Communications in Central America

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by Col. Charles L. Gordon

In 1979 a well-organized revolutionary group known as Sandinistas overthrew the long-standing, almost universally hated, government of Anatasio Somoza in Nicaragua in the heart of Central America. At first it looked like a turn for the better, and the United States was quick to offer millions of dollars in aid to the new government, which had promised democratic elections and wide-ranging government reforms.

However, it soon became apparent that the Sandinista idea of "reform" had a Marxist-Leninist flavor. Pre-revolution promises were not kept, and Nicaraguans again found themselves governed by an oppressive regime. Refugee flow accelerated as over a million people left the country. Hundreds of Cuban advisors poured in, and a rapid buildup of the military machine began. Today Nicaragua has an armed force second to none in the region, numbering over 100,000 soldiers (eight times its size in 1979). An endless chain of Soviet Bloc ships have delivered more tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft guns, attack helicopters, and other military equipment than that possessed by all the other Central American nations combined. In addition, the

illustration by Terry Moehlman

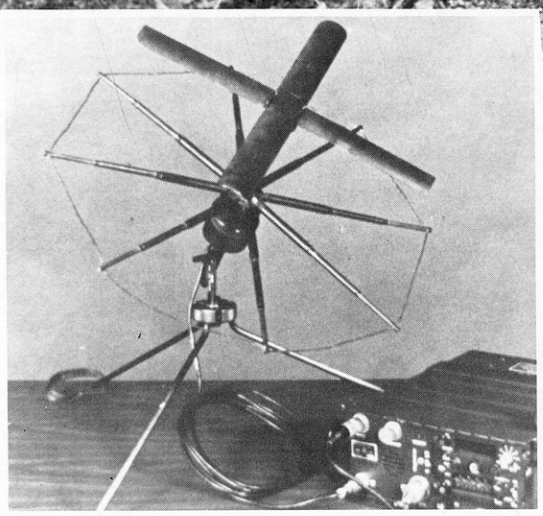
Sandinistas are building airfields large enough to accommodate high performance aircraft, which could be delivered at any time.

This buildup of military force, far larger than anything needed for defensive purposes, has understandably given Honduras and Costa Rica, Nicaragua's neighbors to the north and south, a case of the jitters. If there remained any doubt as to Sandinista intentions, they needed only to look to their beleaguered neighbor, El Salvador, where insurgents waging a bloody civil war are being supported through Nicaragua from various sources.

Unwilling to accept a new Cuba on the American mainland exporting Marxist-Leninist revolution to its neighbors, the President in April 1983 declared the region "vital to US interests" and initiated a broad range of actions to deal with the crisis. The military portion of new US initiatives in Central America has presented great challenges to communicators.

Indigenous communications in Central America are austere at best. There are no roads or telephone lines into many towns. Where service does exist, systems are operating at full capacity, with little or no room for additional circuits. There is high reliance on telegraph and radio communications, and frequency management is almost non-existent. Until recently, the only secure US communications lines in the area were to our embassies, and these were very limited. There were no significant lateral US communications systems. If our ambassador in El Salvador were to talk secure to his counterpart in Honduras, the call had to be connected through Washington, D.C.

In the summer of 1983, thousands of American servicemen and women arrived in Honduras to conduct



Exercise Ahuas Tara II (Big Pine II), a follow-on to a smaller exercise held earlier in the year. This exercise was different from any which has been conducted before. It involved up to 5000 soldiers, airmen, and marines. Several thousand sailors participated in closely coordinated Atlantic Command (LANTCOM) exercises. Ahuas Tara II was the biggest exercise ever conducted in Central America. It lasted for five months—the longest continuous exercise in US military history. The basic communications system which was established is still in existence, supporting the many follow-on exercises and real-world actions which have occurred over the last two years.

The backbone of this new regional system is Ground Mobile Force (GMF) multichannel satellite communications. The GMF links bring in AUTOVON and AUTODIN lines from CONUS, as well as command and control, Armed Forces Radio, weather, and other special circuits. GMF also provides vital connectivity to United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), the Unified Command responsible for US military activities in the region, headquartered in Panama. The GMF system has employed virtually all of the Army's 235th Signal Detachment for the last two years, with occasional additions provided by the Joint Communications Support Element (JCSE) from MacDill AFB, Florida. The 235th, from Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, has done an outstanding job keeping these systems operational for a record period of time.

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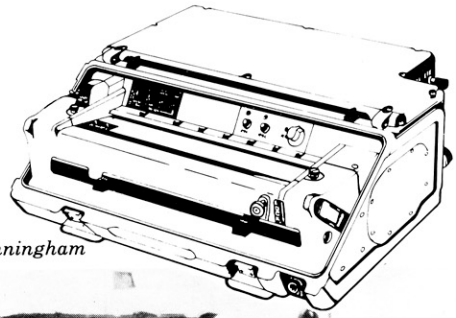

illustration by Eric K. Cunningham

included elements of the 35th Signal Brigade from Fort Bragg and the 3rd Signal brigade from Fort Hood. But the brunt of communications support in Honduras has been borne by the 11th Signal Brigade from Fort Huachuca, Arizona. This capable outfit provides overall systems control and most of the automatic switching, technical control, telecommunications centers, cabling, and maintenance which enable our military forces in the field to support national policy in Central America.

In terms of equipment, one of the most useful communications items has been the single-channel, push-to-talk, tactical satellite (TACSAT) radio, AN/URC-101/110. With this radio, communicators have surmounted the mountainous terrain of Honduras without having to resort to isolated, personnel-intensive repeater stations. TACSAT has thus made it possible for stations located many hundreds of miles apart to be in the same tactical radio net, allowing the cueing (prompting in near-real time) of one station from another. Without TACSAT, US Military operations in the region would be significantly hampered and less beneficial to our training program.

TACSAT communications are absolutely vital in El Salvador. American trainers there are scattered throughout the country in small groups called Operational Planning and Training Teams (OPATTs). The OPATTs are located with brigade-size headquarters of the El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF). US trainers are not directly involved in ESAF military operations, but emergencies sometimes occur in the isolated areas where they work. When that happens, they cannot rely on limited ESAF

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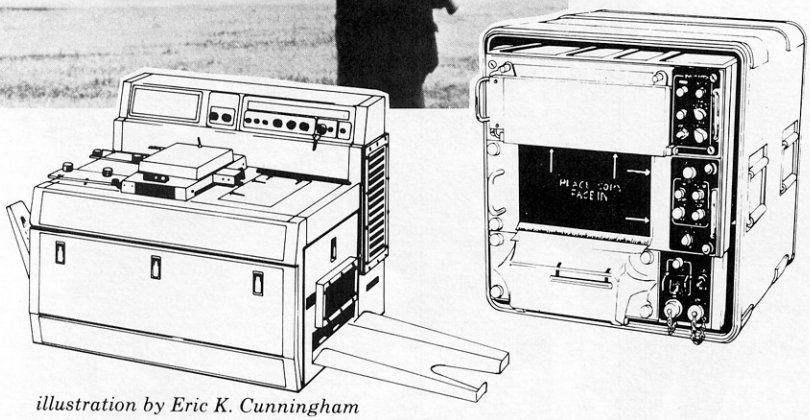

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Though much remains to be done to improve US military communications in Latin America, many enhancements have now been set in motion.

communications networks, most of which are non-secure in any case. The small TACSAT radios have proven literally to be lifesavers in the middle of a shooting war.

Another important communications innovation in Latin America has been the proliferation of secure facsimile. Tactical facsimile (TACFAX), specifically the AN/GXC-7, is used with the AN/URC-101/110 TACSAT radio. In addition, the AN/UXC-4 TACFAX and its off-the-shelf counterpart, Amecom's FASTFAX 2000, are widely used over commercial telephone lines. The path is currently secured with VINSON communications security (COMSEC) devices, but USSOUTHCOM is in the process of converting to new Secure Terminal Units (STU-II's). Some problems have been encountered due to the relative unreliability of telephone lines in Central America, but a workable, regional (lateral) secure voice capability now exists where there was none before.

Significant strides have also been made in host country communications. As security assistance funding has increased, poor nations of Central America have been able to purchase limited amounts of relatively modern equipment. El Salvador has acquired a great number of AN/PRC-77 and other tactical radios, and installed a securable FM radio system with repeaters throughout the country. Honduras has built a national military HF system with AN/URC-92 radios and, like El Salvador, is moving toward more use of COMSEC equipment. Even Costa Rica, which has no military establishment, has installed modest, securable HF and FM systems with security forces along her northern frontier.

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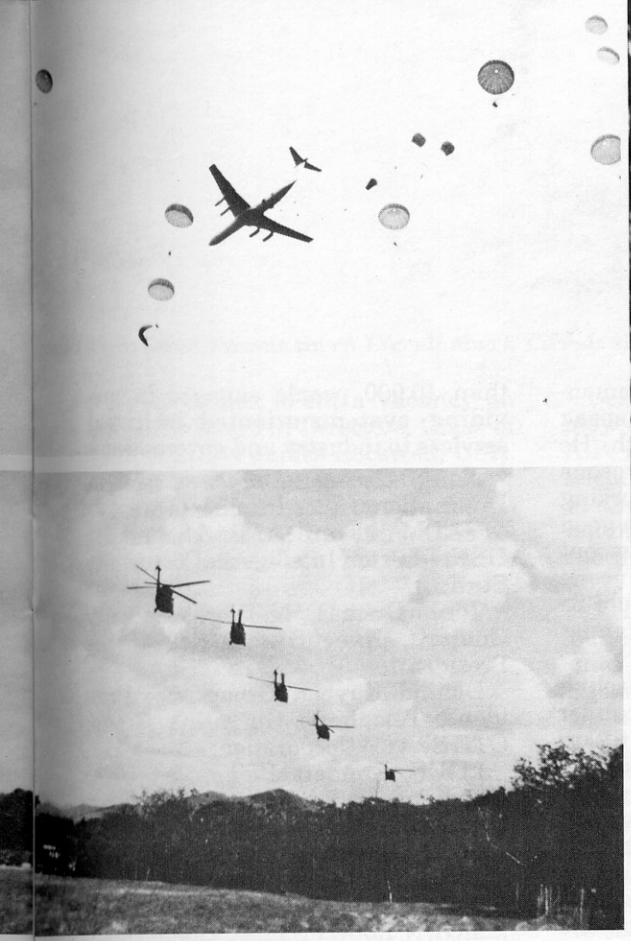

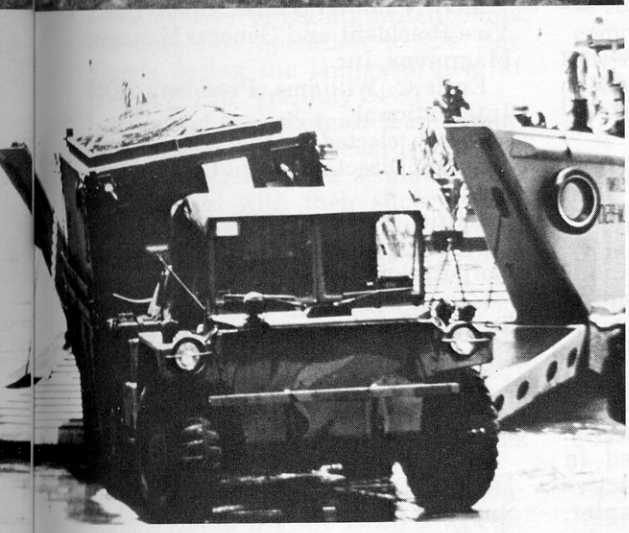

enhancements have now been set in motion. The tactical/transportable communications system in Honduras will be replaced with commercial equipment where feasible. The regional secure voice network of STU-II's and facsimiles is being expanded to embrace all US military organizations throughout Latin America. Elements of the Defense Communications System (DCS) in Panama are being upgraded to include a new satellite earth terminal, new AUTOVON switch, additional microwave links, and tech control improvements. USSOUTHCOM Headquarters will soon be fully automated with the acquisition of a totally new ADP system which will be linked to scores of "smart" computer terminals.

In the meantime, US military communications systems in Central and South America continue to provide reliable service through the dedication and skill of communicators from all the services, working together toward a common goal. There have been big changes south of the border. Things are humming now, but more is yet to come.

Col. Gordon has served in Signal command and staff assignments throughout the world during his 23 years of service. For the last two years, he has been stationed in Panama as Director, Communication-Electronics and Automated Systems, J6, United States Southern Command, with staff responsibility for all US military communications in Central and South America.