price that bordered on making it a non-profit project for them. I next contacted my friend Robb Adams (WA9ZMO) of Kalamazoo, MI about handling the book orders and shipping the book to each of you who showed faith in the project by ordering one or more copies. Robb receives a 100% Vietnam vet disability from DOD and is wheelchair-bound, but as he often puts it, "Just because you are in a wheelchair doesn't mean that you are paralyzed as a person!" That's an understatement. During Desert Shield and Storm, Robb personally ran more than 10,000 phone patches and broke the all-time one-month MARS phone patch record for a single operator, 1,550. Handling the book orders will provide some needed income for Robb, his wife and their family of five children. I consider it an honor that Robb Adams handled this phase of the publication of your MARS Nam book.

I am very grateful to Barry Goldwater (K7UGA) for writing the Foreword to this book. Senator Goldwater's Air Force Mars station, AFA7UGA, ran nearly 100,000 phone patches during the long course of the Vietnam War, and his life is a virtual history of amateur radio. I am also indebted to Christine Blanke and Linda Skrzypek at Thomson-Shore and to Alex Leonard, a student at Montclair State University, who brought great creativity to the design of the cover. A special word of thanks to Chief Army Historian Dr. Vincent Demma and to Dr. Richard Boylan, Director of the Vietnam Records Section of the National Archives Annex in Suitland, MD. An important behind-the-scenes advisor at nearly every stage of this project has been my very good friend and fellow vet from the 101st Airborne Division in Nam, Dennis Vernacchia (N6KI).

Lastly, I will be forever indebted to my wonderful wife of 26 years, Linda, and daughter, Leigh, for their constant thoughtfulness and patience in indulging this particular crazy phase of my life. Now that the MARS Vietnam book is finally out, we can go back to some quiet, family dinners again!

## A Christmas to Remember

By Paul A. Scipione, AA2AV

I spent Christmas Day, 1969, in Vietnam—in the ward at 326 Med. Camp Eagle, the base camp for the 101st Airborne Division—waiting to go over to the hospital ship *USS Repose* for surgery to repair a deviated septum.

At dawn the next day, several of my ward mates and I were choppered out to the *Repose*, anchored five miles offshore in the South China Sea. When I came out of the anesthesia, the doc told me that the surgery had gone "A-Okay."

After breakfast, two Navy doctors and a stern-faced Navy commander strode into the ward to announce that there had just been a major firefight near Quang Tri. We would be shipped out to make room for the latest wave of GI casualties; by early afternoon we were back in the ward at 326 Med.

"Okay, guys, this is the plan," whispered the lanky Spec 4 from Texas, drawing four of us into a tight circle to shield our conspiracy. "It's time to call home. As soon as the nurse leaves, we'll stuff pillows under our blankets and duck out the back door and down the hill to the MARS station."

The plan sounded fine, except that two of the guys were in casts and on crutches, the Texan was bent over from surgery to remove shrapnel from his intestines, and I could barely see around the bandages on my face. We headed for AB8AAE, the MARS station operated by the 501st Signal Battalion. Between the four of us, we had the equivalent of one working body.

AB8AAE wasn't particularly impressive from the outside: just a typical plywood-and-screen hooch, up on stilts a few feet, with a tin roof.

"How long a wait will we have?" I inquired of the PFC in charge.

"Can't estimate that exactly," a buck sergeant hollered out from behind a crude wooden table covered with Collins transmitters, receivers and linear amplifiers. "Propagation ain't so hot."

As the four of us from 326 Med took our places along the inside walls of the radio hooch, an amazing thing happened. One by one, other Screaming Eagles began giving up their places. "We can always come back tomorrow night. Looks like you guys need a call home more'n we do. Merry Christmas."

We were grateful for the generosity of our fellow GIs. After a two-hour wait, I was behind the Texan and a fellow from Indiana. As I entered the "phone booth," a makeshift

plywood enclosure with an Army telephone on a plywood shelf and an old stool to sit on, I wondered if my wife and I would be able to recognize each other's voices over the 10,000-mile shortwave connection.

"Okay, Sarge, the usual time limit is three minutes, but you guys from the hospital get five. Here goes."

I was heartbroken when there was no answer from my wife. We then phoned my parents' house and I recognized my Dad's voice on the other end, hollering for my mother to crowd around the phone.

"Dad, how are you and Mom? Did you have a nice Christmas? Over."

"What's t-h-a-t, I can't quite make out who's talking on the other end. Can this really be Paul calling all the way from Vietnam? Over."

"Yes, Dad, it's really me, calling from Vietnam. Merry Christmas from the land of monsoons and rice paddies. Over."

"I'm still kinda confused at this end," I heard my Dad say in frustration. "This is your father, Alfred Scipione, of Lewiston, New York, talking. Over."

When my Dad heard my laugh from 10,000 miles away he knew it was really me and we were soon conversing like pros, as the two MARS operators threw their send and receive switches.

After I talked to my mother and hung up, tears filled my eyes, out of loneliness and because some wonderful hams had volunteered their time and stations to give us a touch of home. I stood in line another two hours, this time reaching Linda. "Hi, Babes. Love ya', Babes." The 10,000 miles disappeared.

Around two in the morning, our foursome stumbled out of AB8AAE and down the "road," back up the hill to the medical ward and our cold bunks. I smiled with joy thinking of my two miraculous Christmas calls home.

Twenty years later, on Christmas Day, 1989, I tuned the bands and listened to some GI phone patches home from Germany, Panama and the Indian Ocean. The men and women of MARS are still going full tilt.

I hope today's MARS operators—Army, Navy/Marine and Air Force—read this, because it's a belated "Christmas card" from me to them. I love and admire you, one and all.

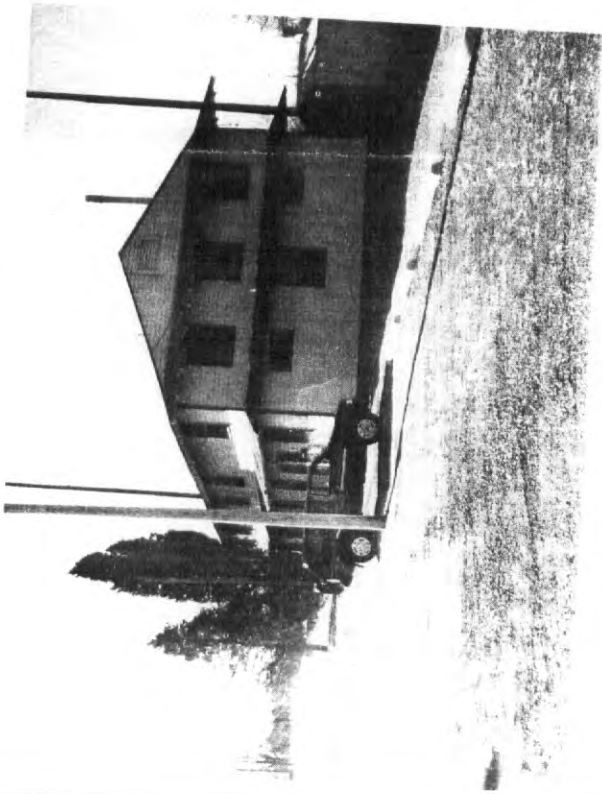
*Paul Scipione is active in the Piscataway (New Jersey) ARC. He holds a PhD in psychology, practicing from a study that doubles as his ham shack. He and his wife Linda have a 10-year-old daughter, Leigh.*



1969



**Top:** The original AA2AV article in the Nov. 90 QST (sidebar to Mars Vietnam article by N6KI) that started the flood of stories from former Mars Nam operators (Paul Scipione, AA2AV and QST); **Bottom left:** Sgt. Paul Scipione, Phu Bai (Hue), Vietnam, 1969, 101st Airborne Division; **Bottom right:** Dennis Vernacchia checks out the quad HF antenna that was blown off its telephone pole by an enemy rocket at AB8AY, Phan Thiet, 68 (Dennis Vernacchia, N6KI).



1990-91

**Top left:** Army Mars station AAR2USI (K2USA) at Ft. Monmouth, NJ, 90. The pole at the right is one anchor of the 900 ft. rhombic antenna that made this the #2 station in running phone patches during Operations Desert Shield/Storm; **Bottom right:** The author, Paul Scipione, personally ran nearly 1,000 Desert Storm phone patches during 90-91, using the same Collins tube rigs that handled some of his Vietnam phone patches more than 20 years before; **Top right:** Time stands still -- the six Mars studios inside K2USA at Ft. Monmouth are identical to how they looked during the Vietnam War, housed in the ancient, wooden WWII barrack; **Bottom right:** QSL card from K2USA, Fort Monmouth, NJ (all photos this page from Paul Scipione, AA2AV).

## About the Author

The origin of Dr. Scipione's commitment to write the official history of MARS operations during the Vietnam War came at Army Mars station AB8AAE at Camp Eagle (Hue), Vietnam in 1969. Scipione was serving as an NCO in the 101st Airborne Division. After he first experienced the "magic" of making phone patches back to his wife and his parents in 'The World', Scipione vowed to "somehow, someday pay back my deep-felt gratitude to the MARS operators who made those calls possible. It took more than 1,000 volunteer hours of my time and is taking place nearly 25 years later, but this book is my way of thanking them, one and all."

Dr. Scipione holds Army MARS call sign AAA9PR and is now that organization's National Coordinator of Public Relations. He is also the well known MARS columnist in *Worldradio Magazine* and personally ran nearly 1,000 phone patches for U.S. troops during Operations Desert Shield and Storm. Scipione is an Extra Class ham radio operator with call sign AA2AV and is a license examiner for the FCC. He is an avid County Hunter (holder of USA-CA #770), DXer (DXCC), and CW/QRP specialist.

In private life, Dr. Scipione is a consumer psychologist and Professor of Marketing in the School of Business at Montclair State University in New Jersey. A specialist in marketing research and consumer behavior, Dr. Scipione is the author of six previous books, including: *Practical Marketing Research* (1992), *The Marketing of Alcohol Beverages* (1979), *The Senior Market In America* (1976), the Vietnam war novel *Shades of Gray* (1988), and *Health Care Marketing* (forthcoming). He is a graduate of: State University College, Geneseo, NY (B.S.), State University of New York at Buffalo (M.A.), and Rutgers (Ph.D.). He resides with his wife and daughter in Metuchen, New Jersey.

