ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Telegraph During the Civil War

By **David Hochfelder,** University at Albany, SUNY

The telegraph was an important part of Civil War military and political history for two major reasons. Most visibly, the telegraph proved its value as a tactical, operational, and strategic communication medium. For the first time in the history of warfare, the telegraph helped field commanders to direct real-time battlefield operations and permitted senior military officials to coordinate strategy across large distances. These capabilities were key factors in the North's victory. Another important function was to safeguard civilian control over military operations. The staff of the military telegraph network reported directly to Secretary of War Edwin McMasters Stanton and President Abraham Lincoln, rather than to the military command structure. Stanton relied on the military telegraph to monitor the actions of generals in the field, and Lincoln spent countless hours in the War Department telegraph office adjoining Stanton's office.

By contrast, the Confederacy failed to make effective use of the South's much smaller telegraph network for several reasons. Before the war, many operators working on southern lines were northerners. After secession, most returned to their northern homes. Officials of the Confederacy's largest telegraph company, the Southern Telegraph Company, balked at cooperating with military and civilian officials. On several occasions, military commanders were forced to place telegraph lines under martial law to ensure effective communication. As the war progressed, vital supplies like wire, insulators, and battery acid became harder to obtain. Finally, as Federal armies advanced southward, the Confederacy lost control of vital telegraph and railroad lines. Although Northern officials were initially slow to recognize the value of the telegraph, they took decisive steps in October 1861 to create a comprehensive military telegraph system. On November 1, 1861 President Lincoln gave Major General George Brinton McClellan command of all Union armies as General-in-Chief, replacing the aged Lieutenant General Winfield Scott. One of his first acts was to order generals in the field to build telegraph lines connecting their headquarters with his. By January 1862, the commercial telegraph companies had run their lines into McClellan's Washington, DC, headquarters. A few weeks later, however, Stanton ordered the lines relocated from McClellan's headquarters to his offices at the War Department. For the remainder of the war, Stanton controlled the Army's communications and oversaw the censoring of telegraphic news dispatches.

The military telegraph network proved its value in coordinating broad strategy within the first year of the war. On February 16, 1862, just hours after the fall of Fort Donelson, McClellan engaged in a three-way real-time conversation with Generals Henry

Wager Halleck and Don Carlos Buell to discuss plans for advancing to Nashville. Similarly, Ulysses S. Grant later recalled that he had "held frequent conversations over the wires" about strategy with Stanton during 1863, some lasting two hours. William Tecumseh Sherman also recalled the "perfect concert of action" between his forces in Georgia and Grant's in Virginia in 1864. "Hardly a day intervened when General Grant did not know the exact state of facts with me, more than fifteen hundred miles off, as the wires ran." [1]

The military telegraph also proved valuable on several occasions as an operational and tactical tool on the battlefield, allowing commanders to remain in constant touch with subordinates and to react quickly to changing conditions. McClellan adroitly used the telegraph to resupply his troops with bullets and shells in the midst of the Battle of Antietam, Maryland, in September 1862. Assistant Secretary of War Charles Anderson Dana later praised the utility of the telegraph when he witnessed Union forces in action during the Battle of Chickamauga in northern Georgia on September 19, 1863, noting that "it was one of the most useful accessories of our army," giving General Rosecrans "constant information on the way the battle was going." Also, Dana was also able to send eleven telegrams to Washington, apprising Stanton of the progress of the battle on almost an hourly basis. [2]

During the battle of Spotsylvania in the Wilderness Campaign of May 1864, Major General George Gordon Meade used the telegraph to reinforce Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps after it had come under heavy Confederate counterattack. Luther Rose, a telegrapher attached to Hancock's headquarters, set up his key and sounder at 3:30 a.m., an hour before Hancock's advance on the Confederate lines, allowing Hancock's chief of staff to coordinate the attack with other corps commanders. Favored with a heavy early-morning fog, Hancock's advance was successful. Later in the day, however, the Confederates counterattacked. Hancock telegraphed to Meade that he was unable to hold his gains unless the VI Corps on his right came to his support. Ten minutes later, as Rose recorded in his diary, "the 6th Corps was thundering away & Hancock held his own…. Here the Telegraph came forcibly into play, showing to what great benefit it could be used." Rose used a field telegraph that could be deployed within a few minutes from the backs of mules and could be strung almost anywhere. Such flexibility meant that Rose accompanied Hancock closely, taking down and resetting his instruments if Hancock moved his headquarters more than half a mile. Rose and a companion operator were so close to the front at Spotsylvania that heavy shelling frequently broke their wire. The two took turns splicing the breaks, remarking before setting out, "If I stop a shell, send my things home." [3]

Rose later described his telegraph instrument as "the principal channel" through which passed the orders determining the movements of Hancock's corps during the

[1] David Hochfelder, *The Telegraph in America: 1832-1920*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, 9–10.
[2] Ibid., 10.
[3] Ibid., 10.

Wilderness campaign. Similarly, during the ill-fated Battle of the Crater at Petersburg on July 30, 1864. Meade later recalled that he had sent or received over 100 telegrams during the five-hour battle, or one every three minutes. Rose himself operated from an artillery battery during that engagement, demonstrating the utility of the telegraph for real-time battlefield use. [4]

Despite the usefulness of the telegraph as a strategic and tactical communication medium, the United States Military Telegraph (USMT) had one important limitation—it remained a civilian organization. The result was an uneasy hybrid, a telegraph system that served the military but was not part of it. While the USMT built thousands of miles of its own lines to link military commanders with each other and the War Department, it relied heavily on the existing commercial telegraph network. Telegraph companies gave priority to military and government messages, while continuing to handle commercial traffic and earn enormous wartime profits. The top dozen officials of the USMT were all officers in the Quartermaster Corps, yet they retained their civilian positions as managers of the commercial lines. Many of the approximately 1,200 operators and linemen in the USMT also continued to work for commercial telegraph companies and drew only part of their salaries from the War Department.

The USMT remained a civilian organization because key members of the Lincoln administration, particularly Stanton, wished it so. Stanton regarded his supervision of the telegraphs as central to maintaining control over both military operations and the flow of news.

Civilian control of the USMT created conflict in two areas. Of direct concern to field commanders, few USMT personnel were subject to military authority. While USMT operators usually performed their duties with alacrity, they often refused to conform to military standards of discipline.

USMT telegraphers often engaged in conduct that no military officer would have tolerated from subordinates. Many operators drank on duty, failed to answer morning roll calls, and took bribes to transmit civilian messages ahead of military traffic. On at least two occasions, USMT telegraphers threatened strikes if their demands for better pay and working conditions went unmet.

On their part, officers often expected the USMT to provide instant communications, even when operators were unable to do so. In February 1862, General Halleck tried to have an assistant superintendent fired for delaying military traffic at Chicago while permitting commercial messages to pass freely. Although the reason for the delay was a broken cable crossing the Ohio River at Paducah, Kentucky, Halleck brusquely replied, "Remedy the defect…. There must be an end to this inefficiency and delay." In 1864 Theodore Holt, an operator assigned to Brigadier General Eugene Asa Carr at Little Rock, Arkansas, could not raise a nearby office, so Carr forced Holt to operate under armed guard. On another occasion a major general threatened to shoot an

[4] Ibid., 10-11.

assistant superintendent if he did not send a certain message to a distant office within the hour. USMT operators frequently complained in their diaries and letters of such treatment, expressing sentiments as Holt did, that "Carr don't own the Telegraph Corps."[5]

Just as seriously, the USMT did not coordinate its operations with the Army's Signal Corps. The United States Army had only recently come to recognize the importance of military signaling in general. Colonel Albert James Myer (himself a former telegrapher) had been appointed as the first Chief Signal Officer of the Army only in June 1860. Myer had no trained telegraphers in the Signal Corps when the war broke out, yet he continually pressed to gain control over the military telegraph system. His persistence led to his dismissal from his post as Chief Signal Officer in late 1863. He was reinstated in 1867 and remained Chief Signal Officer until his death in 1880. He built a Signal Corps capable of providing all forms of military communication in a future war. However, the major mission of the Signal Corps from 1870 to 1890 was weather prediction. Myer's most notable postwar accomplishment was the establishment of a national weather reporting system staffed by volunteer observers and Signal Corps personnel. Myer's weather reporting system, taken over by the Department of Agriculture in 1891, led to fundamental strides in the new science of meteorology, prevented many shipwrecks on the Great Lakes, and proved a boon to farmers protecting their crops from bad weather. Afterward, the Signal Corps focused on purely military signaling. The Signal Corps proved its worth during the 1898 war with Spain and again during the world wars of the 20th century.

The Civil War was the first conflict to see the telegraph used for military purposes. It was an important key to Northern victory. The significance of the telegraph for Northern victory is best captured by an accounting of its use. From May 1, 1861 to June 30, 1865, the USMT handled some 6.5 million messages at a total cost (for construction, repair, and operation of the network) of $2,655,000, or about forty-one cents per message. During the war the USMT built 15,000 miles of line, often in adverse conditions and sometimes under enemy fire. At its peak in 1865, the USMT network consisted of over 8,000 miles of military telegraph line and another 5,000 miles of commercial lines operated by military telegraphers. Of the 1,200 operators and linemen who served in the USMT, 175 were wounded or captured and 25 died in service, 8 by direct enemy action.

****

[5] Ibid., 12-13.