

Ken Follett

From: Bernard Green [Syemon.Es@btinternet.com]
Sent: 19 January 2001 12:23
To: Ken Follett
Subject: German comms in France

Morning Ken

Re telephone cabling.

In the area around Argentan some memories of a switch board operator passed on to me by her daughter. All handed down memories.

Probably not of great value but may add some background

The majority of circuits were maintained by the French and woe betide the engineers and line repair crews if important circuits were not properly maintained.

Some lines and circuits were accessible only on a section operated by German staff. Some jacks in the rest of the exchange were blocked by wooden inserts to prevent French operators connecting to them. Calls for these lines had to be connected to the German staff for connection.

((On a manual board a subscriber's line is presented on several calling jacks so that every operator can reach a calling jack for that line. There is also an answering jack per line used to answer a call from the subscriber or remote exchange. The answering jack has a lamp or indicator with it to alert the operator. The jacks are spaced around the exchange so each operator has a set of answering jacks in front of her and could normally reach a calling jack for every line. However on large exchanges it was also possible for one operator to put a call through to another operator in the same room if the first operator did not have a calling jack for the required line))

((When a operator has a call for a line she touches the tip of her cord plug to the rim of the nearest jack for that line. This provides an indication of whether that line is busy or free, if free she puts her plug into the jack and rings the line. If busy she advises the caller who can ask to be connected or can wait. This multiple presentation allows any operator to listen in to any line, hence some jacks are blocked to prevent this.))

Minor sabotage in the switch board room was dealt with harshly. One girl's whole family was put on house arrest for two weeks effectively starving them other than the small amount of food smuggled to them.

The tips of operators plugs were weakened so the tip would easily break off and remain in the jack (socket) putting that circuit or line out of action until removed by an engineer. ((Reaching for a jack at arms length it wasn't unknown for a girl to slip and snap her plug in the jack, normally the bent but unbroken plug could be pulled out without damaging the jack.))

The Germans had complained of slow service so the supervisors allowed the operators to drink coffee while working at the switchboard rather than being off duty in the rest room. Naturally coffee was spilt knocking out several of the cord

circuits ((operators plugs and switches)) until replaced.

Reprisals against civilians reduced external wire cutting to a minimum. Though the level of reprisal did give an indication of how important the cut wire was to the Germans. Some wire cutters were hung using the wire they had cut down from the poles. Most wire cutting after that was "to order" to isolate an area or to sell a dummy to the Germans.

She believes Falaise exchange was evacuated when a bag of salt was dropped into a battery and the exchange building filled with gas. ((this would have been chlorine gas))

Additional trunk lines from remote exchanges were added to the board in 1940 or 41 which were alternative routes for the same trunk circuit.

((This fits with comments from my colleague in Germany about double routed trunk lines in the areas under Allied bombing))

In early 1943 some of the French staff were replaced or supplemented by Germans both engineers and switch board girls. Similar events on the railway system and movable bridges. In most cases the German girls were friendly and worked alongside the French with little animosity.

End of the switch board memories

Cable were also run along deep sewers, whether these were primary or back up routes I do not know. I was surprised reading a report from an american signals division who used captured German wires during a siege. They found later that cables from an observation post to the various other posts were in places more than 8 feet deep in the ground.

Best regards

Bernard