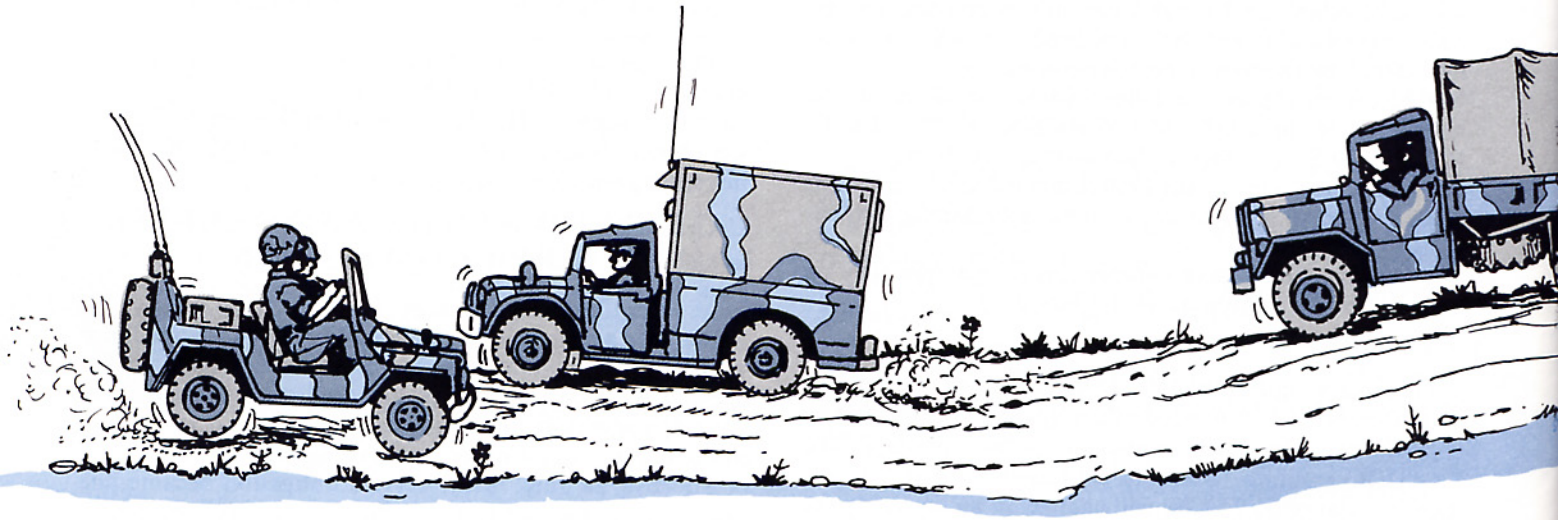
We got ourselves a convoy!



by CPT Donald C. Schilling

WE GOT OURSELVES A CONVOY!!!!

"Breaker! Breaker! Hey good buddy, look at all them green trucks!"

"Fur sure...fur sure. They're spread out over half the county don't you know?"

"That's a BIG 10-4! Got traffic blocked for 20 miles!"

"Mercy sakes. Must have a big dummy for a SigO!"

"ROG -o!"

Convoys are a commonplace - if not welcome - occurrence for most active duty, Reserve and National Guard units. Whether it's just going to the field for a three-day problem or motoring across several states for an ARTEP or two-weeks summer camp, most unit commanders have gotten additional gray hairs because of them. And for good reason.

The planning and organizing of a convoy is an art that is learned only through experience. The arrangement of serials, departure times, the selection of checkpoints, the coordination of bivouac areas, and vehicle maintenance are enough to turn even the most fair haired S3 gray. Many units have excellent standard operating procedures for the organization of convoys, and after one or two run-throughs they can do it in their sleep. However, the majority of these does not have even an appendix - nay, a tab - on the subject of convoy communications. It is in these units that the hair of the Signal officer turns white.

I hate to think how many times the C-E staff officer has been called by the S3 at 1700 hours to be told, "Hey, Fred. Forgot to tell you, the unit's moving out tomorrow at 0600 for Oshgosh, Wyoming. How about getting me a couple frequencies we can use and 300 Communications-Electronics Operation Instructions (CEOIs)? Have a nice night."

LOVE IT! It's no wonder Signal officers die young.

Very little is to be found on the subject of convoy communications in all the countless field and training manuals and pamphlets. If there is such an animal, it is indeed a rare and endangered species. I searched for it while a Signal officer at the 20th Engineer Battalion at Fort Campbell, KY, before leaving for our annual ARTEP at Camp Shelby, MS. Luckily I had a far-sighted S3 who gave me a little more advance notice than in the example above. Not much, but still enough time to "get my act together."

Not having any experience in a tactical unit prior to my assignment with the 20th left me in a precarious position. I had no experience to draw from and when I asked around to some of my more seasoned colleagues, I was told to "wing it!" Not wanting to appear stupid, I agreed with a meek smile. To this day I cannot figure out whether they meant we should all fly down to Mississippi or employ carrier pigeons.

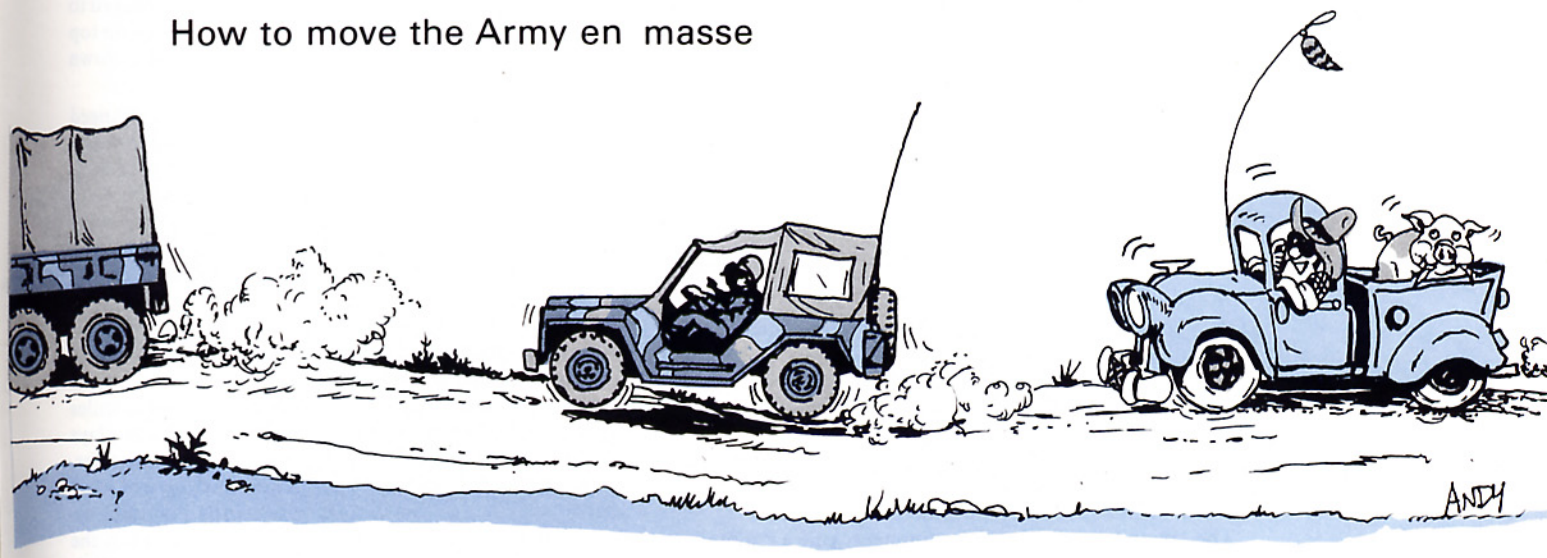
In any event, I decided that "winging it" was not applicable to the solution of my problem...uh, excuse me...I mean challenge (In the advanced course, I learned that Signal officers do not have problems - they have challenges). So, I had to write my own handbook about what does and does not work when you have to get X number of men and vehicles from Point A to Point B.

What follows, then, are my own lessons learned about convoy communications—everything you wanted to know about convoy communications but were afraid to ask. If you've been with a tactical unit, you probably already know many of the things I had to find out on my own the hard way. If you haven't, I hope you'll keep this article in the back of your FM 21-1. You might just need it one of these days. Even if you don't, it's nice to have.

LESSON #1 - *Stay in the S3's hip pocket*

The best piece of advice I ever got as a C-E staff officer with a maneuver battalion was to get in the S3's hip pocket and stay there.

The S3 shop is where it's happening or, in certain instances, not happening. If you want to know what's going on, you need to beat a path to his doorstep and stay there until you get the information you need to plan the communications. If you don't, communications will be planned for you and you'll have to live with it. (In the 20th Engineer Battalion, we had an unwritten reg. It said, "The C-E staff officer does not tell the S3 and company commanders how to build bridges. Therefore, the S3 and



company commanders will not tell the C-E staff officer how to install, operate and maintain commo.)

During the initial phases of planning the convoy to Camp Shelby, I hadn't taken my own advice and stayed in the S3's hip pocket. As a result, I wasn't consulted on the formation of the serials. When the list of vehicles in each serial was published, no thought had been given as to which vehicles had radios and which had not. Some of the serials had five or six radios. Some had none. I had a choice of either rearranging mounts for radios or rearranging vehicles.

I threw myself on the mercy of the S3 and he concurred that rearranging the vehicles would be a much simpler solution. This decision resulted in a considerable morale boost for my men since they would have had to rearrange the radio mounts a second time when we got to Camp Shelby. I celebrated that evening at the officer's club in honor of a wise and noble decision.

LESSON #2 - *Evenly space your FM assets throughout the convoy*

With the challenge of having the FM radios redistributed and out of the way, I thought I could pack my duffel bag and enjoy the ride. WRONG!

While at the division Signal office to get frequencies for the radio teletypewriter shot we were to make from Camp Shelby to Fort Campbell, the subject of convoy frequencies came up.

"Have you got your frequencies for the trip?" asked the assistant division Signal officer.

"Sure do. I'll just use a couple of the spares in the CEOI," said I.

I'm glad he didn't write my efficiency report. I had just stepped on it - BIG TIME! Whenever a convoy leaves the confines of a military reservation, you might as well toss your CEOI in the circular file. (Please don't take that literally or we'll all go to jail.)

Convoy frequencies have to be coordinated, requested and approved by the division Signal office, or, on some posts, by the US Army Communications Command detachment frequency manager. The reason for this is pretty obvious if you'll stop to think about it. With all the radio and TV frequency allocations and countless CB radios, somebody has to be a traffic cop or else the whole spectrum would become a real mess. You could probably get away with using a CEOI frequency if it were an emergency or for going off-post for just a few hours, but the proper way is to get clearance from division Signal. And—REMEMBER THIS—getting off-post frequencies cleared takes time, anywhere from 30-60 days worth.

LESSON #3 - *As soon as you know when and where you're going, run - don't walk - to division Signal for frequencies.*

As long as we're on the subject of frequencies, the question of how many are required may come up. Non-Signal types will tell you that it is mission essential for each company to have at least one; the commander needs one; S3 needs one; the mail clerk another one and so on. Tactfully, notice I said tactfully, explain that it's not required or necessary to have that many. You won't get them anyway in all probability, so there's no sense in getting their hopes up. Right?

I found that two were enough. A primary and an alternate. These should do nicely provided the serials are spaced out over enough distance to preclude interference with each other.

The first serial that leaves uses the primary, the second the alternate, the third the primary, etc, etc. Then, if the commander needs to talk to any of the serials, he can raise them on one of two frequencies, which saves you from preparing and distributing a voluminous CEOI.

Call signs come up at this point. Of course, if you're tactical while convoying, you'll have to use the call signs in the CEOI. Be careful here because if you go that route you'll have to make sure all the drivers and assistant drivers are cleared. They should be but you might just want to double check before you turn over to them a classified CEOI.

If, on the other hand, yours is an administrative convoy, you'll have to come up with an appendix to the operation order (OPORD) which can be given out. Try to keep things as simple as possible on the road. I made the serial commander Sierra Charlie. The first serial commander was Sierra Charlie 1. The second serial commander was Sierra Charlie 2 and so on. Assistant serial commanders were Sierra Charlie Alpha 1, 2 or 3. My favorite was Charlie Charlie. Can you guess who that was? The company commander, of course. (That call sign

stuck with one of our company commanders for at least six months after we got back from the field. His name, you understand, was Charles.)

All the other vehicles with radios in the convoy can use their bumper numbers - HQ36 or B23 or whatever. The drivers will remember these easier and will answer quicker if they are being called.

LESSON #4 - *Publish an appendix to the OPORD with call signs and frequencies and insure everybody who needs one gets one. Keep it simple, stupid (KISS).*

Make sure you enforce whatever call signs you assign. If you don't, you're going to be having CB handles used. This is definitely bad form and will be tough to break once you go tactical if you have an administrative convoy.

I never allowed CBs to be placed in our units' vehicles. Some unit commanders allow this practice since there never seem to be enough radios to go around. I cannot determine if there is a reg specifically prohibiting CBs in military vehicles. If there isn't there should be.

The installation of CB equipment on a military vehicle - with a few exceptions - is unauthorized. If it is connected incorrectly, you will have a hefty statement of charges. If the radio itself gets damaged, don't look to Uncle Sam to reimburse you for its replacement. Citizen's band radio is exactly that - citizen's band. The military has its own frequency allocations. On a practical note, the range of a CB is extremely limited. If for some reason you should have to drop out of a convoy to change a flat or make some repair and need assistance, good luck, good buddy. The convoy will be long gone and you'll wind up talking to passing motorists who wouldn't know an M880 if it bit them.

LESSON #5 - *No CB radios, slang*

Up to now, we really haven't left the motor pool. We have planned the serials to insure that there is an equal distribution of radio assets; we've requested our frequencies from division Signal or USACC; we've published an appendix to the OPORD listing the frequencies and call signs to be used; and we've checked to make sure there are no funny looking whips stuck on top of our vehicles. Now we're ready to boogity-boogity down the superslap.

My experience with the 20th Engineers is that you need a minimum of three radio-equipped vehicles per serial. It would be nice to have more but it really isn't necessary. The normal configuration of a convoy is to have a lead and follow-up vehicles. These are normally ¼-ton jeeps. I found it more effective if an M880 or 2½-ton was used as the lead vehicle, with a ¼-ton right behind him and another ¼-ton at the end of the convoy. The reason for having a truck as opposed to a jeep as the lead vehicle is that your convoy speed is more realistic. A jeep can go up hills rather easily. If the jeep driver isn't paying attention, he can very easily leave the main body a couple miles behind him in rolling terrain, and then everybody plays catch-up. By having a 2½-ton for your serial commander, you eliminate this and he has a much better idea of what the convoy can do safely under various road conditions.

The ¼-ton behind the lead vehicle - which I term the "chase car" - has your assistant serial commander. He's the guy who is really going to control the convoy and do the legwork. With this chase car concept, you can effectively manage a convoy of almost any size with a minimum of radios to spread around. The follow up vehicle should have maintenance personnel in it and should also be a ¼-ton jeep. With this arrangement you have a great deal of flexibility and latitude in dealing with different driving conditions as you'll see in a minute.

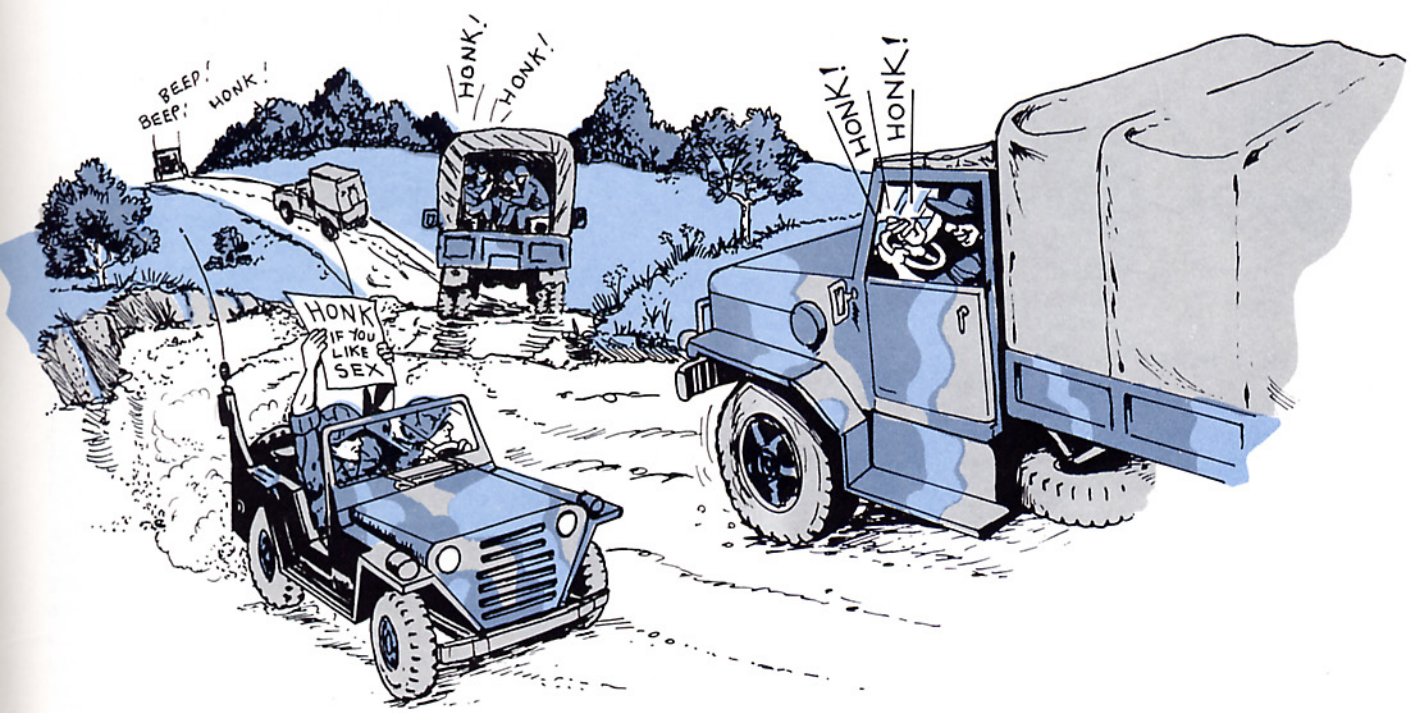
Right! The motor pool gates have swung open and the MPs, with their sirens blasting and lights flashing, escort you to the post main gate. We're on our way.

After getting out on the road for a piece, what appeared to be a smoothly running convoy starts to get a bit flakey. Our serial commander (whom we will call the SC from this point) looks out his rear view mirror and has a cardiac arrest. Intervals are not being maintained. Everybody is bunched up and it's tail gate city. How does he get the word to all the drivers to spread out? Simple.

A call to the assistant serial commander (ASC) right behind him in the ¼-ton will do the trick. "Have the vehicles maintain a 100 meter interval." "Wilco!"

The ASC tells his driver to pull around the lead vehicle and head down the road a mile or so. While on the way, he writes on a large yellow tablet (legal size will do nicely) with a thick felt tip (black is the best color) the message that needs to be passed. Pulling off to the side of the road, he gets out and flashes the message to the convoy vehicles as they come by. Everyone has got the message the SC wanted to give them, regardless of whether they had a radio or not! But there's more for the ASC to do...

After all the vehicles in the convoy have received the message, the ASC hops back in and heads back up to his original position. I think you can see now why this vehicle should be a ¼-ton to have manueverability. As he is moving up in the convoy, he checks the vehicles he's passing to make sure that equipment and canvas are securely tied down and that head and taillights are operational. He tries to spot anything else which may be a potential safety hazard. If a vehicle has something wrong, such as a burned out taillight, he'll make a note of which vehicle it was so it can be repaired at the next rest stop. If it is something which the driver can correct on the spot, he'll make a sign and flash it to him - TURN ON HEADLIGHTS! If it is a real emergency he'll wave the driver over to the side of the road and call the follow-up



vehicle to tell him the problem so that the mechanic can repair it. Instant, on-the-spot corrections...on the move... on the road. Nothing could be easier.

All right now. We're looking good. The ASC is back in position and everything is rolling smoothly. Intervals are being maintained, all the vehicles have their lights on, everything is strapped down. Just about this time, the SC gets a call from the follow-up vehicle that a 2½-ton is down with a flat on the side. He's now pulled over to assist and estimates it will take about 15 minutes to repair.

Whenever the follow-up vehicle has to leave the convoy, the ASC should then replace him at the end of the serial. By doing so he can act as a relay station to keep the SC informed of the situation when any breakdowns occur when the follow-up vehicle gets out of range. Once the problem is resolved and the follow-up vehicle rejoins the main body, the ASC once again moves up alongside the main body - again checking each vehicle as it passes.

On long hauls, the morale and attention span of the drivers can become very low if steps are not taken to perk them up. Here again, the ASC can play an important role. When passing drivers, the ASC should on occasion flash an unusual or attention-getting sign just to make sure everybody is alert. My favorite was "HONK IF YOU LIKE SEX." It never failed to get not only a honk but a smile. You accomplish several things when you do this. The monotony is broken. The drivers are more apt to pay close attention the next time you come by with a sign. I also checked to make sure all the horns were working! Inevitably, I woke up two or three assistant drivers who were taking a nap when they shouldn't have been. Pretty tricky, huh?

As you can see, there is a lot of additional flexibility to be gained by using the three-vehicle convoy communications team concept. That ASC does a lot of moving around, but with a limited number of radios someone has to get the message through - and that's his job.

There are several other times when the ASC can be a big help in maintaining command and control of the convoy. For instance, when approaching an intersection, the SC can dispatch the ASC to move ahead to stop traffic so that the main body can go through smoothly. When it's time for a rest stop, the ASC can move ahead and pick a suitable location if one hasn't already been selected. When the main body approaches, the ASC can direct the vehicles into the rest area safely, and flash a sign telling the drivers what is happening.

LUNCH - 30 Minutes

REFUEL

PIT STOP - 10 Minutes

CHANGE DRIVERS

The drivers appreciate this and everyone knows what is happening, eliminating a lot of confusion. The troops are informed and they know how long they will be at a particular location and for what purpose. If the signs are made up ahead of time, they'll look a lot neater and will be more visible. You might even have them made up with flourescent paint so they can be seen at night.

I hope that these lessons learned will be of help to you in planning the communications for your unit's next convoy. I'm sure you'll add some of your own ...communications techniques, that is...not gray hairs!

"Breaker! Breaker! Look at them 10 wheelers!"

"Rog-o! They're clean and green down to Shakey Town."

"What'cha mean "Rog-o" The SigO the main man, don't you know?"

"That's a 10-4, good buddy. Roger, wilco, over and out!"

CPT Donald C. Schilling is a Reserve officer assigned to the US Army Control Group in St. Louis. Serving on active duty for eight years, he held a variety of Signal and Public Affairs assignments. Among his published works are articles in ARMY TIMES Magazine, MS, "The Minkus Stamp Journal," and THE BALTIMORE SUNDAY SUN Magazine. CPT Schilling currently resides in Los Angeles.