

The Army Phone System In Vietnam

It's paradoxical, that even though all Army photographers wore the Signal Corp insignia, we seldom filmed assignments of our sister/brother communication jobs. Many photographers, including myself sent some portion of their Army career in signal battalion photo labs. Much of this dilemma relates to the fact the photo section was housed within the Headquarters Company, not the line companies having telephonic equipment. Another factor was our terminology and jargon were completely unharmonious. While the photo section talked in terms of whether to "SOUP" film in DK-50 or D-76, and how long to "HYPO" it, or the virtues of TRI-X over PLUS-X film; the communicators had their own argot and lingo for their work related tools, parts and equipment, that were totally alien to the cameraman. My stay in the NCO hut at Chu Lai, with the 36th Sig. Bn., while awaiting the Americal Division Colors (story and slides at this web-site.) I was a total stranger to the other NCO's vocabulary, their ACRONYM's in reference to work related communications, parts and equipment. It was an embarrassment for me wearing Signal Corp brass, to be associated with these other signal sergeants, our work related language had nothing in common.

This discord created isolation between the photo section and the communicators. The situation was sort of a quarantine from the Bn HQs and the photo staff. It's believed the "HEAD SHED" considered telephone operators a lack luster, non glamorous, rather mundane occupation. Another element in the equation is that the signal battalion, also operates the message center. A portion of the message center's traffic is classified, with higher headquarters sending down mission directives or operational changes to subordinate units. These messages were received and transferred to the appropriate unit(s), within the signal battalion jurisdiction. Having photos of these classified segments would add burden and delay in completing the yearly Inspector General's visit.

I well remember my first trip to Vietnam in 1965, when 14 cameraman from the Army Pictorial Center were sent to augment the 39th Sig. Bn, on Tan Son Nhut, until the 69th Sig. Bn arrived from Germany. The entire battalion was huddled onto a few acres of the air base. We had ample opportunity to film the telephone operators at work. I doubt that any of us 14 cameramen ventured to the signal vans out of curiosity. Daily the word from the superiors was nothing happening, or certain people hang loose, we're trying to contact some far flung location to send a photo team. It was this lack of emphasis from the brass and command center on down, that deprived the signal battalion operations from being filmed during the Vietnam era. In my 13 years behind a camera, I never filmed the switch board operation of a Sig. Bn.

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From my first venture to Vietnam, until I departed the MACV Photo Team in 1969, plus two subsequent trips in 69 and 71, a goodly amount of time was wasted trying to communicate. The phone system had definitely improved over the years, but was still primitive, by any standards. Much of the telephonic equipment was probably Korean War vintage. Under this criteria, the signal Bn would have land lines between Corp HQS, to each division HQS, the separate regiments and brigades, independent aviation, medical and supply and service units. The TV series M.A.S.H. graphically depicts the situation. The entire 4077th Hospital had a single phone, controlled by Radar in the Orderly Room. At best the Korean War phone service reached down to battalion level, and probably not to company level. One phone served 800 to 1200 troops. In Vietnam the phone service had escalated to one phone for every 150 to 200 troops or there about. Besides telephonic communications with Army units, the phone system had to interface with the Air Force, Navy and Marine units.

It must be emphasized that all calls were processed by rank. There were, and probably still is five categories of calls. I hope I remember the categories and ranks using each category correctly.

- FLASH: For generals, admirals & GS-13 or above civilians
- PRESIDENTS: For colonels, Lt. Col, Naval Captain and commander
- IMMEDIATE: For Major and possibly captains, Lt. CDRS
- PRIORITY: Lieutenants and top three sergeant ranks
- ROUTINE: For junior sergeants and lower enlisted

Rank had its privileges as far as phone service went. The second the operator came on line, the first question was what category of call are you making? When all circuits were busy, and someone with a higher rank wanted to place a call, any underling was unceremoniously disconnected. There was no fanfare. No operator came on the line saying you have 10 seconds to end the call--nothing. In the middle of a sentence or a word, the line just went dead. Untold countless times this has happened to all, but the generals.

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This was decades before the cell phone craze. Satellite communications was in its infancy. The phone system had no direct dial service. All calls were operator assisted. The phone system had no private lines, they were all party lines. Meaning four or five units shared one phone line. Frequently when lifting the receiver, you would hear an on-going conversation. All you could do was hang up and try later, which added to the frustration. In the early years, there were few, if any microwave relay antennas. The phone system was virtually as if each zip code was its own area code. For example: If the TTU Archives wanted to call Chicago, picking up the receiver, you would get the Lubbock operator. This operator would contact Amarillo or Dallas operator. The Dallas or Amarillo operator would extend the call to Oklahoma City operator. The Oklahoma City operator would plug your call into St. Louis phone center. In turn, the St. Louis operator would transfer the phone line to Chicago operator, where finally the Chicago operator would connect the TTU Archives with the proper number in the Windy City. To call Cu Chi from Tan Son Nhut only 25 miles away, it quite probably you were transferred to Saigon, then Deer, to Rabbit and Foxtrot, before getting to Charlie Charlie.

If the above scenario sounds like a nightmare; it was. Tan Son Nhut Air Base, at the edge of Saigon had one phone exchange, while the military off base had a separate phone operation. If the 5th Special Forces wanted to book some people on a flight, they had to have the Saigon operator connect them with the Tan Son Nhut operator, which in turn would connect the call to the passenger reservations. Under the best of circumstances, a simple phone call became a laborious task.

I've only seen the switchboard equipment of the era in technical manuals and on historical episodes, such as the History Channel's "Mail Call." I remember there were two rows for phone connections. Each row having eight to 10 outlets. One of the most common phrases heard from operators was, try later all circuits are busy. When you tried a few minutes later, a different voice came on the line, thus there were several switch board operators on duty at all times.

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A G.I. needing to update his immunization record might try placing a "Routine" call to the dispensary, checking if the vaccine he needed was available. Between all circuits are busy, the party line already in use, higher caliber calls disconnecting the completion of the call to the dispensary, or the dispensary line busy with other incoming and out going calls, it could take half a day to perform this simple chore.

The voluminous amount of calls taxed the American Forces phone system to the point many troops considered the telephone a necessary evil. In most cases it was virtually easier and quicker to take a military vehicle, hitch-hike, use the military bus or even take a Vietnamese taxi, to conduct business; than to try and perform these tasks over the phone. Conducting business in person had several drawbacks. First it escalated the volume of traffic on the Saigon and other Vietnamese city streets. This congestion slowed traffic to a crawl. Causing it to take longer getting from point (A) to point (B). Second with the added vehicles on the streets greatly increased smog and other pollution, causing an unhealthy air to breathe. Lastly it adversely affected the productivity a person could accomplish in a work day.

The phone system expedited wasted manpower, cost and reduced efficiency. I recall in 1965, a captain spent two days trying to contact an engineer battalion in Qui Nhon, to inform them that he was sending a two man photo team to cover their activities. In total exasperation, the captain booked us on a flight to that city. Arriving in monsoon rain, we were informed the unit hadn't worked in a week, because of the rain and mud. Hoping the weather would clear, we spent a week with the unit. Not having a change of clothes, nor a bath in a week, the two of us stunk to high heaven. We booked ourselves a flight back to Saigon totally empty handed. This was only one costly incident because of communications were lacking.

The De Long Piers (story and slides at this web-site) was another communication fiasco. I with a still photographer were sent to Cam Ranh Bay to film the installation of floating docks. Arriving on site, the piers were somewhere on the Pacific Ocean or South China Sea, but no one knew where.

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While the desk clerks and pencil pushers of the combat service support units had more phone. The combat divisions were closely aligned to the Korean War era. I was at the Public Affair Office of the 25th Infantry Division. The entire 15,000 man division had a four page mimeograph phone book. Other combat units had phone books of similiar size; That meant each of the division's brigade had some phones. Each battalion within the brigade had fewer than 10 phones for 1200 to 1500 troops. The battalion headquarters had a few phones. Each 160 man company had a phone in the orderly room. The mess hall probably had one. The motor pool and battalion supply (S-4) had a phone. That was about all the phone service for a battalion sized unit.

Line drop was another hardship everyone had to endure. Every one got a cauliflower ear and sore throats yelling into the phone. It was as if two kids had a pair of tin cans attached by a string a half mile apart and trying to talk. I remember calling Bam Me Thout for two hours, one evening, to inform them a MACV Photo Team was coming to film a specific topic. I was cut-off numerous times by higher class call. When I finally was able to make contact with the staff duty NCO, the line drop was terrible. We were both screaming at the tops of our lungs and getting cauliflower ear from pressing the ear piece into our ears. Still both of us screamed "SPEAK LOUDER", I CAN'T HEAR YOU!! In the end, I think I was able to convey that "The Big HQS" was coming. The people in Bam Me Thout had no idea if the team was to relieve the commander. If some inspection team was coming, or something as innocent as a photo team was coming.

Because of the dense telephonic traffic, the operators were constantly monitoring the calls. Any brief silence in talking was justifiable reason to assume the call was completed. The operator would disconnect the line. Many calls required that one person lay down the receiver, to ask someone else a question, or extract a document from the file cabinet. To insure you weren't disconnected, during the silent moments, one person had to constantly say "WORKING."

By Mid to late 1967, there were some marketly improvements in the telephone system. However it must be remembered that this time frame also saw the maximum troop strength in Vietnam, straining an already precarious communication links to the limit.

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I recall MACV handing the Army "A" Photo Team an assignment in Da Nang. I dreaded even attempting to place a call to the unit four hundred miles away. I questioned how many switch boards I'd be transferred through to complete the call. I procrastinated if I would be able to hear the Da Nang operator, because of the line drop. I pondered how many higher class calls would cut me off, before ever getting to Da Nang. When I finally got up the fortitude to lift the receiver and tell the Saigon operator, that I wanted Da Nang, the next person I heard was the Da Nang operator. The line drop was unnoticeable on this call. I can only deduce that the Pentagon donated to the Military Assistance Command some frequencies on a Dept. Of Defense communications satellite to alleviate some high congestion phone routes.

Another time I needed to call Tay Ninh, concerning a photo assignment. I well remembered going through four or five switch boards just to reach Cu Chi. To transfer the call another 40 miles from Cu Chi to Tay Ninh was a daunting problem. Yet by 1968, when the Saigon operator asked where the call was to, I was immediately connected with Tay Ninh. I have no confirmation, but I infer the introduction of microwave relay stations, from Saigon directly to Cu Chi and another relay antenna in Tay Ninh put the call straight through with minimum of line drop and delay.

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