GENERAL MYER AND THE SIGNAL CORPS

Crossed flags and torch, the insignia of the Signal Corps, represent the first means of military communication employed by Brigadier General Albert James Myer, founder, organizer, and first chief of the United States Army Signal Corps.

Signals by means of torches, flags, smoke, pyrotechnics, and other symbols have been employed from time immemorial, but the systems of signaling were either difficult to learn or the equipment was cumbersome in form, complex in character, or impractical to manufacture on a scale large enough to be effective in mobile military operations. General Myer's genius lay in his ability to devise a simple visual signal system of "wig-wagging" a flag or torch to the left or right to indicate letters that could be read by a trained soldier. His signal system met essential military requirements because it was not only militarily effective but employed light, sturdy, easily transportable, easily made equipment.

Albert James Myer was born in Newburgh, New York, in 1828. He received his early education in Buffalo where he also worked as an operator in the local telegraph office. He attended Geneva College and the Medical College of the University of Buffalo. His interest in telegraphy influenced his thinking even while in medical school and, for his Doctor's degree thesis, he wrote "Signals for Deaf Mutes", which was based upon the use of a two element telegraphic alphabet that formed letters by the waving of anything to the left or right. This thesis was to become the basis of his military communication system. In 1854 he was commissioned Assistant Surgeon in the Regular Army with the rank of lieutenant. While with the Army as an assistant surgeon from 1854 to 1860, he devoted much of his leisure time in devising a system of visual signals that might be effectively employed by the Army. In 1860 the U. S. Army adopted the Myer system of signaling and appointed Assistant Surgeon Albert James Myer to be Signal Officer with the rank of major, to fill an original vacancy in a newly created Signal Department. At that time the use of signal communication of any kind in the Army -- as contrasted to mounted messenger service -- was almost unknown.

At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Major Myer, together with a very small group of enthusiastic officers and enlisted men, established Signal Schools to provide the rapidly expanding Union Army with signal troops. During the Civil War signaling assumed such an important role in military operations that Congress passed an act on 3 March 1863 establishing the Signal Corps as a separate branch of the Army with Major Myer, later to become Brigadier General, as the first Chief Signal Officer. Thus the United States Army was the first to have a Signal Corps and it has since served as a model for the creation of Signal Corps in the armies of many other nations.

The valiant and heroic services of the Signal Corps throughout the Civil War contributed greatly to the success of the Union Army and General Myer was instrumental in establishing Signal studies in the United States Military

Academy. During the Civil War, 146 officers were commissioned in the Signal Corps, and, in addition, there were 297 acting Signal officers. The total number of enlisted men numbered about 2,500. The Act of 1863 establishing the Signal Corps was only effective during the Civil War and upon termination of hostilities the Signal Corps was demobilized and then re-established and reorganized in 1866 with 6 officers and 100 enlisted men.

General Myer was also responsible for the adoption of electrical means of communication by the Army. In his preface to his "Manual of Signals" for 1868, General Myer wrote: "The actions of the late war, in which victory or defeat has sometimes hung upon the transmission of a signaled message, have rendered it certain that military signals will be used in the future military and naval operations of our arms - - - The perfection to which these duties can be brought, by careful study, experiment and practice, can be contemplated yet in imagination only." "Careful study" -- "experiment and practice" -- "contemplated yet in imagination only" -- are basic thoughts that have always been and continue to be incorporated in the underlying philosophy of the Signal Corps.

In its role as communicator for the Army, and in its zeal to provide our troops with the most rapid and effective means of communication, the Signal Corps has always been quick to adopt, modify, and whenever necessary, to directly contribute to such inventions as the telegraph, telephone, radio and radar. In between the progress of military communication from the flag, torch, and crude telegraphic equipment of the Civil War to the latest development in radar and radio relay, the Signal Corps was responsible for two other outstanding scientific achievements. During the period 1870-1890 the Signal Corps organized, established, and developed every phase of a weather reporting service for the benefit of our nation's agriculture and commerce and thereby laid the groundwork for our nation's present day Weather Bureau.

During the same period, the Signal Corps installed, maintained, and operated about 5,000 miles of telegraph lines in the northwest and southwest frontiers of our nation. These lines not only transmitted important meteorological data but were authorized by Congress for the express purpose "of connecting military posts and stations, and for the protection of the populations from Indian and other depredations." By 1875 our weather reporting service was so advanced that it attracted the attention of meteorologists from all over the globe and our War Department through the Signal Corps was influential in the development of a world-wide meteorological service. This was one of the great 19th century achievements in science as well as in international cooperation.