Communications in the DMZ

by Capt. William O. Holmes

U.S. Army Signal Corps soldiers assigned to the United Nations Command Support Group at the Joint Security Area (JSA) in the Republic of Korea have a unique role in preserving peace on the Korean peninsula, which has been divided since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Living and working in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the nine-man Communications-Electronics (C-E) section provides a variety of support to both American and Korean forces stationed at the JSA, often called Panmunjom for the village that existed at the location before the Korean War.

The most important mission of the JSA C-E section is to provide support to the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) in its role of implementing the Armistice Agreement signed in July 1953 to end the conflict. A formal peace treaty has never been negotiated to officially end the War. When the commission announces that a meeting will be held, the C-E section goes into high gear to prepare for the arrival from Seoul of the United Nations Command's senior member — currently Rear Admiral F. Warren Kelley — and the arrival from Pyongyang, North Korea, of the Korean People's Army senior member, Maj. Gen. Lee, and the other members of the MAC delegations.

The C-E Section is responsible for providing a system for allowing each delegate of the U.N. Command who attends a MAC meeting to hear an English translation while the North's delegate is speaking in Korean. A sophisticated array of microphones and earphones with a plug-in jack at each position on the South's side of the Military Armistice Commission building are checked repeatedly to be sure each is working properly. A translator hears the words of Lee through an earphone in a sound-proof booth at the back of the building and simultaneously translates the narrative into English for the U.N. members of the Commission.

Because the MAC building is large enough to seat only the members of the Armistice Commission delegations, spectators, members of the international press, and U.N. security personnel from the JSA Support Group must watch from outside. A series of indoor and outdoor speakers broadcasts the proceedings allowing everyone on the South's side of the Military Demarcation Line that runs down the middle of the DMZ to hear every word. Each statement of the U.N. Command is read first by Kelley in English, then by translators in Korean, and finally in Chinese. Each statement of the North's Lee follows a similar pattern, beginning in Korean. The side which initially proposed the meeting speaks first, with the meeting continuing until both sides agree to an adjournment. The 424th meeting of the Military Armistice Commission was held on 22 February 1984.

Because MAC meetings must be transcribed into a written format, the C-E section also records the proceedings on tape for use by translators assigned to the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission Secretariate in Seoul. All these important tasks keep every JSA signal soldier busy throughout each MAC meeting. Each leaves his one year assignment at the Joint Security Area with a much greater appreciation for the critical importance of the Armistice Commission in maintaining peace in Korea.

When not participating in meetings of the Military Armistice Commission, the C-E section is responsible for providing an integrated system of communications to support the daily activities of the U.N. Command security forces in the Joint Security Area. Organizational and direct support maintenance on tactical FM radio systems receive a great deal of attention. Daily

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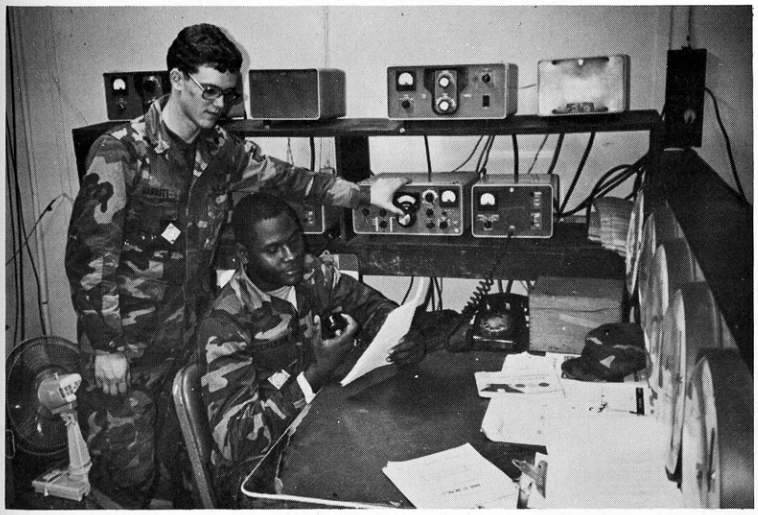
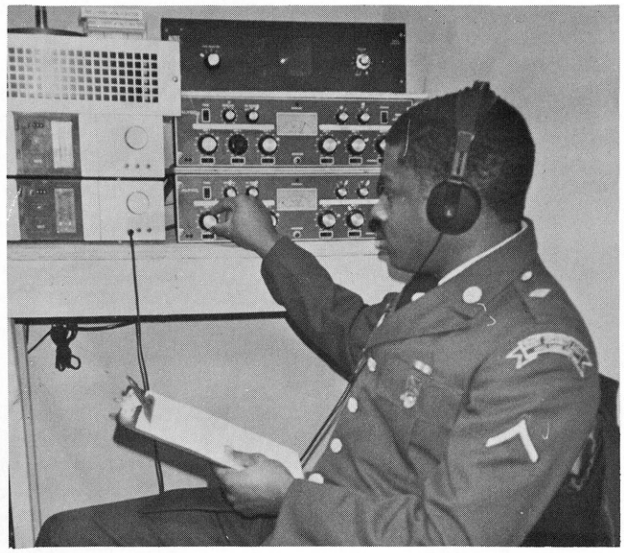
coordination with the 552d Signal Company of the 41st Signal Battalion, 1st Signal Brigade, insures the best quality of dial telephone and emergency access console telephone service for the JSA commander, his staff, and the U.N. command's Joint Duty Officer. A series of bunkers and guard posts surrounding the JSA compound at Camp Kitty Hawk are connected to the tactical operations center via WD-1 and TA-312 telephone sets which require constant maintenance to insure command and control of the soldiers who man each fighting position during alert exercises.

Maintaining the only existing telephone link between the two Koreas is also a responsibility of the C-E section. Approximately once each quarter, a member of the section accompanies the Joint Duty Officer across the Military Demarcation Line into the North Korean sector of the Joint Security Area and enters the North's duty officer building, called the Panmungak, to install fresh batteries or to replace the TA-312 which connects the two duty officers. These are the only times any members of the U.N. Command in the Republic of Korea enter North Korean territory.

Another valuable service provided by the JSA C-E section is operation of a Military Affiliated Radio System (MARS) Station. American soldiers serving along the DMZ and in the JSA are provided the opportunity through MARS to speak with family and friends





"stateside" via the phone patch, or to send a 30-word MARS-gram. The radio operators in the section work diligently to get the message through quickly and accurately for each MARS customer.

The approximately two hundred U.S. Army and an equal number of Republic of Korea Army soldiers assigned to the Joint Security Area rely on the communications electronics section to provide reliable communications 24-hours a day as they preserve freedom for the Korean people. The Signal Corps is well represented by the small group of thoroughly professional communicators assigned to the JSA.