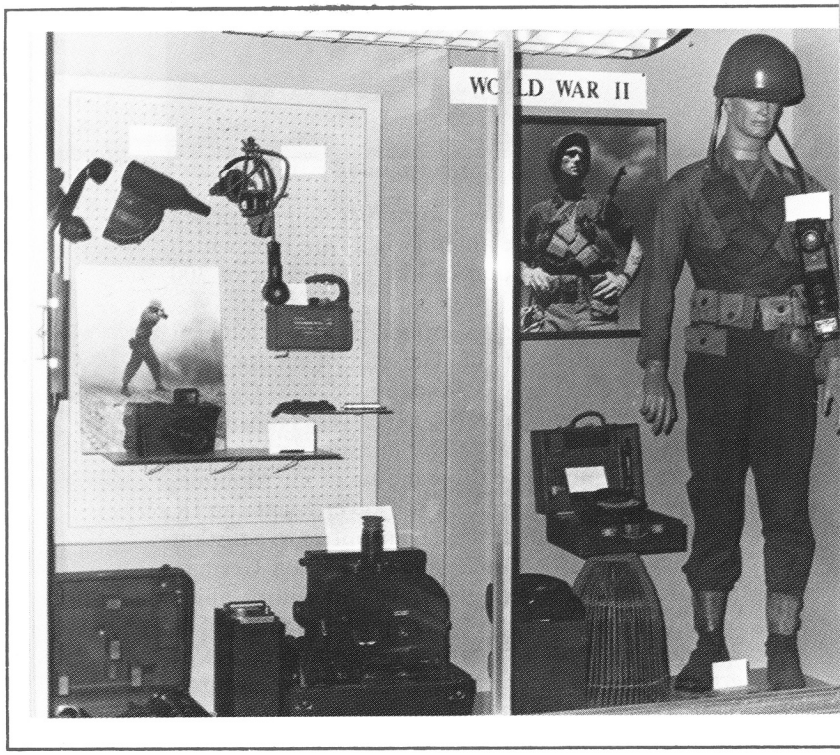
The U.S. Army Signal Corps Museum

by 1st Lt. Jill Blauvelt

The U.S. Army Signal Corps has had a tremendously colorful and important history during its 120 year existence. The current Fort Gordon Signal Corps Museum has 600 items and artifacts on display preserving this monumental past for present and future generations. The educational, historical, and recreational value the museum offers is significant. There is equipment covering vast historical dimensions from the Civil War through the Vietnam era. One can see a visual chronological show of communications development in the United States Army.

The museum is fortunate to have, for example, some of the personal effects of Albert J. Myer, a physician who founded the Signal Corps in 1860. These items include his medical and Civil War swords, bible, compass, epaulettes, and documents; most important, his original patent for the formation of the U.S. Army Signal Corps is also part of the museum collection.

Many of the 600 items are WWI, post WWI, and WWII equipment. For instance, there is a portable spark coil set SCR-74 used during WWI. It was a telegraph transmitting set designed to establish communications within infantry

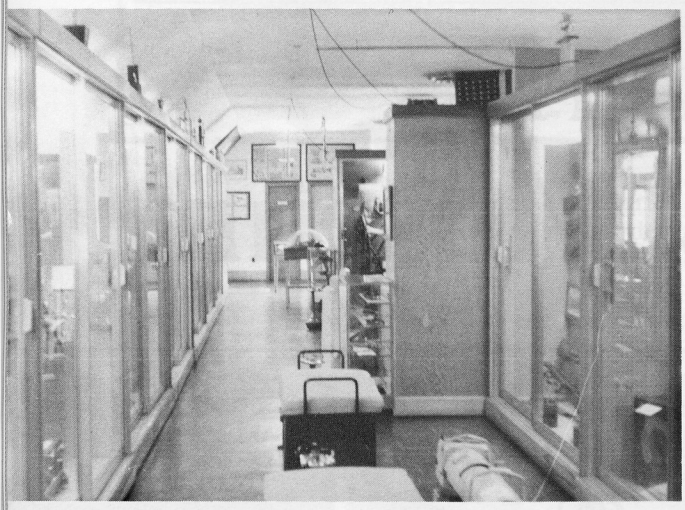


regiments, artillery brigades, and on airplanes. It was manufactured by the American Radio and Research Corporation and had a range of 10 miles.

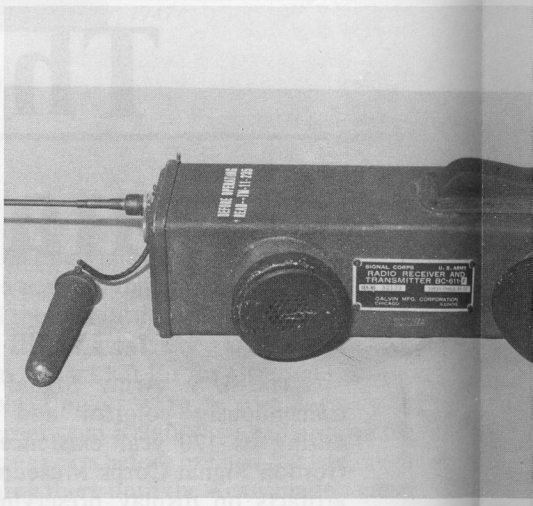
Of post WWI vintage one can see a 1922 M-94 Cipher Device used by message centers within infantry regiments and by supporting troops. It is cylindrical, consisting of a shaft on which are placed 25 aluminum discs with each rim displaying a differently disarranged alphabet of 26 letters. The secrecy of the cipher depended upon the keyword or key phrase which determined the order in which the discs were placed upon the shaft.

Some of the items from the fine WWII collection include a 1942 Handie Talkie, which is a portable radio receiver and transmitter BC 611 FM with a range of 2 miles; a 1942 Field Telephone EE-8, a portable instrument intended for general field purposes using 2 batteries BA-30 in Local Battery (LB) mode: 1943 Signal Lamp Equipment SE-11, which is portable field equipment used to transmit messages by means of white or red flashes. It had a range of 2000 yards in sunlight and a code speed of 10 words per minute. Perhaps most interesting is the 1944 Gibson Girl Radio Set SCR-578 (2S578), a portable transmitter used in rubber dingies for sea rescue purposes. The antenna is a wire type which was raised by a balloon or kite to a height of 300 feet.

The museum also offers a close look at captured equipment of German, Chinese, and Russian origin. There is, for example, 1941 German Voice Modulated Infrared Receiver/Transmitter "Lichtsprechgeraet - 80". This unusual device could convert and modulate three inputs — microphone, field phone, or an impulse code keyer — into an IR beam by an optical infrared transmitter to a distant and like unit. Also on display is a 1938 German Multiband Receiver used to monitor allied broadcasts, which has a frequency band range of 0-200 megacycles. Of a non-technical nature but of great historical importance is one other captured piece, Hitler's telephone. This item was taken from the library of Hitler's mountain fortress at

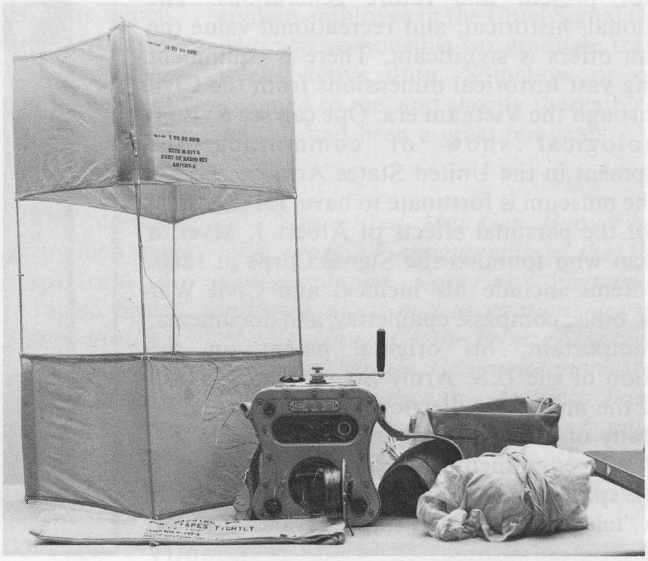


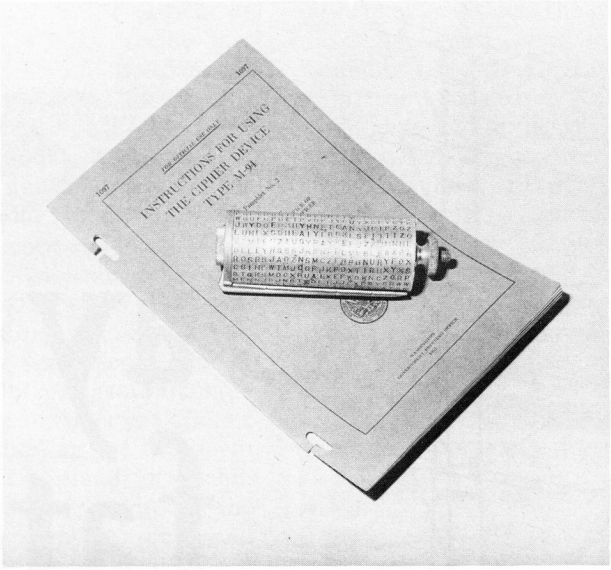
Left: Glass display cases house part of the 600 artifacts on display in the museum. Many other items remain in storage because there is not enough space to display them.



Below: The famous "Gibson Girl" Radio Set was used for at-sea rescue. The set was equipped with a kite-borne wire antenna.

Below right: An interior view of the Signal Center Museum showing several free-standing and wall-mounted display cases.



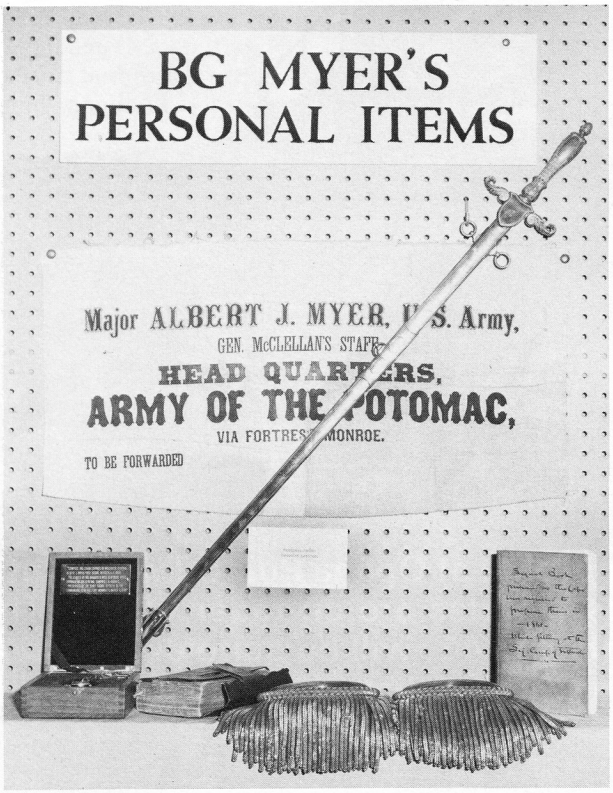


Above: The post WWI ciphering device, which is now on display at the Signal Corps Museum, was once used within the infantry regiments and by supporting troops.

Above left: Not many people realize that the Signal Corps has won two Oscars, both for documentary films. One was for "Seeds of Destiny" (1946), the other for "Towards Independence" (1948).

Right: This Handie Talkie of WWII fame is but one of the many types of tactical radios on display at the museum. It had a range of two miles.

Below: The Myer Collection features many of the documents, letters, and personal effects of Brig. Gen. Albert J. Myer, famous Civil War general and founder of the Signal Corps.



Berchtesgaden in June 1945. It was presented to Maj. Gen. H. C. Ingles, Chief Signal Officer, by Maj. Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Commanding General of the 101st Airborne.

In another display case around the corner from the captured equipment display are two impressive and familiar gold figurines: both are Oscars and both were awarded to the Signal Corps. The Corps was responsible for the production of military films during and after WWII. They had a complete cinematography facility located in Astoria, Long Island. Both the 1946, 19 minute documentary, titled "Seeds of Destiny" and the 1948 documentary on European reconstruction "Towards Independence" were awarded the Oscar by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences for the best documentaries of those years.

But these artifacts are crammed into the museum because the history of the Corps is extensive, and the present facility is inadequate. It is a small wooden structure with less than 3000 square feet of exhibit space. The floor displays could be more appropriately displayed and the numerous items in storage could finally be unpacked, if more space were available. The lack of space was one of several reasons a plan for a new museum developed. The new plans include a 50,000 sq. ft. building with a science center format concentrating on interactive displays. Communications equipment lends itself well to this concept for it must be used and handled for true comprehension. The intention is to one day have these items set in a 'living' environment with visitors learning from actually handling the equipment. For instance the "Gibson Girl" mentioned earlier could be taken out of the glass case and actually put in a WWII dingy with a WWII setting. The wire antenna could be extended with a balloon or kite attached to perhaps the ceiling. Hitler's telephone could be placed in a German WWII library setting with mannequins in WWII dress and furniture of that decade. Taped German conversations could be added in the background. The item would be brought to life.

The ideas and possibilities are virtually endless, recreating excerpts in history. Learning would move to a much higher more meaningful level in such an environment.

There are currently over 100 science centers worldwide. Without exception, they are educational, historical, recreational, and financial successes. The goal of the Foundation for the U.S. Army Signal Corps Museum and Science Center and a major concern for the Signal Corps Association is to see this science center concept become an exciting reality for communicators everywhere.

Lt. Blauvelt, who is assigned to Museum Affairs at Ft. Gordon, holds a direct commission in the Army. She earned her B.S. at Cortland State University in N. Y. Blauvelt is a member of the 1980 All-Army Tennis Team.