illustration by Mike Rodgers

Europe's Signal schoolhouse

by Capt. David E. Hunter-Chester

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1985 was quite a year for 40th anniversaries, marking as it did the anniversary of the end of World War II, the pivotal event of modern history. One such anniversary which may have gone largely unnoticed, not being as dramatic as the meeting of the Americans and Russians at the Elbe, or V-E Day, was the anniversary of the founding of the oldest US Army School in Germany.

On 21 October 1985, Col. Michael H. Crumley, Commander, Seventh Army Combined Arms Training Center, officiated at ceremonies marking the fortieth anniversary of what is now known as the Communications-Electronics Department, Seventh Army Combined Arms Training Center (C-E Dept., 7A CATC).

The Communications-Electronics Department is located at Flint Kaserne in the beautiful, alpine health resort town of Bad Toelz, south of Munich. The school was originally activated, in Germany, on 20 October 1945, but the organization's actual origin can be traced beyond its founding in Germany to the early days of US involvement in World War II.

The entry of the United States into World War II prompted sweeping changes in the Signal Corps, as it did

(U.S. Army photo, Ansbach, circa 1958)

throughout the Army. The Signal Corps expanded at an incredible rate, from a standing strength of approximately 3,935 in June 1939, to 36,396 by June 1941,[1] and 321,862 by May 1945.[2]

In order to meet the geometrically expanding requirement for Signal soldiers, CONUS training centers were rapidly expanded, and training time was severely curtailed. Prior to the limited emergency of September 1939, prompted by Hitler's invasion of Poland, Signal officers received nine months of training in their basic courses, while most enlisted soldiers received ten months of training. By 1941, training for officers had been shortened to one month, and many officers received no specialized training at all. Similarly, training for enlisted soldiers had been shortened to three months, while at least half of them went directly to field units with no technical training.[3] As a result, many units received soldiers who were "unseasoned, half-trained, or worse,"[4] while the individual soldier-communicator who had received the reduced Signal training was characterized as a "one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind."[5]

Besides having to man the tremendously expanding force structure, Army communications people also had to deal with the revolutionary developments occurring in military communications, including the recent development of radar, a suddenly global military commitment, and the heavier dependence of highly mobile armored forces on reliable radio communications. Yet another communications difficulty was that this was the United States' first extensive experience in coalition warfare.

General Eisenhower, recognizing the urgent need for communications specialists, ordered the establishment of a Signal school in the North African Theater of Operations, in a letter dated 25 February 1943. The school was originally operated by the Signal School Company of the 2624th Signal Service Regiment, with facilities at Oran, North Africa.[6] The mission of this school was much the same as the current school in Bad Toelz; it provided refresher training for Signal soldiers arriving from the United States, new equipment training, and training in Allied methods of communications. The school proved a success and moved with the victorious Allied drive through Italy, until a more or less permanent location for the school was established in Naples, where it remained until the cessation of hostilities.[7]

The school in Naples, having already undergone the first organizational and name changes that would become a characteristic of its history, had come to be known as the 6614th Mediterranean Theater of Operation Signal School Detachment.[8] It was deactivated on 10 October 1945, but just 10 days later it was reactivated, moved to Neuendettelsau, in northern Bavaria, and designated the Theater Signal Corps School. Throughout the next 40 years the school's name and organization continued to change, as commitments and force structure in Europe fluctuated.

The first commandant of the TSCS was Lt. Col. Reuben L. Abramowitz, a career Signal officer who had participated in both the Mexican Punitive Expedition and the American Expeditionary Forces of World War I. Lt. Col. Abramowitz was well-suited to his role as commandant because of his experience as an instructor at West Point, and with the Signal Corps School at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, during the tremendous World War II build-up.[9] Abramowitz had been working as the head of the Paris Signal Center in late October 1945 when he was directed to "set up a Signal school for the entire European Theater at Neuen Ddettelsau (sic) Bavaria."[10] He was given a month to complete this formidable task, made more formidable by the fact that Neuendettelsau, an abandoned Luftwaffe Ammunition Depot largely untouched since the end of the war, still contained over 150,000 tons of live munitions. Abramowitz immediately set to work with a handful of men, including some officers and NCOs from the old school in Naples. Among other things, the cadre hastily constructed student tables out of bomb crates, and when those ran out, chopped down trees from the prodigious forest surrounding the kaserne for lumber.

(U.S. Army photo, Ansbach, circa 1958)

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Despite the many difficulties, the school started at the end of the one month dead-line, in December 1945.[11] Out of 150 students enrolled in those first courses, only 4 graduated, due to the redeployment policies in effect at the time.[12] Though the beginning was hectic, a grand and still on-going tradition had been born. It called for providing quality Signal instruction to the soldiers in Europe, despite whatever obstacles.

The facilities at Neuendettelsau were cramped, but the school continued to expand during the following months. A bomb scare in February 1946, however, prompted Abramowitz to search for a new home for the Signal School. He found it just eight miles away, in an abandoned fortress called Gneisanau Kaserne, on a hill overlooking the town of Ansbach.[13]

Gneisanau Kaserne was later renamed Barton Barracks, after David P. Barton, a Signal Corps lieutenant colonel killed in World War II.[14] The school flourished on Barton Barracks for 12 years, averaging more than 3,000 graduates a year. However, the name and organization of the school continued to change, reflecting changing doctrine and commitments for US forces in Europe as a whole. When the US Forces European Theater became the European Command, the school became the EUCOM Signal School. In 1951, with the build-up of forces in Europe and the formation of US Army Europe, the name became the USAREUR Signal School, and in 1957 the designation was changed to US Army Signal School, Europe.[15]

In 1958 the school again relocated, this time to Prinz Heinrich Kaserne, in the village of Lenggries, south of Munich, where it was combined with the Quartermaster School to become the US Army Quartermaster-Signal School, Europe. As an economy measure, this type of consolidation had taken place among several Army schools in Europe, a trend which continued until July 1961, when all USAREUR schools were combined under the direction of the newly formed US Army School, Europe (USASCHEUR), headquartered at Oberammergau. The Quartermaster and Signal Schools were separated, with the Signal School remaining at Lenggries, as the Signal Department, USASCHEUR. In 1966 the school name was changed again, this time in deference to changing Army terminology, to the Communications-Electronics Department, USASCHEUR. In 1971 the school moved once more, to its present home at Flint Kaserne, Bad Toelz, only six miles from Lenggries.[16]

Though moving days for the school were finally over, it still underwent two name and organizational changes. On 1 July 1971, USASCHEUR was redesignated the USAREUR Combat Support Training Center (USAREURCSTC). In 1974 USAREURCSTC was dissolved and the Communications-Electronics Department became part of the newly established Seventh Army Training Command's Combined Arms Training Center (7A CATC).[17]

Today the C-E Department consists of 10 academic courses, training up to 3,500 students annually. Just as when the school was founded, the courses are not MOS producing, but rather are meant to provide refresher training on items such as medium and low-capacity multichannel systems, VRC-12 series radios, RATT rigs, and other pieces of equipment. The courses also provide transition training on new pieces of equipment introduced into the theater, such as the VINSON secure devices (through a government contracted course), and the new Army teletype, UGC-74. Carrying on the tradition of training Allied as well as American soldiers, the school hosts interoperability training with members of the German Bundeswehr, both in formal classroom settings and during less formal Partnership Program events.

One training objective the school has had since its founding is the grounding of selected young officers in the basics of tactical communications. According to SFC James P. Howell, a former course chief at the school, "Our course teaches the basics of communications in a combat unit—infantry, armor, ADA, etc. The officer comes out of the basic course a generalist. Our course prepares them to advise that combat arms battalion commander on tactical communications."

(U.S. Army photo by Susan Rummer, 1985)

(U.S. Army photo, Ansbach, circa 1958)

SFC Howell also mentioned another important class taught by the department, the Communications Security course. "The COMSEC course explains how to use the various regulations and gives hands-on training with the paperwork. Students also benefit from the experiences of others in the class." The Program of Instruction (POI) for the course was developed by the Signal Center at Fort Gordon and is taught Army-wide at seven different locations.

Though soldiers assigned to the department have rotated frequently over the years, some of the civilian employees have been associated with the school since the 1950s. Mr. Richard Townsend, the department's civilian academic advisor first came through the school in the late 1950s as an enlisted man. "We were a big school back then" he recalls. "We graduated about 6,000 a year."

Mr. Alois Patrzek, a civilian who instructs in the UGC-74 radio teletypewriter course and the radio alignment course, first joined the department in 1959, at Lenggries. He recalls the department teaching subjects on such diverse items as radar and radiac equipment, as well as on many pieces of equipment no longer in the inventory. Asked why the school has lasted so long, he replied, "There's always been a demand."

As the C-E Department approaches its 150,000th graduate, in the 40th year since its establishment on German soil, it remains a bridge to the past, with bright promise for the future. Throughout its many changes of place, name, and organization, the school's focus has remained the same: to train soldier-communicators in the means of effectively providing the voice of command. Today the communications field is exploding with development, due to the introduction of digital, laser, and other new technologies. The US Army, as always, will ride the crest of this communications explosion, and the C-E Department, 7A CATC, "Europe's Signal schoolhouse," stands ready to play its role. Lt. Col. Jimmie D. Rawls, the department's current director, put it best: "Our job is to augment the training soldiers have already received. Signal soldiers come here to hone certain skills that may have become rusty over the years. We return those soldiers to the field better able to communicate in support of their mission, and we've been doing it for 40 years."

ENDNOTES

1. *Dulany Torrett,* **The Signal Corps: The Emergency,** *United States Army in World War II series, The Technical Services (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1956), p.204.*

2. *Dixie R. Harris, George R. Thompson,* **The Signal Corps: The Outcome,** *United States Army in World War II series, the Technical Services (1966; rpt. Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1968), p.512.*

3. *Dixie R. Harris, Pauline M. Oakes, Dulaney Torrett, George R. Thompson,* **The Signal Corps: The Test,** *United States Army in World War II series, The Technical Services (1957; rpt. Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1968), p.51.*

4. *Harris,* **Test,** *p.55.*

5. *Torrett,* **Emergency,** *p.210.*

6. *Letter from Headquarters, North African Theater of Operations, US Army to Commanding Officer, Mediterranean Base Section, 25 Feb 43, subject: Signal School. AG 352/022 C-C-M.*

7. **Monthly Historical Journal,** *HQ 6614th MTOUSA Signal School Detachment (OVHD), 5 Oct 45, p.2.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *"Colonel Abramowitz Dies; Had Long Military Career,"* **Monmouth Messenger,** *13 Mar 67.*

10. *Reuben C. Abramowitz, "Theater Signal School at Ausbach,"* **Signals,** *Vol. 1, No. 1, Sep-Oct 46, p.57.*

11. *Abramowitz, pp.57-59.*

12. *Letter from Lt. Col. Reuben L. Abramowitz to Col. S. P. Fink, 7 Aug 54, concerning early activities at the TSCS.*

13. *Abramowitz, p.57.*

14. **Unit History,** *US Army Signal School, Europe, 1957, p.2.*

15. *Ibid, p.1.*

16. **Unit History,** *History of the COMMEL Department, USAREUR Combat Support Training Center, Jan 74.*

17. *Information Brochure, Communications-Electronics Department, 7A CATC, p.2.*

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