

Ma Bell Goes To War

by
Mike Prero

The United States entered World War II with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, but the war, itself, had already been going on since Hitler pushed across the Polish border on September 1, 1939.

Consequently, even before Pearl Harbor, the United States had begun to enact a variety of measures here at home, just in case, especially the National Defense Program, which started in 1940.



After Pearl Harbor, the country quickly mobilized, and behind every soldier that left, and every ship that sailed, and every plane that flew, there was an entire army of civilians and businesses that worked tirelessly to ensure that the job would get done and that all would return home safely. The Bell System of telephone companies across the land was an important part of this effort.

In those days, before television and before the computer, Ma Bell was the United States communications system. The war put a tremendous strain on that system, and, looking back after 50 years, it's something of a miracle that the challenge was met.

In 1943, for example, 568 warships were launched, each with a complete communications system provided, for the most part, by Ma Bell. When the U.S.S. Missouri was launched in 1944, it alone carried some 1,200 telephones, 350 miles of telephone wire, and a ship-wide battle announcing system. And, each mile advanced by American land forces meant that their communications lengthened.

From 1940 to mid-1944, the number of Bell System telephones in service increased by more than 4.5 million. At the same time, the military needed everything that the Bell System could provide—not just telephone equipment, but many kinds of secret electrical weapons components, as well. Faced with the greatest volume of telephone calls in its history, at a time when it could not build sufficient lines because materials—copper, rubber, nickel—were desperately needed elsewhere, Bell had to find other answers as to how get war messages through.

By mid-1942, a plan had already been developed. It relied on cooperation between the System and the American people on a scale previously unthinkable. In July, 1942, an intensive public education program began. It included newspaper advertising, radio announcements, posters, telephone booth notices, vehicle

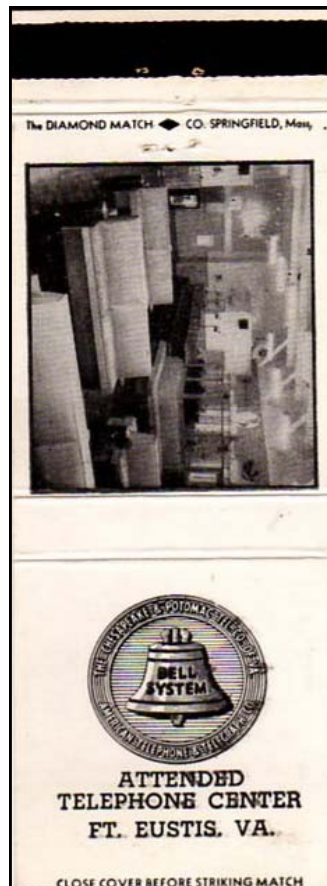


cards, and leaflets to be distributed by managers and company representatives. It called for telephone users to make only essential calls, keep them to a minimum, answer promptly, be considerate of others on party lines, avoid rush hour use, and spread the word why the war effort comes first.

...And it worked! Because, unlike the Vietnam War, this was a war in which the country acted as a team. Of course, after Pearl Harbor, there were no options to do otherwise, but it's also true that these were different times, and everyone still remembered World War I. Headquarters offices of Bell's Pacific Telephone & Telegraph Co. in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, for example, all proudly displayed their "901" Service Flags, dedicated to the 901 Pacific Telephone & Telegraph Co. employees who had joined the Armed Forces.

In the mean time, the 300,000 people of the Bell System were doing everything they could possibly think of. The telephone industry became a war industry. Bell Laboratories strove to make improvements in equipment; Western Electric stocked apparatus and materials in warehouses strategically located throughout the nation; construction and maintenance crews were fully mechanized; every facility was put into use; switchboards were crowded beyond normal capacity; one-party lines became party lines; irreplaceable equipment was renovated.

In 1944, Bell put in 400 million dollars' worth of new equipment. One equipment installer noted, "We're installing switchboards like we used to install telephones." Small, portable phone booths were developed, enabling bedridden servicemen to call their loved ones. A new phone center was built at the Puget Sound



Naval Yard, converting an entrance tunnel to an air raid shelter into one of the most complete and best-equipped telephone centers for servicemen in the Pacific Northwest. And, the list of achievements goes on and on.

As with almost all parts of the national war effort, the Bell System's role in those war years is chronicled in its matchcovers. The four I have in my World War II Patriotics collection are shown here, but there are bound to be more. A veteran collector in that area, say a Stuart Bergman, for example, would probably be able to come up with other varieties. And, as always, it's the history that makes the hobby come alive.

Bell's relationship with the military certainly didn't end with World War II. Pictured on p. 3 are some Post-War Military/Bell covers.

[Special thanks to Alison Moore, Archivist, Pacific Telesis Group, for appropriate research materials]
[reprinted from RMS Bulletin, Jan/Feb 1997]

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