

## **“Ma Bell,” the Signal Corps and the Great War**

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World War I was known for major technological advances in modern weapons. Weaponry was not the only technology that was crucial to the fighting, however. New advances in technology for communications played an important role in allowing the battalions to relay messages in an efficient and reliable manner. Once the trenches were dug and the soldiers settled down for a long battle, devising ways to communicate up and down the trench lines was vital to coordinating attacks. Telephone and telegraph lines needed to be erected so that military headquarters could communicate with those on the front.

My great-grandfather, Fred Frank Mondt, was one of those men responsible for laying the lines. Before the war began, he had been a lineman with the Chicago Telephone Company, which was a local branch of the Bell Telephone Company. Due to America’s quick entry into the war, men already trained in telephone and telegraph installation and service were critical to ensuring that American troops would have access to reliable communication technologies during the war. This paper will explain how the Bell Telephone Company became involved in the war service and follow the movements of Mondt’s unit over an eighteen month period as the men progressed from the training camp to the countryside of France. Most of the information comes from articles and letters published in issues of *Bell Telephone News*, which was a company magazine issued monthly by the Bell Telephone Company.

### **Bell Telephone Company History**

The National Bell Telephone Company was created on February 17, 1879 by merging Bell with the New England Telephone Company.<sup>1</sup> Theodore N. Vail, the new company’s general manager, had a vision to take the company to a national level and was vital in the incorporation of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) on February 28, 1885. From the main AT&T companies, twenty-one operating companies branched out to provide direct service to customers in distinct geographic regions.<sup>2</sup> The company took a big leap forward in 1908 when it set out to become a monopoly. Many small telephone companies were absorbed into the Bell branch system.<sup>3</sup>

The original Bell Telephone Company of Illinois was founded in 1878 and three years later became part of the Chicago Telephone Company, which was part of the Bell network of the American Telephone & Telegraph Company. By 1905, the Chicago Telephone Company was operating 100,000 telephones in the city. A 1912 additional of a second building gave Chicago Telephone Company the distinction of having the largest telephone company building in the world.<sup>4</sup>

### **War Recruitment**

The men of the Chicago Telephone Company were recruited to serve in a branch of the United States Army called the Signal Reserve Corps. The U.S. Signal Corps was a small group, comprising less than 4% of the total Army population. As of April 6, 1917, the Signal Corps

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<sup>1</sup> George P. Oslin, *The Story of Telecommunications*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1992), 228.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>4</sup> “Central Engineering Department,” *Bell Telephone News*, June 1916, 3.

only had fifty-five officers and 1,570 men, which were not nearly enough men for active war service in Europe. As it became apparent that the United States would be entering the war, the Signal Corps needed to find an efficient way to get a large amount of men trained in the shortest time possible. The most obvious solution was to recruit men who were already trained in the telephone, telegraph and electrical industries.<sup>5</sup> The United States learned from Britain's mistake of sending skilled men to the trenches. The U.S. Army would avoid this by interviewing the men who were joining the service to determine if they had any special skills or prior training that could be of use behind the trench lines.<sup>6</sup>

In order to expedite this process, the Chief Signal Officer met with Theodore N. Vail and John J. Carty of AT&T and Newcomb Carleton of Western Union Telegraph Company to discuss how to get men already trained in telephone and telegraph equipment operation and maintenance into the war. Preparations had to be made in the event of war so that trained men could be recruited without crippling the telephone and telegraph service in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Men working for telephone and telegraph companies were exempted from the draft due to the critical nature of maintaining the nation's communications infrastructure so only a select number of men could be sent abroad.<sup>8</sup> The Bell men who voluntarily joined the service went almost exclusively into the Signal Reserve Corps. The S.R.C. Telegraph Battalions were "charged with the duty of providing the semi-permanent telephone or telegraph systems from brigade or division headquarters to higher headquarters, or to the base of operations."<sup>9</sup> A term of enlistment in the Signal Reserve Corps was four years. In peacetime, the men would be expected to perform fifteen days of training each summer, for which Bell would grant them leave.<sup>10</sup>

Once war was officially declared, five of the leading engineers and executives from the largest telephone and telegraph companies across the United States were commissioned by the Signal Corps. Their task was to select trained company personnel that could be sent abroad immediately to start communications work while the army trained new men in the United States. Commissioned men included John J. Carty, Chief Engineer of AT&T, Frank B. Jewett, Chief Engineer of Western Electric Company, Charles P. Bruch, Vice-President of the Postal Telegraph Company, G. M. Yorke, Vice-President of the Western Union Telegraph Company and Dr. Robert A. Millikan, Professor of Physics at Chicago University. Due to their quick work, the Army was able to organize twelve battalions of telephone and telegraph men to send to Europe within the first few months of the U.S. involvement in the war.<sup>11</sup>

While training schools prepared men to use specialized equipment, research schools were set up to develop and improve existing technologies for the war environment. Col. Robert A. Millikan led the Science and Research Division of the Signal Corps. Recruits who were studying at the university level in fields such as electricity, chemistry and mechanics were sent to research labs both in the U.S. and Europe to improve signaling methods.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph M. Smith, *History of the 412<sup>th</sup> Battalion, U. S. Signal Corps: A Story of the Valiant Telephone and Telegraph Unit which was Recruited from the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company*, (St. Louis: Southwestern Bell Telephone Co., 1930), 3.

<sup>6</sup> W. V. Bingham, "Army Always on Lookout for Specialists," *New York Times*, April 14, 1918, Accessed April 4, 2011, <http://proquest.umi.com>.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *412<sup>th</sup> Battalion*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> "Signal Corps Organization Completed," *Bell Telephone News*, July 1917, 21.

<sup>9</sup> "Facts About the Signal Corps," *Bell Telephone News*, May 1917, 13.

<sup>10</sup> "Facts About the Signal Corps," 14.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *412<sup>th</sup> Battalion*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

As the initial troops were deployed, training schools were set up to prepare more men for the service. The technical schools that were developed during this time focused on training men on the various types of electrical communications equipment that were to be used in war. The Army needed men that had specialized training. Such training included, but was not limited to, telephone and telegraph engineers, traffic and plant experts, optical experts, linemen, switchboard repairmen, and operators that spoke foreign languages including French, English, and German.<sup>13</sup> The training schools were set up as a combination of Army training and thirteen weeks of technical training. There were five training camps: Camp S.F.B. Morse in Massachusetts, Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, Camp Alfred Vail in New Jersey, and Franklin Cantonment and College Park both in Maryland.

### **Company E, 11<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion**

My great-grandfather was originally commissioned to Company E of the Eleventh Telegraph Battalion. By August 1917, the 11th Telegraph Battalion was fully recruited and composed entirely of Bell employees from the Central Group, which was based in the Midwest. The war department approved of all the men and appointed officers.<sup>14</sup> The formation of the battalion marked the culmination of the war plan that had been developed in the spring. The plan called on the Central Group of the Bell Company to contribute two companies (which were D and E) to the U.S. Signal Corps.<sup>15</sup> Lieutenant Colonel L. D. Wildman, department signal officer of the Central Department of the War Department of the United States, sent a letter of thanks to W. R. McGovern, who was the chief engineer of the Central Group of the Bell Telephone Company. The letter shows the sense of appreciation the War Department felt for the service Bell was providing. It reads, "I feel that personal thanks would be out of place, as we have all been doing simply our patriotic duty; that they have been prompted by the desire to do everything possible to assist the Government."<sup>16</sup>

Company E was initially composed entirely of men from the Chicago Telephone Company, with the exception of the two lieutenants. As the men prepared to ship out, they still lacked a major, but it was expected that someone already established in the Signal Corps would take that role.<sup>17</sup> The Captain of the Eleventh was Virgil E. Code. The two first lieutenants were Walter E. Cole and Frank M. Litter, the sergeant was Lorenz J. Hausheer and the corporals were William W. Fry and Stuart G. McIntosh.<sup>18</sup> Pvt. Mondt was one of 97 privates.<sup>19</sup>

On August 20, 1917, Company E mobilized. For a period of two days, the men of Company E reported to the Municipal Pier in Chicago to be equipped. The men had their first battalion bonding experience, spending two nights together in the makeshift camp at the pier. On August 22, the men of the 11<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion marched through downtown Chicago amid cheers to the Baltimore and Ohio train station, leaving the Municipal Pier to head east. According to *Bell Telephone News*, "they found a large crowd of friends and relatives to bid them good-bye and wish them a safe and speedy return."<sup>20</sup> Additionally, a number of Chicago telephone officials were present. Chief Engineer W. R. McGovern returned from a vacation early to send off the battalion that he had been instrumental in organizing.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *412<sup>th</sup> Battalion*, 4-6.

<sup>14</sup> "Eleventh Battalion Organized," *Bell Telephone News*, August 1917, 14.

<sup>15</sup> "Eleventh Telegraph Battalion Enters Training for Active Service," *Bell Telephone News*, September 1917, 13.

<sup>16</sup> "Eleventh Telegraph Battalion Enters Training," 14.

<sup>17</sup> "Eleventh Battalion Organized," 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> A complete list of the privates is available in Appendix I.

<sup>20</sup> "Eleventh Telegraph Battalion Enters Training," 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Along the way, the train picked up an additional forty-seven men from Detroit and forty-six men from Cleveland to add to the original battalion. The now expanded battalion arrived at Camp Alfred Vail in Monmouth Park, New Jersey. The 11<sup>th</sup> battalion was joined by many other battalions composed of men from the eastern branches of the Bell Telephone Company. The men were to remain at the camp to train until being called for active duty in northern France.<sup>22</sup>

### Life at Camp Alfred Vail

Camp Alfred Vail was the official training camp of the Eastern Division of the Signal Corps. Previously known as Camp Little Silver, it was renamed after Alfred Vail, who built steam propulsion engines that fostered intercontinental communications. Vail, who was also the uncle of AT&T President Theodore N. Vail, was an associate of S. F. B. Morse, who is well known for his invention of the electromagnetic telegraph.<sup>23</sup>

When Company E of the 11<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion arrived at Camp Alfred Vail, they were under the command of Major Russell. Major Russell was a consulting engineer from Boston who had been assigned to lead the 11<sup>th</sup> by the War Department. Life in Camp Alfred Vail was described by Sergeant E. N. Thilmont, who was the Company E correspondent to the *Bell Telephone News*. In a letter dated September 29, 1917, Thilmont describes what life had been like for the men of Company E in the month that they had been in camp. The men had received all of the equipment and were lacking in nothing for their health and comfort. The Rumson Road Club, a ladies' group, had provided them with comfort kits and sweaters.<sup>24</sup>

Camp life involved more than training. The men regularly went for long hikes, many of which took them past some interesting sites. On September 6<sup>th</sup>, the hike ended near the Pullman summer home near Asbury, New Jersey. Upon arrival, the men received coffee, cookies and Pall Mall cigarettes. On the return hike to camp, the men went past President Wilson's summer home, 'Shadow Lawn.' Another hike on the 13<sup>th</sup> resulted in their first overnight experience, which involved pitching dog tents.<sup>25</sup>

Thilmont reported that the Company E boys, under the direction of Sergeant Phil Stockhausen, defeated Company D thirty-two to six in a football game. During the game, the battalion jazz band escorted the players to and from the field and played during breaks in the action. The football game and band entertained a crowd of 1,000 spectators. Thilmont ended his letter by reflecting on the spirit of the men, saying, "In conclusion, you can be sure of one thing from us boys, and that is that we are going to do our duty and do it manfully in a manner characteristic of Bell Telephone men."<sup>26</sup>

The Camp Vail football games were big news and the *Bell Telephone News* kept those at home well informed of the results of important games. In the November 1917 issue, an entire column detailed a recent game between Company E of the 11<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion and Company D of the Second Field Battalion. Company E "fought tooth and nail" to achieve a six to nothing victory over Company D.<sup>27</sup> Despite the imminent war, participating in recreational activities was still important. Reporting on the games gave friends and relatives insight into what their loved ones were experiencing at camp.

Life at Camp Alfred Vail was not all about scenic hikes and football games, however. John Robertson, also of Company E, 11<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion, wrote in a September 11, 1917 letter

<sup>22</sup> "Eleventh Telegraph Battalion Enters Training," 13.

<sup>23</sup> "Camp Alfred Vail," *Bell Telephone News*, December 1917, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Elmer H. Thilmont, "Another Letter from Company E," October 1917, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Thilmont, "Letter," 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> "Exciting Gridiron Battle at Camp Vail," *Bell Telephone News*, November 1917, 10.

to his former coworkers, who submitted the letter to the *Bell Telephone News*, that there was always plenty of work to be done in camp. He gives a very descriptive account of the daily routine, which was as follows:

We are up in the morning at 5:15 and have setting-up exercises until 5:45, breakfast at 6, assemble for drill at 6:45, drill until 8:30; one-half hour rest; drill until 10:30, and a fifteen-minute rest, and then another drill until 11:30. Off for the rest of the morning. Mess at noon. The afternoon is taken up with construction work of telephone and telegraph lines.<sup>28</sup>

Robertson reported that while the work was interesting, it was also very demanding because they were being taught a six-month course in a three-week time frame. Men had to learn basic Army lessons such as personal hygiene, first aid, camp sanitation and general orders for guards. Additionally, the men learned various signals using flags and mirrors as well as telegraph code. The Signal Corps men practiced using convoys of trucks and motorcycles to lay up to twenty miles of wire a day.<sup>29</sup>

One thing that John Robertson missed from back home was sleep. He said, "Uncle Sam's day consists of twenty-four hours if he needs you."<sup>30</sup> Robertson reported that he knew that once training was complete things would only get worse as expectations of their abilities were raised. He also could tell from the amount of equipment arriving daily that it would only be a matter of time before the men left Camp Alfred Vail to serve their country in France.<sup>31</sup>

### **Off to France**

On September 21, 1917, prominent leaders of the Central Group of the Bell Telephone Company visited Camp Alfred Vail, including Central Group President B. E. Sunny, Vice President H. F. Hill, Chief Engineer W. R. McGovern, General Manager W. R. Abbott of the Chicago Telephone Company, General Manager Allard Smith of the Cleveland Telephone Company and General Manager George M. Welch of the Michigan State Telephone Company. Once the group arrived, they were accompanied around the camp by Major Russell, the commander of the 11<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion.<sup>32</sup> The telephone company officials were able to get a sense of the training that the men were receiving and admired the fact that camp was being run in an efficient manner.

Throughout the visit, the closeness that the officials felt to their former employees was evident. They saw the enlisted men as "their Signal Corps" due to the fact that all of the men were Bell employees. An article in the *Bell Telephone News* reported on the event and noted in several places that the officials were there in part to make sure that the men were well cared for. The officials were able to watch the men do their drill and they were extremely impressed in the transformation they saw in the men "who but a few short weeks ago were accountants, clerks, linemen, engineers, etc., engaged in the business of rendering telephone service, but now engaged in the serious business of war."<sup>33</sup>

The telephone officials were also there to offer inspiring words to the men who were about to ship off to France. President Sunny presented a speech in which he congratulated the

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<sup>28</sup> John Robertson, "Plenty of Work for the Signal Corps," October 1917, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Robertson, "Plenty of Work," 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> "Central Group Officers Bid Goodbye to Boys of Eleventh Battalion," *Bell Telephone News*, October 1917, 14.

<sup>33</sup> "Central Group Officers Bid Goodbye," 14.

men on their achievements in camp and hoped that they would use the energy and dedication they put into their work for Bell into the war effort. Mr. McGovern wished the men well, saying:

I know that in the great field before you will give as good an account of yourselves as you have in the past in our business, for I see today that in selecting you from many volunteers we have made no mistake. In saying good-bye to you for the short time you will be away from us, I can voice my sentiments no better than to say, GOD SPEED you to a safe return.<sup>34</sup>

Sergeant Thilmont mentioned the visit from the company officials in his September 29<sup>th</sup> letter. He noted that the visit went well and that the speeches from the officials were impressive. For Thilmont and the men, though, the most exciting part of the visit was learning that President Sunny had donated \$1,000 towards the company fund, which caused the men to shout his name all over camp. President Sunny's sentiments towards his men were clearly more than just words.<sup>35</sup>

Further evidence of the company's commitment to its men can be seen in its policy towards the families of those in the Signal Corps. While those who joined the service were entitled to benefits for their family members from the government, the company acknowledged that these benefits were often not enough. In a letter published in the August 1917 *Bell Telephone News*, President B. E. Sunny wrote that the Employees' (sic) Benefit Fund Committee was "authorized to make allowances to dependents of such employes (sic) in such amounts and for such periods as it may determine...."<sup>36</sup> Bell would continue to take care of its employees' families despite the fact that they were no longer on the company payroll.

### Life "Over There"

Company E, 11<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion left Camp Alfred Vail on October 17, 1918 and boarded the U.S. Transport *Covington* the next day.<sup>37</sup> Private Mondt's discharge papers show that he went with the 11<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion to France on October 18, 1917.<sup>38</sup> The ship arrived at St. Nazaire, France on November 1, 1918.<sup>39</sup> A letter to Mr. Irwin, the *Bell Telephone News* editor, from Sergeant Thilmont dated November 5, 1917 relates the battalion's journey overseas. Thilmont wrote that the trip was relatively pleasant but a few men fell seasick. While Thilmont was obviously unable to detail much about where the men had been since their arrival in France, he did mention the difference in telephone lines. In France, the lines in some places were not attached to poles like in the United States but strung over the tops of buildings.<sup>40</sup> Besides getting used to their new surroundings, the men of the 11<sup>th</sup> had to get used to a new identification. After their arrival in France, they became Company E of the 409<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion and gained a new captain, Forrest E. Brooks. While research did not reveal the exact date of the switch, a letter from Sergeant Thilmont dated January 13, 1918 reflected the change.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>35</sup> Thilmont, "Letter," 16.

<sup>36</sup> B. E. Sunny, "War Service Dependents," *Bell Telephone News*, August 1917, 12.

<sup>37</sup> "They Left Their Imprint on the Map of Europe," *Bell Telephone News*, June 1919, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Fred F. Mondt, U.S. Army Service Record, 1919.

<sup>39</sup> "Their Left Their Imprint," 20.

<sup>40</sup> Elmer H. Thilmont, "Signal Corps Men in France," *Bell Telephone News*, December 1917, 19.

<sup>41</sup> Elmer H. Thilmont, "A Line from Sergeant Thilmont," *Bell Telephone News*, March 1918, 12.

Subsequent letters written to the *Bell Telephone News* reflect the amount of change that the men experienced once in France. First Lieutenant Fred Norwood noted in a letter dated January 1, 1918 that the men were slowly coming around to living the lifestyle of a soldier. One major change was their level of hygiene. The men wore the same clothes every day and seldom had clean clothes to change into. Norwood also mentioned the fact that the troops had learned to economize and make do with what they had.<sup>42</sup> On March 18, 1918, Sergeant Thilmont wrote that despite their busy schedule, the men still found time to have some entertainment. When not on duty, the most popular way to stave off boredom was to read letters from home as well as the European editions of American newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune* and *New York Times*.<sup>43</sup>

One change that was most difficult to get used to was that of a shortage of supplies. Thilmont's March 18 letter thanked former co-workers for sending packages containing cigarettes. On April 16, 1918, Lieutenant Charles F. Moran said that while cigarette prices were slightly lower in France, the men were only allowed to buy two packages at a time. Moran hoped that those back home would be able to help out with the shortage by sending packages of cigarettes overseas. Moran described other shortages as well, such as "shaving cream, tooth powder and paste, talcum powder, toilet soap and shoe paste (red)."<sup>44</sup> Moran also wanted those back home to send more reading material. While the letters and newspapers that Thilmont mentioned in his letters were available, Moran said that the men would also like magazines and fiction books to help pass the time. The men also missed reading *Bell Telephone News* and requested extra copies.

Lieutenant Norwood described the relationship between the soldiers and the French countryside residents as good. He said that they were well cared for and the French were treating them well. Norwood lamented the fact that the French did not seem to share the same types of entertainment as the Americans. "They do not seem to have any games here that we can attend, not even a horse race, nor have we seen anyone in this town following the ponies."<sup>45</sup> The American soldiers had to find or make their own entertainment, which was why reading was popular.

#### **409<sup>th</sup> on the Move**

Around June 1918, the American soldiers who were behind the front lines were given permission to write about the various towns and places where they were located. Prior to this, letters home only described stopping in nameless towns or regions. On June 9, 1918, Thilmont revealed that after finishing the installation of 100 miles of line in Cote d'Ore, the battalion moved to Anton Saone-et-Loire. By this point in the war, only forty of the original 100 members of Company E remained, the rest being sent to various places around France to perform maintenance work. On June 1, Company E had set out to construct more telephone line circuits. After three days of travel, the company was in the valley of the Loire, which was near Tours. Once there, the men set up tents and explored their new surroundings. When not at work, the men went into Tours to ride the street car or visit the local Y.M.C.A.<sup>46</sup>

Some of the locations where soldiers were stationed remained unknown until after the war. Letters from soldiers in June 1918 revealed many of these locations. The June 1919 issue of the *Bell Telephone News* helps to fill in some of the gaps and explained what the men of

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<sup>42</sup> Thilmont, "A Line from Sergeant Thilmont," 13.

<sup>43</sup> Elmer H. Thilmont, "With Our Signal Corps Boys in France," *Bell Telephone News*, May 1918, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Charles F. Moran, "Signal Corps Boys Thank Mr. Hill," *Bell Telephone News*, May 1918, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Thilmont, "A Line from Sergeant Thilmont," 13.

<sup>46</sup> Elmer H. Thilmont, "Sergeant Thilmont Writes from Tours," *Bell Telephone News*, July 1918, 15.

Company E experienced during their time in France. On November 9, the company arrived at Nevers and received “motor trucks, motorcycles, automobiles, tools and materials.”<sup>47</sup> They began to work on a line that would connect St. Nazaire to the general headquarters located in Chaumont.

On December 15<sup>th</sup>, Company E was split in half, with one half of the men going to Longy, where the other half met up with them again right before New Year’s Eve. Company E kept busy moving all over France to aid in the construction of telephone and telegraph lines: on February 3 the company was in Mersault and on April 20 the company was in Autun. On June 25, the company was split yet again, with half the men in Geivres and the other half in Nerondes by July 11.<sup>48</sup>

On October 8, 1918, the men of Company E were reunited and moved to the front lines to join the Second Army in battle. The men were assigned to the 28<sup>th</sup> Division, which was largely made up of men from Pennsylvania. The new division was stationed at Hamonville, which had been largely destroyed by bombings. The men spent their days laying lines and spent their nights in the ruins of the bombed houses. By the time the armistice was called, the men were in yet another location, Vevil.<sup>49</sup>

After the armistice, the entire 409<sup>th</sup> was assigned to the Fifth Army Corps to aid in the construction of lines for the occupation. A signal office was set up at Longwy, Lorraine with the men running lines to Luxembourg, Arlon, Belgium and Montemedy. On December 27, the battalion moved to Toul and by January 15, 1919 was headed to Mont de Vignoble. On March 24, the men arrived at Brest and remained until they sailed for home on April 5 on the *Plattsburg*.<sup>50</sup>

The 409<sup>th</sup> arrived in New York on April 14 and was sent to Camp Merritt, New Jersey. The men departed from New Jersey on April 23, at which time they were sent to camps close to their hometowns. The Chicago men of the 409<sup>th</sup> were discharged from Camp Grant, Illinois on April 28. Most of the men went back to work immediately and resumed their old jobs within the Bell system.<sup>51</sup>

While over 200 men went off to France as part of the 409<sup>th</sup>, only sixty-seven returned aboard the *Plattsburg*. Most of the rest were transferred to other Signal Corps units during their time in France. Pvt. Mondt was one such person. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Mondt did not return home until May 8<sup>th</sup>, when his ship docked in New York.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the 409<sup>th</sup> lost six men in France. Edward Caldwell Field died in an automobile accident and Charles E. Galavan, Robert Cline, Jr., Stephen M. O’Brien, Warden D. Miller and James M. West died from disease.<sup>53</sup>

### **Bell on the Home Front**

The Bell employees that had joined the Signal Corps were far from the only members of the Bell family that were involved in the war effort. Besides providing updates from the various battalions filled with former Bell men, the *Bell Telephone News* encouraged participation from those still in the United States. As early as August 1917, the magazine was urging its

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<sup>47</sup> “They Left Their Imprint,” 20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>51</sup> “They Left Their Imprint,” 18.

<sup>52</sup> “Chicago Troops Reach New York,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 9, 1919, Accessed April 4, 2011, <http://proquest.umi.com>.

<sup>53</sup> “They Left Their Imprint,” 18.



subscribers to write to soldiers. A page long supplement went over the various rules for writing to those who were in service.<sup>54</sup>

Bell also urged its employees to support the war through Liberty Bond drives, an effort which was often depicted in the cover art of *Bell Telephone News*. The company offered to set up various payment plans so that employees could buy bonds directly out of their paychecks.<sup>55</sup> In order to encourage a high participation rate, it was noted that the money from the Liberty Bonds would go to fund officer training, the building of barracks, and the general maintenance of the training camps.<sup>56</sup>

About 4,600 Bell employees volunteered for the service by the time the September 1917 *Bell Telephone News* was published. Those 4,600 men were equivalent to ten percent of the total male employee population between the ages of twenty-one and thirty.<sup>57</sup> Men that did not join the Signal Corps still had an important role to play in the war, however. With the United States at war, maintaining and expanding the telephone and telegraph infrastructure of the nation was a critical task. During the course of the war, the number of telephone lines connecting to Washington, D.C. doubled. Lines were improved so that they could handle a higher volume of traffic so that any possible war emergencies could be handled efficiently. Bell employees were also partnered with the U.S. Army and Navy to complete inspections of their communication systems in training camps all across the nation.<sup>58</sup> In 1917 alone, Bell strung over two million miles of telephone wire throughout the country.<sup>59</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Whether on the home front or in France, the Bell Telephone Company employees were very involved in the war effort. Modern warfare required highly specialized training in order to provide adequate communications. During the war, the *Bell Telephone News* became more than just a company magazine. It was a vital way to disseminate information about the company's involvement in the war effort as well as a place for soldiers to communicate with a large audience about their war experiences. Since no letters from my great-grandfather survive today, this source has been invaluable in tracing at least part of his troop movements during his time in France. Prior to this, my family has relied on second-hand stories from my grandfather telling about his father riding a motorcycle to relay messages during the war. While research failed to uncover how long Pvt. Mondt was with the 409<sup>th</sup>, no doubt he experienced many of the same events and problems such as those that Thilmont, Robertson and Moran recorded in their letters.

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<sup>54</sup> "Supplement," *Bell Telephone News*, August 1917.

<sup>55</sup> "Second Liberty Loan," *Bell Telephone News*, October 1917, 12.

<sup>56</sup> "Back America's Bullets with Liberty Bonds," *Bell Telephone News*, October 1917, 13.

<sup>57</sup> "War Activities of the Bell System," *Bell Telephone News*, September 1917, 9.

<sup>58</sup> "War Activities of the Bell System," 9.

<sup>59</sup> "\$118,000,000 in Year for Wire Extension," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 12, 1918, Accessed April 4, 2011, <http://proquest.umi.com>.