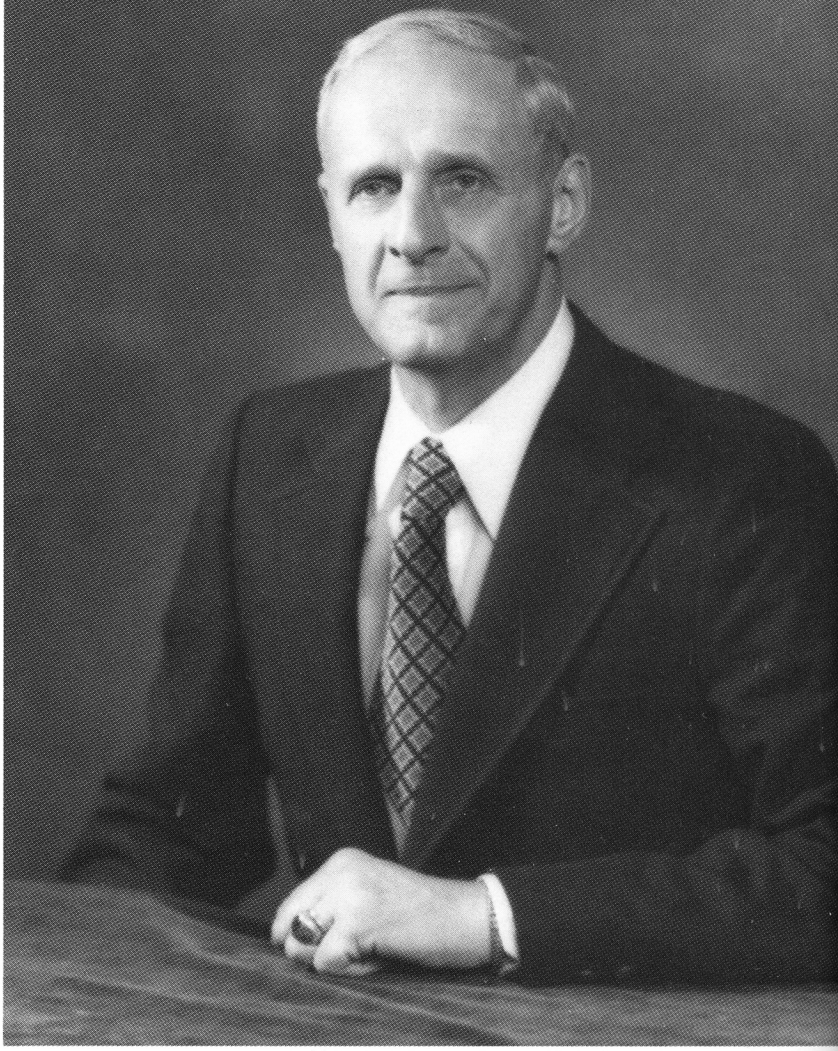
A Signal Corps giant shares 42 years of experience...

RIENZI



by Lt. Gen. Thomas M. Rienzi, U.S. Army retired

A former corps commander for the XVIII Airborne Corps once said, "If you ain't got communications, you ain't got nothin'." That was the philosophy I used throughout my career which stretched from 1938 to 1979. All that time, my thoughts were on the best ways to communicate. I think the human interest and historical emphasis of my experiences and philosophies can best be told by looking at my career.

I spent a year a Lehigh University before going to West Point. While at West Point, it became obvious to me that learning, "to move, to shoot, to communicate," was the basis for victorious warfare. And the more I saw of moving and shooting, the more I realized that the cement which bound it all together was the communications.

And so I moved through four years at that great school. It worked out in those days (1938-1942) that if you went into the Signal Corps, you could be in both a combat arm and a service. In other words, you could be close to the fighting, and at the same time take jobs that built a communications system from the barbed wire at the front line right to the White House. After four years at West Point, I graduated in 1942 with about 400 others. World War II was just beginning. After a few months of training as platoon leaders in the Fort Monmouth Training Center, we joined companies and battalions that were going overseas.

Our battalion went to Burma, and as a lieutenant and then a captain, I commanded approximately 250 people for three years in the middle of the Burmese jungle. General Stillwell, who truly believed that he couldn't do anything without communications, took us to his bosom in the middle of Burma, and with our very rudimentary equipment, we made his communications system work.

It became obvious to me during those three years in Burma with a signal company of a corps signal battalion that we were vitally important to the Commanding General or to the State Department or War Department or Department of the Army, because without our sending those messages, not very much took place. Working with our soldiers, who were trained at our many Signal Camps at the time, was a great pleasure. We were all human—we weren't perfect; but we worked well together for three tough wartime years.

This leads me to a very strong view that the longer the Army can keep an organization together, and the longer its officers and NCOs can stay together within it under whatever conditions, the stronger the professional Army will be. Today our command time is two or three years, our sergeants' time two or three years—that's a minimum that a unit must stay together, and whatever can be done in the future to hold full units together longer must certainly be done.

In Burma, our job was to build communications from India to Burma to China. I think the most important thing that it took during those years—when many of us had malaria or dysentery and were a bit worn from being in the jungles—was that you had to think hard and plan ahead. And each night as a commander, you did that; and the next day you set your priorities and took those great signalmen

out to do the job. Building pole lines and antenna fields in the middle of the Burmese jungle is not easy; we would go out in the jungles in the middle of the night or the middle of the day to fix something. We didn't know where we were going; we had only a general ideal of where we needed to be—but we'd find it, fix it, and return. We did that day-in and day-out, and that showed me the tenacity of the signal soldier and his true guts and bravery.

After Burma, I was assigned to the Signal School, where I was an instructor in many subjects including public information, Corps Signals, combat formations, and riot control. I tell you all those things not to brag, but to show the diversity of what one had to do at the Signal School, and this was the first time to my mind that I really learned the importance of training, the importance of school, the importance of good instruction. I vowed at that time, God willing, that I would run a school, make it progressive and interesting, and graduate trained soldier-apprentices who would have the drive to become great corporals, great sergeants, great lieutenants, great generals.

So those two years at Fort Monmouth were important to me in seeing how a school should be run, and I think from that grew what we have today: A school at Fort Gordon with basic training, technical training, and advanced training, all in one establishment. People like Lt. Gen. Hilsman have brought that to its highest fruition. But the importance of training, to my mind, came from that two years after World War II, when it became necessary to train so many people so quickly in such technical skills as microwave, computer technology, and repair of intricate electronic circuits.

After the school tour and after learning of the many electronic industries in and around New York, New Jersey, and Washington D.C., it became obvious to me that one had to get graduate training to compete in the specialized world that the Signal Corps was going to live in; so the next year, along with fifteen of my wartime buddies, I enrolled in graduate school at the University of Illinois. The electronics was tough, the math was tough, and for that time at Illinois, we worked solidly six days and nights every week, with only Sundays off to renew our batteries. But from that, I earned an advanced degree in electronics, which put me in good stead for the future.

The thing I learned at the university—besides gaining a technical skill—was that in the electronics business, a signalman has to dream very hard and think way out. I learned that the harder we dreamed and the bigger we dreamed and the further out we thought - that's what would make our Signal Corps significantly great in the years to come. Now I could technically think it through, and I had a vision of a war, and I had a vision of a school; so I had three bricks that were, I think, the cornerstone of my life: being a soldier, teaching in school, and getting advanced training.

I might add as a postscript to my advanced training that throughout my career I've felt you should have training in business and training in international relations, and the Army was kind enough to send me to school for business, for international relations, and for electronics. With those master's degrees, one has a well-rounded competence to deal in the technicalities and the diverse requirements of communications in our world.

A new thing happened after graduate work: I was sent into the atomic energy business, and for the next six years I

was part of a team which put weapons together, did research and development on new weapons and tested them. It was a fascinating and interesting business in New Mexico and in Washington. I felt very strongly from 1948 to 1954 that I could stay in the atomic energy business for the rest of my life, but I found that was just a specialty; it was important to know that I was able to develop my specialty in atomic effects and still be a signalman. So in 1951, '52, '53, and '54, there were very few of us in the country who had the knowledge in weapons effects and could sell it to the senior people of our country. I was required to brief the President, the Congress, and most of the senior officials of all the services, and to teach them this important facet of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. But in 1954, after six years in this specialty, I had to make a decision to either stay in the nuclear business or to return to Signals.

The chief signal officer and his deputy asked that I go to West Point and become a tactical officer. After many nights of thought, I decided the strength of what I was trained to do at West Point was in an arm of the service call the Signal Corps.

So with that, I went to West Point as a Signal Tactical Officer to the Tactical Department, and there again, got back to the troops—got back to the soldiers, got back to the cadets. For three years I taught basic training and helped cadets become officers. All through it, I had the great love of communications and would push the Signal Corps at West Point and Fort Leavenworth because I believed a reasonable number of the people graduating from West Point, Leavenworth, and the War College should go into the communications business.

While at West Point, I was lucky enough to be chosen to attend the War College, where I was able to espouse the philosophies that I think are important to communications. Under the tutelage of some famous War College professors, I wrote a thesis which projected military signalling in the field army some twenty years into the future. I kept that document and used it over the years in an attempt to implement the ideas into the Army. By the time I retired, all of the ideas that were thought up in that wonderful War College year had been implemented in the Army.

But then it was back again to soldiers and command. At the end of that year, I felt it was time to go back and command a unit that had these knowledgeable soldiers — these managers—and see if we could put theories and ideas into practice. So I asked for a command and was lucky enough to be able to command one of the famous signal units of the Army: the 51st Signal Battalion. Here was a unit of over 2,000 people with 30 or 40 officers spread all over Korea that had done great work in the thirties, forties, and fifties and had tremendous history in the Army. It is the oldest signal battalion in the Army and should be reactivated as soon as possible.

While there, we fought for and won all the prizes. We became a famous unit in Korea because we did things—we

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thought big—it was a great command. The ideas that came to my mind there were how important it is for a Signal officer to be very close to the commander and how important it is for a Signal officer to be very close to the operations officer or the G-3 because they design the mood and the mode of what's going to happen. So I learned every day to see the C.O. or see the C.G. or see the chief of staff or the G-3, to be in complete harmony with what they wanted, knowing what I could do, knowing what I couldn't do.

After being back with the troops for a year, the Army and I felt very strongly that now I should get some joint duty, and I asked to go to the joint command in Hawaii, CINCPAC (Commander-in-Chief, Pacific). We had many friends there, and I was accepted by the general, who was my tactical officer at West Point, to be on the J-6 staff, where I became the Signal planner and the requirement maker for all of the Pacific.

Everybody should strive to be assigned to a joint command because every war we're ever going to fight is going to be a joint or combined war. Again, at CINCPAC it came to mind: we must dream big, believe in ourselves and think big. That kind of attitude produced the circuitry that went from Hawaii out to Japan, Korea, the Phillippines, and Okinawa. If we had thought small, we certainly wouldn't have made it.

About this time, computers were coming into use, so I felt very strongly that we should begin to learn automation. As a consequence, we had many teachers at Fort Shafter and Camp Smith in Hawaii who brought us up-to-date and made us quite competent in using automation. That knowledge stayed with me for a long, long time. Years later, when I returned to Fort Shafter in 1970, we had the first automated message center in the Army, and that came, I think, from those earlier days when we believed that the automation process would be what we needed for the future.

Another point came to mind during this period: one had to truly sell his ideas. Often, when we would speak of atomic energy or computers, people sort of turned their heads and wouldn't listen or didn't understand. So I believed very strongly that all of us must fight for our point of view with our confreres, with the Chief of Staff, with the Boss. If you don't get your point across the first time, come back again—and again if necessary. And over the years, this approach certainly worked for me. If you have a good product and a logical approach, success becomes a matter of preserverence.

After leaving Hawaii, I was able to become the Signal Officer of the XVIII Airborne Corps—the only airborne corps in the world. And here, I met for the first time those courageous troopers who jump out of airplanes and are the emergency force throughout the world. That taught me how to do communications in the airborne world, and all the principles that I had learned to date of fostering training and thinking big and pushing viewpoints and getting to the C.G. were even more important there because things moved so quickly. I was fortunate to be able to serve with four great Corps Commanders who accepted our views, understood them and fostered them to the best of their ability during Cuba and during the Dominican Republic affair. We had the equipment and the people we needed to have command and control, and in dealing with a war-like situation, the principle of selling your viewpoint to your confreres is doubly important.

Next I returned to Washington, where the Chief Signal Officer asked me to be his executive officer. There for two years, I saw how important it was for the key communicator to be on the Army staff, to be seen frequently by the Army Chief of Staff, by the Defense people and by the other services. Luckily, I learned from the Chief Signal Officer how to do that because years later I came back to that job, and many of the things that I learned at the time were used when I sat in that big chair behind that big desk in the Pentagon.

But it was the Chief Signal Officer's view that two years as an executive officer was enough and that I should go over to the Army Materiel Command, where they were running a program on night vision combat surveillance and target acquisition, a key issue at the time. In conjunction with that staff and with the directions from the dynamic head of the Army Materiel Command, we made great progress in target acquisition, night vision, and combat surveillance years before it was needed in Vietnam, so when Vietnam came along, it was there. So here we were in a system that allowed us to think before the war was happening, and we had a dynamic commander and the money to produce the things then, so they were available when a war came.

At the end of that job, I became a General Officer and was given the Signal Center and School at Fort Monmouth. It was great. I had a graduation class every week, with literally hundreds of courses, and a census of about 14,000 people. It was then the biggest school in the Army, had the most number of courses in the Army, and competent civilians, soldiers, and officers to teach them.

Probably the main benefit was that I had to stay ahead of what was going on in the field. Because of the new equipment going into Vietnam at the time, we had to produce people who could work in Vietnam with these new systems. We built new classrooms, new buildings and new courses so that there would be well trained people to run the integrated communications systems we built in Southeast Asia. Here, we were a little behind. We didn't make our pitch quickly enough to get the material, to get the people, to get them there right on time; but they were pretty much there right after the installations were completed.

While at the school, I felt strongly that teachers must be dynamic. They must work hard, they must dream hard, and they must know their commanders. Most important, they must breed those qualities in each officer and soldier and civilian, so when they go out they can be tremendous, tremendous communicators.

After three years of producing people for Vietnam, the opportunity came to become the deputy commander of the 1st Signal Brigade—the largest signal unit in the world: 23,000 people in three countries (Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam), composed of 24 battalions in six groups. And we had the competence to provide the head of that Armed Services with everything he would need for command and control—from automated switching equipment and

automated message equipment to tactical satellites, strategic satellites and microwave. The list could go on and on. But this was due to great planning back in the United States by all those different commands that I had been lucky enough to have served with on previous tours.

It's important to know that as you grow and come to know everyone in the system, it allows you to go back to your associates, and—because of your knowledge of them and their knowledge of you—usually it helps achieve your viewpoint for the good of communications. The three years at Vietnam with the 1st Signal Brigade was probably the pinnacle of Command: We had the soldiers, the officers, the civilians, and the backing of the country. Because of that, we could fulfill the command and control requirements to the fullest.

We worked hard, and we worked well in Vietnam. We would have, for example, a bombed-out radio station or a bombed-out signal complex. We were able to completely rebuild it and have it back in operation in no time at all. Another thing I learned in Vietnam was that since we had so many sites—something like 300 of them in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam—you could follow the battle by the messages or by the shells that were coming into our signal sites. I sold this idea to the Commanding General. "Let's use the signal operations in the initial facets of the battle," I told him, "to give you indicators of what's going on." It panned out extremely well.

Personnel were also extremely important. Even with all the great advantages we had, it was important to stay constantly in touch with the personnel system for the numbers of people and types of people required. If we hadn't, we'd have one day found that the right folks just weren't there. I lived my two years in Vietnam with the Adjutant General and the G-1 of the major Army Command in Vietnam, and because of that, we always knew what was going on, and what our requirements were. Therefore, we usually had the right people to do the job.

After the Brigade, I transferred back to Fort Shafter and there became the MACOM signal staff officer and commander of the signal units in the Pacific. Being back in Hawaii was like being at home, but to be able to be the staff officer to a major Army Command and the commander of the Army Strategic Communications Command units in the Pacific gave me the capability to view many, many things with ease. But here again, the same principles were so important: push your own view, dream hard, look ahead, be close to the commanders, know your C.G. and know his G-3, get the people from the schools, and foster training even after they leave the school.

As I said before, at that time in Hawaii we had the first automated headquarters message center that moved messages right into the command section, right into the staff sections for their use. It was a sad day two years later when I had to leave this command and go to Washington to become the Assistant Chief of Staff for Communications-Electronics. I truly loved the job and Hawaii. In fact, after 42 years in the service, my family and I returned to Hawaii in 1980 to live.

During the next five years, I served four different Army Chiefs of Staff who had four different views of what command and control should be; but through it all, they trusted what we said and would give us the best they had, depending on what their capabilities were at the time.

I can't over emphasize how important it is to the future of every signal soldier and signal officer to serve in Washington because that's where things are made and that's where things are done. During the tenures of those four Chiefs of Staff, we went from a General Staff Section to a Directorate in Ops, to a name-change, and finally back to an Assistant Chief of Staff for Computers and Communications, where it is today and where it should stay. Those contacts in Department of the Army are still with me and can be used every day to help the signalman along. I think the principle here is: have those contacts and make contacts in whatever business you're in, so you can push the signal view.

After five years in the Pentagon, I was chosen to go to NATO and be the Deputy in the NATO Integrated Communications System Management Agency. There, we planned and programmed about a billion-and-a-half dollars for communications for the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, and for all of NATO.

My director was a British retired officer with a four-star equivalent. We used the knowledge gained from our years in the service to push a communications system in NATO. My British counterpart had been the British Chief Signal Officer, and we had known each other before. As a consequence, it made working together quite easy. For two years at the combined level, planning large amounts of money and large systems, it brought again to mind all of the training, all of the assignments I'd had which I brought to bear on this last assignment. At the end of it, we had programmed a complete communications system for NATO that would be built from now until the year 2000 and had shown again to the NATO staffs and the military nations of Europe the importance of command and control.

I've tried to go through my career and outline what I consider important about it and what I consider some of the teaching points. I would say the Army did well in allowing me to have the career I had because it led me from block to block with ever mounting responsibilities and knowledge, so that finally I had the competence to provide command and control communications advice and the communications itself to our Armed Services.

The principles that stick in my mind as I finish this short tome for THE ARMY COMMUNICATOR are: (1) You have to dream hard and think way out in front; (2) Command is significantly important and you must command with the highest professionalism and drive; and (3) Quoting from a general in World War I, "Run to the sound of the gun." I think if you run to the sound of the gun, you'll get things done, and done in a big way. All of this guided me in the varied experiences I had during my service.

Aloha.

Now retired, Gen. Rienzi lives with his family in Hawaii.