



Telegraphy during the American Civil War

by James H. Hillestad

Throughout the entire history of armed conflict, national leaders at the seat of government were unable to learn the fate of their armies in battle in a timely fashion. Left to their own devices, generals determined the future of nations. It was for this reason that heads of government such as Henry V at Agincourt and Napoleon in Russia remained with their troops — to combine both national and military leadership.

ABOVE
Behind the lines. A small Federal camp along a newly erected telegraph line.

RIGHT
President Abraham Lincoln (in daguerreotype form), No.10055.

The U.S. Civil War

During the Civil War Battle of Second Manassas (Bull Run) in 1862, President Lincoln telegraphed a colonel in the field, “What became of our forces which held the bridge til twenty minutes ago?”

Abraham Lincoln was using the new medium of long-distance communication in an unprecedented manner that revolutionized command and control by a national leader located far distant from the action.

Contrast this with the situation in 1861 during the First Battle of Bull Run. Lincoln, just four months into his presidency, was condemned to sit and wait in ignorance with his generals while the thunder of cannon could be heard from the battlefield just 30 miles outside the capital. The General-in-Chief Winfield Scott was so accepting of the tradition of being “uninformed,” that he took a nap

during the battle.

Abraham Lincoln used the telegraph to transform the nature of the presidency. The telegraph became a tool of his leadership, and helped to win the Civil War.

The industrialized North capitalized on the telegraph more than the agricultural South, and between 1861 and 1865 laid an astonishing 15,000 miles of wire.

The U.S. Military Telegraph Corps

Under the direction of Colonel Thomas A. Scott, the United States Military Telegraph Corps was born. Scott, who had been employed

by Andrew Carnegie, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, recruited telegraph operators who excelled at running trains by telegraph.

The Corps eventually grew to over 1,500 men. The operators were employed





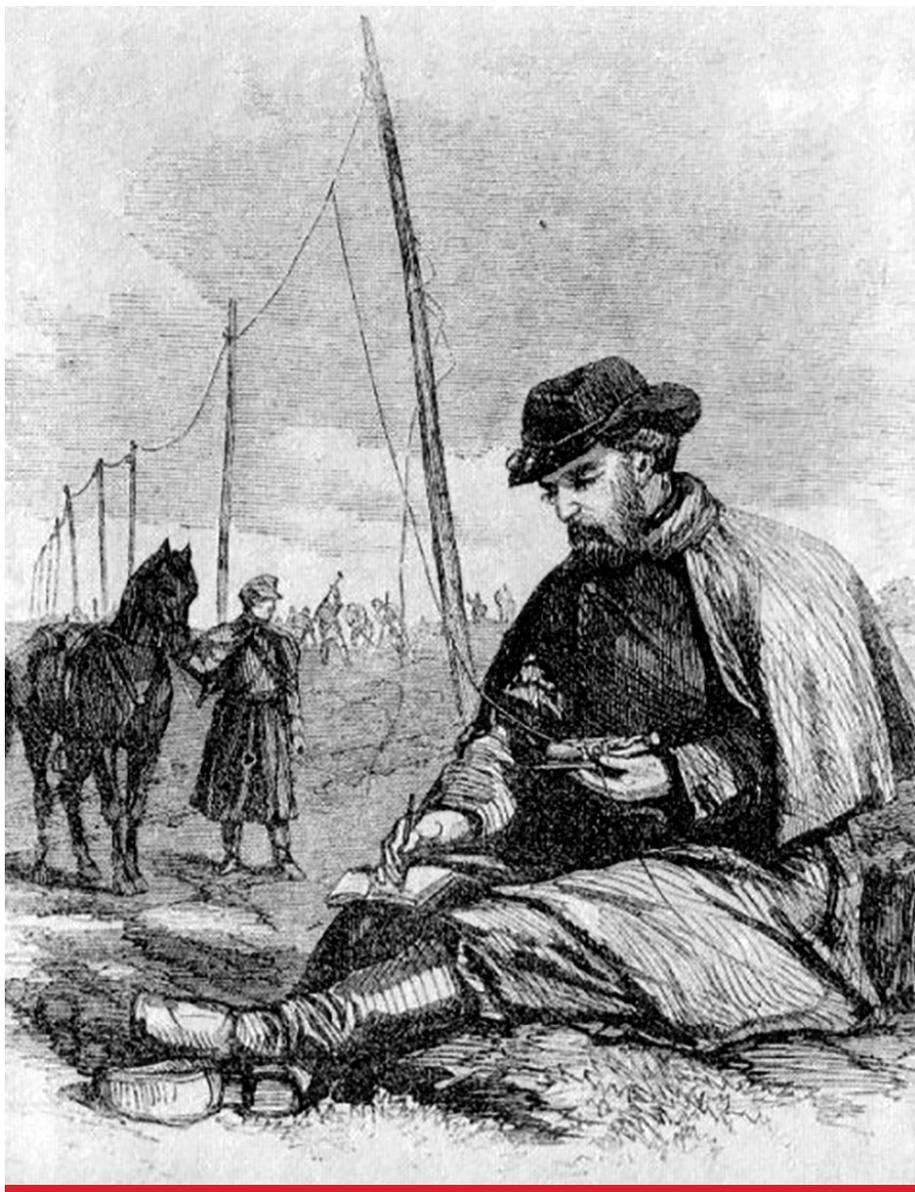
as civilians and took their orders from the Secretary of War, which was irksome to military commanders in the field.

The operators worked under the constant threat of being captured, shot, or killed by Confederate troops. They faced a casualty rate of ten percent, a rate similar to those in the regular infantry.

Ciphers

Messages were transmitted in Morse Code, the most important ones being enciphered. Only a handful of operators were entrusted with coding and decoding. Union telegraphers claimed to have broken the Confederate ciphers, but it seems that the Federal communications remained relatively free of discovery.

A shining example of the value of decoding is found in two dispatches from the Confederate Secretary of War in 1863: the decoded messages led to the arrest of Confederate conspirators in New York City and to the capture of contraband shipments of arms. Other translated ciphers revealed plans laid by Confederate agents for raiding Northern towns.



ABOVE
"Mr. Dayfield" Young Civilian Man Standing used as a civilian telegrapher, No.31272.

TOP
Wire laying with mounted rider and mule.

LEFT
Officer taking notes next to the line.



Constructing the Lines

The Telegraph Construction Corps was charged with the dangerous job of building telegraph lines in the field during battles. The Corps was composed of about 150 men, outfitted with wagons, tents and pack-mules. Large insulated wire was wound on reels and mounted in wagons. The men followed, putting up the wire as rapidly as it was unreeled. The poles used to support the wire did not need to be substantial and could usually be found in the wooded Virginia countryside near the proposed route.

At the battle of Petersburg 1864-1865, General Grant received over the telegraph lines daily reports from four separate armies numbering a quarter-million men. He replied with daily directions for their operations over an area of seven hundred and fifty thousand square miles.

This gave Grant unprecedented control over the operations of widely dispersed units – and soon became the



TOP
With hand-held telegraph key, a Union Colonel transmits a dispatch.

RIGHT
U.S. Telegraphy Corps Set No. 1, No.31281

norm in the world's armies.

The Field Telegraph Comes of Age

The story of Abraham Lincoln and the telegraph is perhaps one of the greatest stories about this great man. Without the guidance of text, tutor or training, Lincoln instinctively understood the transformational nature of the new

technology. By putting its dots and dashes to work, he created an essential tool in waging and winning the Civil War. ■

BELOW
Hanging a telegraph line and posing for the camera.

BOTTOM
A Union Officer confers with a civilian telegraphist, while an orderly holds the reins of the Colonel's horse.

Jim Hillestad is a frequent contributor to *The Standard* and is proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures, dozens of dioramas, and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570 629-7227 or visit his website: www.the-toy-soldier.com

