

Messages to Moscow

*The Moscow Link has provided
25 years of communications.*

Story by LCDR Janet A. Clement

It's 10 a.m. in the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon. The watch team is ready to send a message to Moscow on the hot line.

"Everything: the hills set beneath the moon, the dark red clover fields, the moist forest paths and the magnificent sunset — everything around me seemed beautiful, and there was not a single flaw."

An hour later the Soviets send, "So-called machines were developed in the cradles of civilization, not only the simple implements for lifting water (the 'shadoof' in Egypt and the 'chigir' in Mesopotamia), but also the 'sakiz'...."

Is this a super-secret code? Not at all. Every other hour, around the clock, watch teams in the Pentagon receive an encoded test message from Moscow in Russian Cyrillic characters.

On alternate hours, their Soviet counterparts receive similar messages from the United States in English. Both are routine tests of the emergency communication system.

Known officially as the Direct Communications Link, the "hot line" celebrated its 25th anniversary Aug. 30, 1988. It is often called the Moscow Link, or simply MoLink in military parlance.

The Washington and Moscow hot

line was established after President John F. Kennedy expressed concern that during the tension-filled Cuban missile crisis, communications between the U.S. President and the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev sometimes took as long as 18 hours.

MoLink provides a permanent, reliable and private means of direct communication for the heads of the United States and the Soviet governments. Its mission is to prevent misunderstandings by either side that could lead to hostilities and possible nuclear war.

Contrary to the image promoted in "B" movies or dime novels, the hot line is not a red telephone on the President's desk. Instead, in a small, narrow office with worn blue carpeting, just off the Joint Chiefs of Staff corridor, messages for MoLink are typed up on computer terminals, appearing as white letters on a blue screen with a red border. Almost instantaneously they appear on computer screens in the Soviet Union, eight time zones away.

In 1988 the MoLink was upgraded from a sluggish teletype machine, printing out 66 words a minute, to equipment that spews out 1,800 words a minute. A facsimile service was recently added for the rapid transmission of maps, charts, graphs and signed documents.

The United States and the Soviet Union have agreed telephone conversations are more likely to be misunderstood, are more difficult to translate and may encourage a response prior to consulting with advisors. Therefore, all communication is via computer.

Although military officials decline to discuss how often the hot line has been used, U.S. Presidents have said it was invaluable during the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars, when, among other things, the United States wished to prevent Soviet misunderstanding of U.S. fleet movements in the Mediterranean. Officials have also been quoted as saying that in 1979 President Jimmy Carter warned Premier Leonid Brezhnev that unless Soviet troops were removed from Afghanistan, "U.S.-Soviet relations worldwide" would be jeopardized.

But the almost 50 different test messages the United States sends repeatedly over a six month period are without a hint of controversy or political or religious overtones and read much like, "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog." Also transmitted are passages on poinsettias or pieces on boomerangs. Texts are frequently taken from almanacs, encyclopedias or literature.

Twice a year, at New Year's and on

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the hot line's anniversary, the two countries exchange greetings. It is the chance to say something a little more personal such as, "We have completed another year and would like to congratulate you and your workers. We are looking forward to another good year."

"Sometimes the Russian messages deal with esoteric aspects of nature such as pollination," said Army Major Gerald A. Lechlitter, one of five Presidential translators in the inter-service MoLink office. He, along with another Army officer, a Marine and two Air Force officers, rotate standing eight-hour watches with one of six senior noncommissioned officer communicators.

"It is a job that is important because of its 'what-if' characteristics," said Lechlitter.

The watch-standers must be highly trained to work the hot line. Before being assigned to a 42-month tour of duty in the MoLink office, presidential translator candidates, already proficient in Russian, undergo a 12-week intensive one-on-one tutoring program through the Defense Language Institute.

When Lechlitter isn't translating a test, service or governmental message, he improves his language proficiency by reading Russian publications or translating long Russian passages into English.

He enjoys the mental gymnastics his work requires, likening it to working a *New York Times* crossword puzzle. "You have to know the nuances of your own language," he said, "because you have lots of choices and must come up with the right ones."

"You also have to be inquisitive and can't settle for preconceived ideas because we are dealing with a system of unlimited possibilities,"

Translators man the hot line to Moscow 24 hours a day. The Link is continually tested, using innocuous info ranging from poinsettias to boomerangs.

he continued. However, if the text is ambiguous in Russian, it is not the translator's job to clarify the passage, it should remain ambiguous, he said.

"I sought this work out. I don't think you can buy this training," said Air Force Captain Ron R. Maynard. He learned Russian at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif., and at Syracuse University in New York.

"This training is invaluable because of the depth of exposure. You can't get it anywhere else. It is a real intellectual challenge," he added. In preparation for his new job, he already has spent more than \$150 on Russian dictionaries.

Hot line messages were initially sent through an underwater cable and land-based microwave facilities with a backup radio circuit via Morocco. Then, in 1978, two satellite transmission paths were established to increase reliability and transmission quality.

Currently, MoLink uses an overland and underwater cable with main stopping points in Washington, New York and Helsinki; the Soviet MOLNIYA satellite, and the U.S. International Telecommunications Satellite. The INTELSAT coverage is received from a single satellite orbiting at the same speed as the earth's

rotation, 22,500 miles over the mid-Atlantic at the equator.

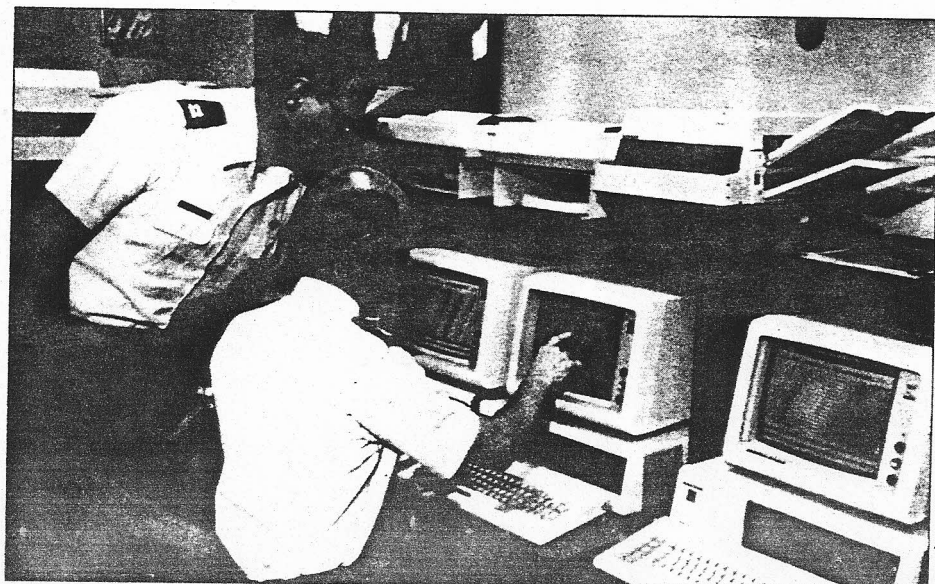
Servicing these satellites are earth stations located at Fort Detrick, Md., and Etam, W. Va., in the United States and two in Dubna, north of Moscow.

Master Chief Cryptologic Technician (Operations) Douglas H. Larson, MoLink's senior technical expert and communicator, and the only Navy man on the 13-member staff, said redundancy has been built into the system so the communication lines will always be open. In the more than 25 years of operation, MoLink has never experienced a complete loss of communication.

In June each year Larson and Army Colonel Thomas C. O'Keefe, Branch Chief of MoLink and senior Presidential translator, meet with their Soviet counterparts in Washington, D.C., and then again in November in Moscow to discuss improvements to the system.

"We are paid for what we know and how fast we can react to a situation, rather than how busy we are kept all day long," said Larson. "Hopefully we won't need to use our expertise." □

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Department of Defense photo