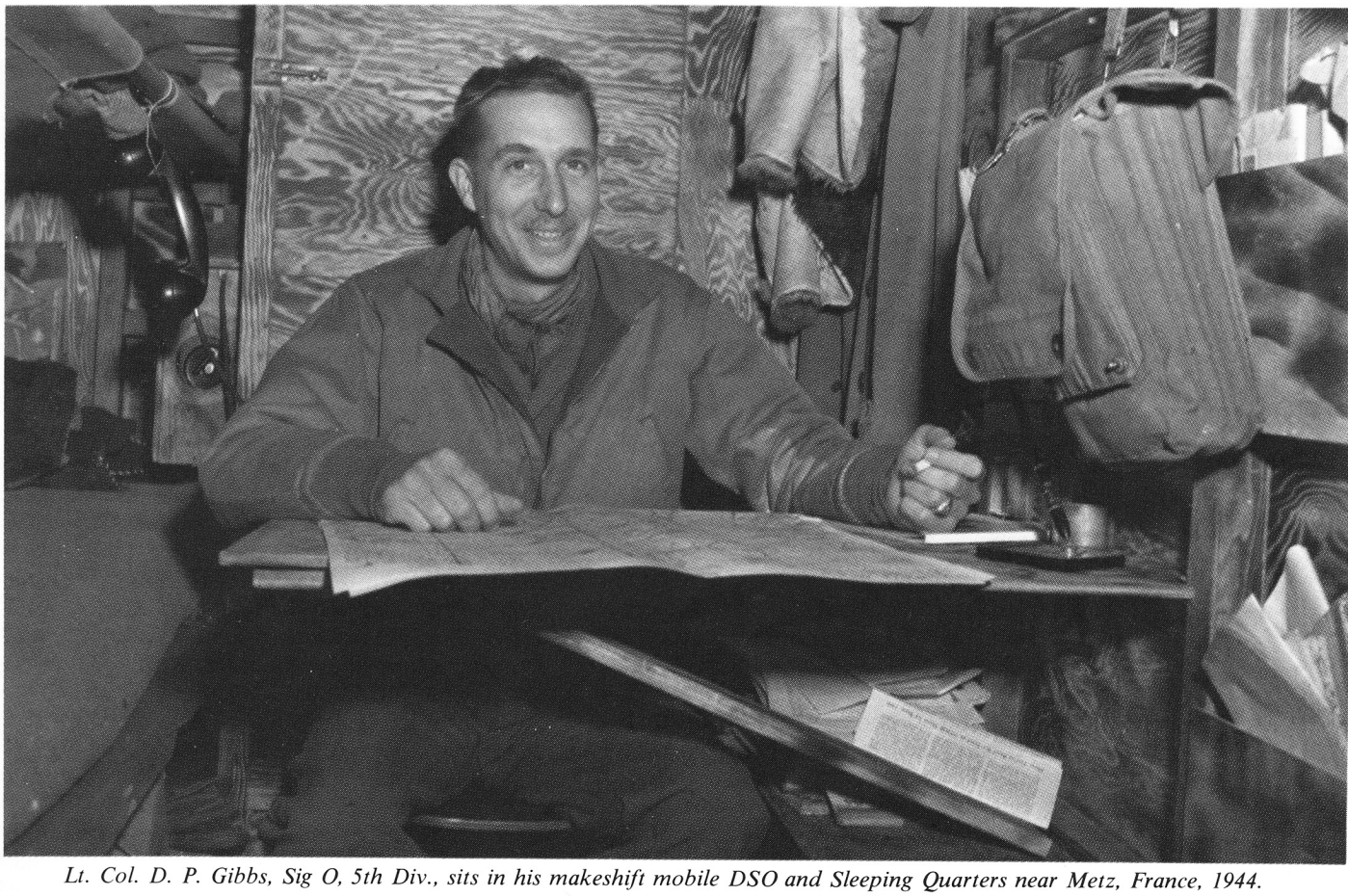

Lt. Col. D. P. Gibbs, Sig O, 5th Div., sits in his makeshift mobile DSO and Sleeping Quarters near Metz, France, 1944.

DSO

A career Signal officer reminisces about one of the most rewarding posts in his distinguished career.

by Maj. Gen. David P. Gibbs, U.S. Army retired

During my thirty-three years of commissioned service I have held many titles, but none was so satisfying as Division Signal Officer (DSO). In this position I believe I was one of the luckiest people in the Army and certainly the happiest over the long term.

I still believe DSO is the most important job in the Signal Corps — the cutting edge — and will be so for the forseeable future. I probably spent more time in that position than anyone I know. Even as a 2nd Lt. in Hawaii (1934-1936), where I was assigned to the Eleventh Signal Company, Hawaiian Division (now the 24th), I was able to put in a little time as acting DSO.

There are a number of places I could begin this story. But after several starts, I find that I keep returning to the place I originally considered most unlikely....

In 1936 I returned from a tour in the Eleventh Signal Company, Hawaiian Division, to Governor's Island, New York. My duties there were Post Signal Officer and, concurrently, C.O. of the 4th Signal Service Co., which provided technicians and operators for the entire Corps Area, Puerto Rico and the Army transports. In the first job, I was under Col. Karl Truesdell, Infantry, who was C.O. of Fort Jay and the 16th Infantry. In the latter, I was under the Signal Officer of the 2nd Corps Area.

Our quarters at this time were on Bedloe's Island, right under the Statue of Liberty. The house was huge. My father, who had retired as Chief Signal Officer about five years earlier, was now an executive vice president for IT&T. His home was in the northwest corner of Connecticut, so he stayed in New York City during the week and commuted home for weekends. He was easily persuaded to move into one of our several bedrooms; he was now able to enjoy his grandchildren during the week (he was a gourmet and added considerable class to our subsistence). When I later moved to Fort Monmouth, Dad came along and commuted — daily — to New York. During the latter part of this period, we often discussed my situation and compared it with his in the "Great War".

At Governor's Island, my problems were intensified by the hundreds of Public Works Administration employees who worked there. I

truly wished that they would indeed "lean on their picks and shovels," as was their reputation; instead, they used them. Daily, they dug to plant trees and other flora. But inevitably, their tools found telephone cables, which they promptly punctured. Colonel Truesdell used to amuse himself inspecting my collection of punctured cable.

One day, when I had been particularly annoyed, I was called by the Post Adjutant to report to Col. Truesdell. After cooling my heels for what seemed an inordinate time, I was admitted to the colonel's office. He was in an affable mood, but he made a suggestion relating to my work, which was to me so outlandish that I blew my stack. The colonel just laughed and said 'thanks'. He then told me he was making out my efficiency report and that he had given me his 'can-do' test, and I had passed it. It was another three years before I realized what this year-long relationship would mean.

Following my tenure at the Signal School at Fort Monmouth (1937-38), I was assigned to the First Signal Company, First Division, at Fort Monmouth. Capt. Widley V. Carter was the Company Commander. He was an extremely knowledgeable and able officer. He was an inspiring leader who gave his subordinates a loose rein, but was always there if his help was needed. Most of the time we were the only two officers available; the others were on duty elsewhere. Those great NCOs we had commanded detachments as the Company performed missions in support of maneuvers and exercises almost anywhere east of the Mississippi. Many of them later served as officers in WWII. At one time during WWII, the Division Signal Officers of Divisions on my right and left were former enlisted men from "the First." Staff Sergeant Riley Graham, for one, retired as a colonel after serving as Signal Officer of the 2nd Army.

From about 1938 until I left in 1942, the division was assigned not only to First Army, under Gen. Drum, but additionally to the Atlantic Fleet Amphibious Force, under Maj. Gen. "Howling Mad" Smith, USMC. As the war was 'hotting up,' the division was assembled at Fort Devens, Mass. On the day of our move — I believe 17 January 1941 — I awoke to one of the most severe snow storms I had seen in that area. Higher authority gave me an opportunity to delay, but I refused. I had aboard 150% of my fuel requirement. It was one hell of a day. New York and New England were covered with ice...a fairyland we could not appreciate! Our planned convoy assistance from the various state police went off without a hitch, however, and we proudly completed our motor march, late but with no losses. Our big wrecker — the last vehicle — arrived running on paint thinner!

Officers of the First Signal Company, First Division, at Ft. Devens, Mass., in 1941. 2nd row from left: Lt. Rielly and Lt. Pickett. First row: Capt. Gibbs (with Pepper) and Lt. Rosenman.

For two years we maneuvered first on land then at sea, ad infinitum. The division even had its own Higgins boats for small unit training at Cape Cod. When Churchill and Roosevelt conferred about early landings, we were at sea, combat loaded. Then we came to dock at Norfolk, only to leave again — maneuver-loaded this time — for a beach in North Carolina or Virginia. For the uninitiated, let me tell you that it took a lot of work to obtain and care for two entirely different sets of equipment, and to be prepared to operate on the beach and inland until we could receive our transportation and regular TO&E equipment and personnel.

Finally, in February 1942, I was transferred to the Fifth Division at Camp Custer, as DSO, promoted to Major and sent almost immediately to Iceland. From Feb '42 to Feb '45, I was Signal Officer, Fifth Infantry Division.

Up until July 1944, when we entered the war in Normandy, I had many years of practice. What is more, I had the tremendous advantage of two and a half years of overseas association with the division staff, the commanders of regiments and battalions, their communications personnel and with the officers and men of the Fifth Signal Company. Many of these relationships continue to this day. I am certain that this contributed to the division's successes in combat. We had the nearest thing to a division communications system that the existing doctrine would allow.

I said I was lucky. I had another advantage in the DSO position. I went to war with a Signal Company TO&E somewhat of my own making. At least I was thoroughly familiar with its capabilities and had learned to improvise with it. When the Nazis blitzed, I was taking the correspondence course of the Command and General Staff School by order of Gen. Short. I neglected the course to spend full time on a study of my own job. I sent my study with recommendations to the Chief Signal Officer through First Division. They favorably forwarded it through First Army. I had stated a need for more and better vehicles, more radios of greater range, more weapons...all those things one would think of in a change from trench warfare, for which we were organized, to a war of movement and dash.

About this time my father, who had been Deputy Chief Signal Officer of the AEF and Chief Signal Officer of the Advance (The CSigO AEF was relegated to the Service of Supply), was requested by his wartime friend Gen. Marshall to advise him regarding preparing the Signal Corps for war. My father came to me to be up-dated on the division organization, and I gave him my study.

Soon after, I was invited to lunch at Scriven Hall by the C.O. of Fort Monmouth to talk with the Signal Officer of the First Army. I was quite shaken when I was asked to rescind my letter, though it really made little difference since the Chief of Staff already had the recommendations. I saw myself facing a Court Martial, but was pleased to escape without buying lunch. Anyhow, most of my requirements were soon in TO&E and my only punishment was a skin on maneuvers for not simulating all of the newly authorized but unavailable weapons.

Without knowing well the details at that time, I was well aware that in WWI there had been a Signal Battalion, and the DSO was afforded a better opportunity to provide a division communications system. I was aware, too, that the reason we had a company instead of a battalion was the arbitrary decision after the war to authorize a specific number of men to the Signal Corps which provided for the Army's administrative system and very few very small tactical companies. Then in 1937, a test exercise was held to determine the soundness of a recommendation that the Signal Corps provide the majority of divisional communications. This was a wasted effort. Originally approved by one of the arms, this approval was later withdrawn. The Artillery generally disapproved on the grounds that the communicator had to be knowledgeable about fire control. I know of no one who proposed the Signal Corps operate any fire control system. In any case, the project was disapproved. In 1939-42 it was not timely to bring up the subject, and we had to go to war with what we had.

During the period we were in Iceland, England and Northern Ireland, I was able to conduct schools and many communications exericses involving regiments, battalions and separate units including attached tank and tank destroyer units. My relationship with commanders and their execs was, by the time we reached France, such that they sought my advice directly. It was possible occasionally to have personnel transferred between units. Two successive Company Commanders of the Fifth Signal Company came from the 10th Infantry (somewhat to the dismay of some Signal Corps lieutenants). The Artillery Commo later joined me as a Signal Corps officer at 22 Corps. It was well known that there was a division signal system, and when other divisional or attached units needed help, they got it and were quick to return the favor — even if it was only liberated champagne, cognac or Cointreau.

I came out of the war determined to see a better organization for providing a division communications system. That opportunity finally came after I had seen the WWII Signal organization in the field again in Korea. I was assigned as Signal Officer of CONARC. My father had died in 1947, and I had, for the first time, opened a box of his papers which included all of his after-action recommendations made in 1918 while he was still in France. These papers were so similar to representations I had already started making to the CONARC staff that when I substituted some, friends would call and say: "what's new about this paper of yours?" I would respond: "Look at the date and signature." It was amusing to me, and I believe it did cause a few of the more non-partisan officers to take a second look. In any case, the division has had a Signal Battalion since then and Signal Corps officers in units of the other Combat Arms.

A captured still from Carolina maneuvers, 1941. The men swear they used the stuff only to replenish their steno cans. The standing men are named Paradise and McCarty. Gibbs squats in front.

A lot has happened in the materiel area in the twenty-seven years since Korea, and it is to be hoped that, by the next major war, the Division will be properly equipped. Because of our problems of interoperability in WWII, the British Chief Signal Officer and I, in 1964-65, presented a proposal to our higher levels and eventually launched project MALLARD. This was my 'last hurrah'. The follow on is TRI TAC. This appears to be the system needed for the future. We thought it would be fielded in 1977. I wonder if I will see it before I go to greener pastures. If the next war is a quick one, it may already be too late.

Maj. Gen. Gibbs, who is now retired, has served in a variety of positions in CONUS and abroad. Among his citations and decorations are the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star (with 2 OLC) and the Croix de Guerre with Palm (France). A 1933 graduate of West Point, Gibbs attended several other military and civilian colleges including Harvard where he took the Advanced Management Program. He is married to the former Elizabeth Goodrich. He has three grown children: Patricia, David and Paul.