

Big Fence

Isolated navigation aid outfit of the 15th Air Force proves the role VHF can play in bringing pilots through tough spots.

By Sgt. AUGUST LOEB

YANK Staff Correspondent

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With the 15th Air Force -- When in doubt, call Big Fence. That's the custom among 15th Air Force pilots needing advice or information to pull through a tough spot. Like the B-24 pilot over the Adriatic whose bombs were stuck and he wanted to find a way to get rid of them. He called Big Fence. The first sergeant of Big Fence put in a call to an ordinance outfit and had the information relayed over the air. The bombs were released and the bomber came in without further difficulty.

Big Fence is a VHF (very high frequency) outfit that specializes in getting planes out of trouble. It operates in high isolated spots where a few GIs, working entirely on their own, pick messages out of the air and relay them to a headquarters, just as remote as the out stations, where bits of information are pieced together and are put into a form that pilots can understand and use.

Pilots and others in the 15th have done considerable guessing about the meaning of Big Fence. But Lt Loyd C. Willrecht of Campbell, Minn., communications officer, says the name is just a call sign and means nothing. It was chosen in North Africa two years ago when the 12th Air Force set up VHF operations under Capt. Donald P. White of New York City, who is still the CO of Big Fence. The name has stuck because it is easy to remember and easy to understand on the air.

The pilots have become so well acquainted with Big Fence procedure by now that the average conversation is terse and matter-of-fact but when you overhear it in the busy plotting room of headquarters it hits you with a dramatic impact. The talk runs like this:

"Hello Big Fence. This is Restless D for Dog."

"Hello D for Dog. This is Big Fence"

"Hello Big Fence. This is D for Dog. Have two engines out and I am low on gas. Give me a steer to the nearest base."

"Hello D for Dog. This is Big Fence. Transmit for homing"

"Hello Big Fence. This is D for Dog. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten."

"Hello D for Dog. This is Big Fence. Steer 180 degrees for Fireplug. You have about 80 miles to go"

"Roger, steer 180 degrees for Fireplug"

Pilots looking for a steer to their home base are the main clients of Big Fence. But the VHF outfit also does a large business in "fixing" (giving locations in reference to some known point) air-sea rescue, weather relays, and May Day messages. A May Day call (from the French "m'aidez," meaning "help me") is the Big Fence equivalent of a four-alarm fire. It makes everyone around the place leap into action. Things move so fast that air-sea rescue has reached some pilots 30 minutes after the May Day signal was given.

"Most pilots surprise you by their calm," says S/Sgt. Lester Dolgoff of New York City, plotting room chief. "They talk about low fuel and engine damage in a quiet conversational tone. I know of only one case where a pilot got excited. He signaled, 'Hello Big Fence, I'm lost,'" without giving either his name or the name of the plane."

Lt. Clarence Cole of Des Moines, Iowa, a former B-24 pilot now with the unit, points out that pilots often imagine a situation to be worse than it is and that Big Fence tries to put them at ease. "The main reasons for a plane's calling in are lack of fuel and shot up controls. By giving them exact information, we try to make them take a brighter view and help to keep them from ditching when it isn't necessary. Emergencies quickly come under control."

In one rare instance Big Fence had vital information for a fighter pilot but no way of getting it to him. He made an emergency landing on a small island in the Adriatic and signaled his position. It happened to be the place where a group of heavies was headed for a practice bombing run. The fighter pilot had bombs exploding all around him but came through unhurt and was picked up by air-sea rescue.

Nerve center of the Big Fence system is in a 13th century castle that looks as isolated from the world today as it was in the Middle Ages. The men live near the castle and work so many shifts that hours for messing and sleeping follow no definite pattern.

Life in the out stations is even less regular. GIs assigned to DF (directional finder) duty often get snow-bound in trucks and have to exist without water and on slender rations until the weather clears. Cpl. Harry J. Burke of Kansas City, Mo., recalls the time snow was banked almost to the top of his truck and he had to break a window to start the DF motor. Another DF operator, Cpl. Joseph P. Cavalli of Detroit, Mich., remembers sweating out the mule packs that used to bring rations.

T/Sgt. Leon M. Taylor of Leesville, S.C., wire chief and acting first sergeant, points out that getting roads through to mountain tops and keeping them cleared is one of the unit's toughest jobs. When new stations are opened, every one pitches in on this and other details.

Looking after all the VHF equipment is 41-year-old M/Sgt. Frank H. Kessler of Ridgely, Md., who had his own radio shop for 14 years. Sgt. Kessler has built many intricate gadgets to keep Big Fence on the air at all times. He put together remote control units and rewired panels when the regular equipment was not available; he used a soldering iron to repair matching stubs and coaxial cables damaged when the wind blew down an antenna mast; designed and perfected a visual bearing meter for the DF stations, and eliminated a type of static caused by the beating of rain drops against the antennas.

Big Fence is without a TO. All of its men are on DS from fighter squadrons and so many ratings are held open for the VHF unit. A paper transfer must be put through every time a man gets promoted, piling up the work for S/Sgt. Donald E. Talley of St. Louis, Mo., chief clerk in the orderly room.

Lack of a TO and living in isolation might be expected to produce bitching but it's held down by the compensations the men find in their job.

"When pilots call in and thank us after completing a tour of duty," Sgt. Dolgoff observes, "we feel pretty good."