

“Mail Call”: A Look At Communication For The Deployed U.S. Soldier

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Since the beginning of formalized postal delivery, mail delivered to deployed military personnel has been an enormous part of a soldier's day. The adrenalin rush of receiving a package from mom, photos of children, and letters from a sweetheart always made the daily anxiety of separation easier with “mail call”.

“Mail Call” as we learned from the television hit “M*A*S*H” is a time of bringing soldiers together for distributing mail on a given day. During many early campaigns of war, the only means of soldier communication was through the infamous “mail call”. Mail destined to a soldier abroad was handled with the utmost care because military post offices knew the message behind the letter or photo was so important. Receiving letters at mail call often meant the difference in motivation during heavy combat campaigns. It often meant the difference in heartache, hence the famous “Dear John” letter. Most of all, it represented a future for these soldiers outside of war that kept their drive and commitment during their tours of duty.

As we look back over the years of military mail we can see a standard that mirrors the USPS. Mail is sorted to military installations and air bases in the same manner as with civilian addresses. Accurate addressing meant getting reasonable delivery standards on mail destined internationally.

The Transformation Process

In the early nineties, many military units gained advanced communication devices for tactical requirements, but did not utilize them as a means to allow soldiers to communicate with their families. Some fundamental communication means included the integration of encrypted messaging, transmitting data via secure facsimiles and early stages of web-based mail.

Electronic communication was limited to only senior mili-

tary leaders and advisors. With the development of electronic communications, military branches of service began to explore the Internet as a means to communicate as a force strategically. Further developments included the opportunity for soldier communication; however, throughout most of the late 80's and 90's, the primary means of soldier communication was still through “mail call”.

Today military communication has advanced at a greater rate than anticipated, continuing to validate the e-business platform used in professional civilian communities. Over the past twelve years, the military has taken aggressive approaches towards electronic communication not only for tactical purposes but for soldier welfare as well.

The enhancement means for soldier-family communication include global cellular phones, phone bank call centers, visual teleconference centers, and electronic on-line communities complete with web site development and e-mail.

As we review the new enhancements, let's be sure to remember that “mail call” has not been eliminated and still is

vital to soldiers abroad.

Global Cell Phones

Depending on the deployment region, soldiers can acquire global cell phones for personal use. Most of the international market has been supported by brand names such as T-Mobile and Nextel, allowing soldiers to purchase advanced minutes for outbound calling. Inbound features include the ability to receive calls at no charge to the calling plan.

To put this in perspective, I offer this real-world scenario.

During a recent trip to Bosnia I visited with a soldier who was negotiating a new vehicle purchase with a car dealer via his cellular phone. The dealer was located in central Pennsylvania and through numerous phone calls and a local contact,

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the soldier was able to acquire a new vehicle for his family. Of course there was a challenge with the time difference, but the dealer accommodated the soldier's needs. At the conclusion, both parties seemed happy with the transaction. This situation is something that would never happen in prior years without the use of cellular phones.

Phone Bank Call Centers

With the aid of major telephone service providers, phone banks have been strategically positioned throughout deployed communities. These high-volume phone banks allow soldiers to contact their family without the difficulties of calling cards or collect call scenarios.

The call centers are continental United States communication nodes that route inbound phone calls directly to US residences. Most charges are handled by the CONUS (Continental United States) account holder receiving the call. Volunteer phone operators providing goodwill gestures staff these communication nodes. Their responsibilities include answering the phones, support phone call forwarding, and call transfers. The ability of these volunteers to ensure connection has made phone banks successful in these deployed regions.

Video Teleconference Centers (VTC's)

We've all seen the development of VTC's in our businesses. VTC's have been a large part of the military community for years. Recently, through the jurisdiction of military chaplain support, VTC's have been established abroad for soldiers' use. In the United States, family action centers (FAC) are geographically established throughout regions for family needs. These FAC's can be found in local National Guard and Army Reserves Armories, as well as active duty military installations. Through a formalized schedule, families and soldiers now have live teleconferences that generally last 15 minutes. Obviously, the unit mission and deployment scenario dictates the availability.

Having witnessed a VTC in a Pennsylvania armory, I had the chance to talk with the family. As you can imagine, there were mixed emotions. Shortly after the VTC session, I traveled to Bosnia and located the soldier who was on the opposite end of that VTC. I spent some time with him discussing his children and the actual teleconference. Again, the emotions were mixed; new feelings had surfaced along with increased separation anxiety. However, there was a comfort in seeing his family and knowing everyone was doing well. In the end, the soldier was thankful for the 15 minutes. Thank you, technology!

Electronic Communities

The Army established an on-line community for all military personnel. As a member of the Army National Guard, I have a unique military email address that allows me to communicate electronically without any membership fees associated with on-line services.

Along with personal email accounts, the U.S. Army has been developing cyber cafes throughout deployed communities. Soldiers abroad can communicate 24-hours/day through these military cyber cafes. General use includes keeping current with family events, while some soldiers have been able to maintain communication with their employer. While away, I utilized the cyber café to keep current with my employer and maintain agendas within my department.

As the cyber cafes grew in popularity, advanced solutions have led soldiers down the path of creating web sites of their experiences. Custom web sites offer families the ability to experience the soldier's deployment as best as possible through some order of chronological events and photos. The best way

to experience this enhancement is visit www.freewebs.com/walutinbosnia.

There you will visit with LTC Walter Lord in Bosnia-Herzegovina. LTC Lord is the Civil Military Liaison Officer responsible for many local communities and politicians in this region. His primary role is to try and reestablish communities that were dismantled during the war in Bosnia. Not only does he have a responsibility to the civilians in this community, but he has a higher mission of ensuring a future through a cooperative peace process. His peacekeeping effort has been captured in pictures and dialogue throughout his deployment.

While surfing this site, visualize being a family member of LTC Lord and experience the tour as one of his children or spouse. You will then appreciate what automation has done for the Army.

As time has passed through the years in service, we find that communication improvements make soldier separation easier for families and those soldiers abroad. Whether it's VTC, cellular phones, web-based solutions, email, or phone banks, all means are equally important to the morale and welfare of our soldiers in uniform. One cannot underestimate the important role a family plays in a soldier who has left them for a higher cause. Most often, these new technologies make the difference in making it through a day.

We've also come to realize that there are times when sophisticated communication is not available based on the mission of a unit; therefore, the aforementioned "mail call" is still a staple in today's military. "Mail call" will never be eliminated because of care packages being sent to soldiers abroad. While we applaud the improvements of communication to our deployed soldiers, we must not forget that there is still joy when receiving something in the mail. In some sense, the daily "mail call" has been more than a letter delivery: it has helped to shape closeness in unit integrity.

(NOTE: Since September 11, 2001, Timothy Kerner has been called to duty numerous times for mission deployments. Tour lengths and assignment locations vary from mission to mission. Acting as the 28th Infantry Division G-1 Personnel Officer, Mr. Kerner is responsible for mobilization deployment coordination for global peacekeeping operations and homeland security missions. Mr. Kerner's most recent deployments have been to Bosnia.)

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