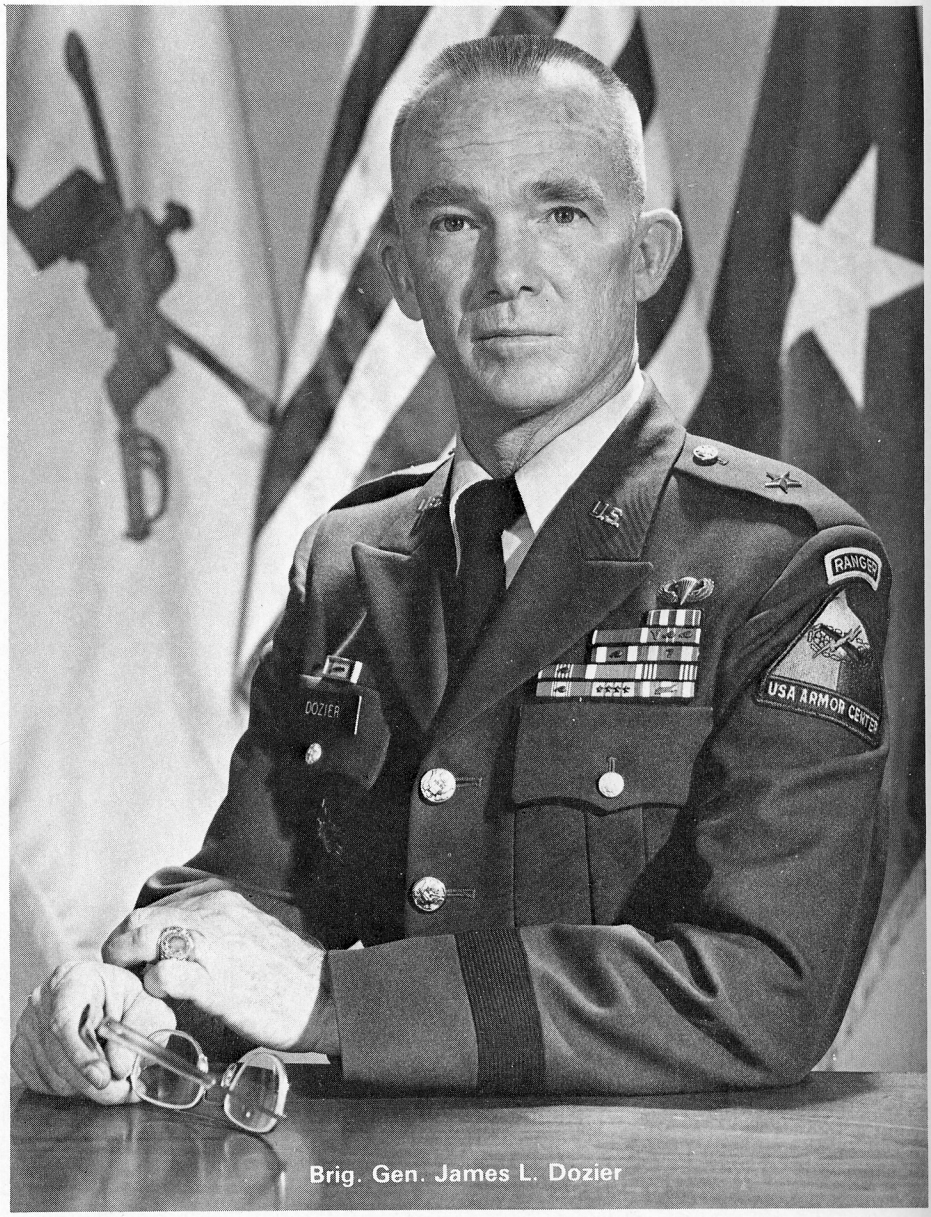
Security tightens at Vicenza and Darby

by Ken Stumpf



Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier

ABC correspondent Peter Jennings to the Vicenza DCO crew: "If anyone ever wants to talk to the moon, they should contact you. If you can't do it, no one can."

The 42-day ordeal of Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier had a profound effect on every soldier and civilian stationed in Europe. For the soldiers of the 509th Signal Battalion at Camp Darby and their northern Italy counterparts in the 54th Signal Company in Vicenza, the Dozier kidnapping hit much closer to home than it did to any other soldiers in the 5th Signal Command.

Immediately following the December 17th abduction of the general, security measures were strengthened to "the tightest we've seen," according to one NATO official.

In Vicenza, headquarters of the Southern European Task Force (SETAF) and home of the 54th, local MPs and carabinieri were augmented by soldiers of the 1st Battalion of the 509th Infantry who performed car-by-car searches. "Access time to get on post went from 30 seconds to sometimes more than 15 minutes," according to Sgt. Maj. Ron Cool, former 54th first sergeant.

Around the outlying sites in northern Italy, troops of the 54th increased their security procedures in conjunction with members of the Italian forces and 559th USA Artillery Group.

"Site access is controlled by either the Italian soldiers or by members of the 559th," said SSgt. Brian Thomas, NCOIC at the Oderzo communications site. "While my troops are armed 24 hours a day anyway, we increased our perimeter security checks around the facility itself."

At the Bressanone communications site, soldiers, acting under the recommendation of the local site commander, wore civilian clothes to and from work. "We aren't any more worried than anyone else," said SFC Gary Tuccitto. "But everyone thought it best to maintain a lower profile with the way the situation is now."

Soldiers at the four other remote locations and at the battalion headquarters in Camp Darby worked closely with the local site commanders to insure all personnel were aware of the more stringent security measures.

In addition to wearing civilian clothing, troops traveled in groups when leaving post, and the joggers spent more time lapping the post than running their normal routes around the countryside.

In addition to the special patrols and upgraded security measures, every company in Vicenza was required to go to an armed two-man charge-of-quarters (CQ).

"It was the first time I'd ever worn a flak jacket," said Pvt. 2 Carol Parker, a Telecommunications Center (TCC) Operator assigned to the 54th.

Every CQ was issued a protective armored vest, their M-16 and 20 rounds of ammunition and was briefed on the special security instructions prior to pulling CQ.

In the TCC, message traffic increased substantially, as did the precedence of the messages that were transmitted. "Our monthly workload for January 1981 was 149,657 total send and receive. That turned out to be less than half of the 386,977 count for January 1982, during the Dozier incident," said SFC Allan Gomez, TCC NCOIC.

Additionally, all Dozier related traffic was high precedence, which places more of a strain on the TCC operators.

At the Vicenza Dial Central Office (DCO) the workload also rose considerably. Special circuits were brought into play for the SETAF Operations Center. This provided close, rapid point-to-point coordination between SETAF and LANDSOUTH in Verona (Gen. Dozier was assigned to LANDSOUTH).

"It was just a part of doing our job," said SFC Frederico Foti, DCO NCOIC. While that statement is true, it says nothing of the rapid response the soldiers and civilians in the DCO gave when the Dozier case finally broke on Jan. 28th.

Rescued from his captors by a crack group of Italian anti-terrorist forces, the general was taken to SETAF headquarters that afternoon. After being checked out by the doctors at the Vicenza Military Hospital, the general was quartered in the VIP suite of the Vicenza Military Guest House.

"Our initial tasking was to provide Gen. Dozier with a redline," said Foti. "We had one installed in his suite as soon as we found out he was on his way there."

Redline service provides immediate preferential treatment through the military switchboard to any part of the world via AUTOVON.

Later that afternoon Signora Giovanna Minuzzo, one of the civilian operators employed for the 54th, put through a telephone call from the White House. The President was calling to extend his congratulations.

The evening of the 28th, the switchboard was busier than it had ever been. Calls came in from all over Europe and the states to express the best wishes of friends, soldiers and ambassadors.

"By Friday we all felt that there might be a slowdown in the DCO," said Foti. "At 12:30 p.m. we were notified that a press conference would be held in the chapel and that telephones were needed for the major television networks."

SSgt. Dave Burnette, installation team chief, and Fabio Nave, Francesco Testini, Mario Beltramello and Nerio Lollo descended on the chapel to provide the required access for the network crews.

Working with ABC, NBC and CBS, along with RAI (the major Italian network), Burnette and his team provided the hookups that allowed ABC to transmit the sound portion of their live broadcast that afternoon.

When the lights finally went down, and the rest of press had begun packing up, ABC correspondent Peter Jennings took time out to say thanks to the DCO crew.

According to Burnette, "After the broadcast, Mr. Jennings came over and said that without the assistance of our team, ABC would not have been able to get their sound hookup to New York," Jennings was also reported to have said, "If anyone ever wants to talk to the moon, they should contact you. If you can't do it, no one can."

The autograph collectors in the DCO left with signatures that read "Peter Jennings — Thanks for the sound."

While Dozier is safely back with his family and the kidnapping a part of his past, security measures continue at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza.

Access to the post is still highly controlled: vehicles continue to undergo inspections; CQs still draw their weapons; and all the 5th Signal Command soldiers are a little more aware of the need for strong preventive security measures.