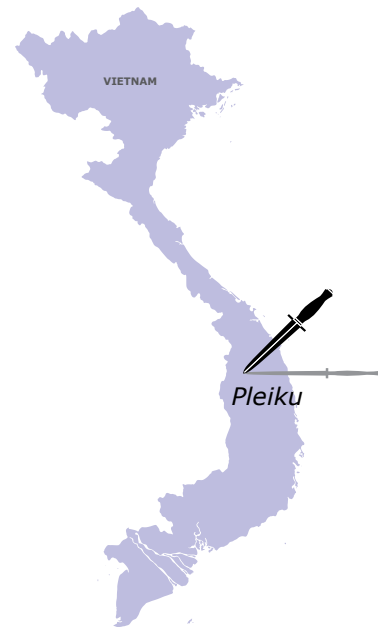


Attack on the Pleiku Radio Station



by Robert W. Jones Jr.

AN integral part of the U.S. Army involvement in Vietnam was Psychological Operations (PSYOP). By 1968, the PSYOP campaign was being coordinated by the 4th PSYOP Group. Products were disseminated by a variety of methods, one being radio broadcasts. This article focuses on the radio station operated by the 7th PSYOP Detachment in Pleiku and an enemy attack in March 1968 that temporarily silenced its broadcasts. It is also the story of one soldier, First Lieutenant Michal A. Merkel, one

of many PSYOP soldiers who served in Vietnam and who was killed during the 24 March 1968 attack.

In late 1967, U.S. Military Assistance Command–Vietnam (MACV) placed a 50,000-watt AM radio transmitter in Pleiku to broadcast to the northern provinces of South Vietnam. “The Voice of the Army and the People of Vietnam” became one of the most powerful radio transmitters in the country.¹ Still, the radio station was a “bare bones” PSYOP operation created with modular vans, maintenance vans, and 2½-ton trucks. The equipment had been flown in from Okinawa, the home of the 7th PSYOP Group. To help set up the station, two civilian radio technicians, Mr. Bill Hamby

and Mr. Bill Howard, flew in from the Sacramento Army Depot, California. For protection, the equipment was partially dug in and barricaded with dirt-filled 55-gallon drums covered with sandbags. The “Voice” became operational in December 1967.²

While it was in an ideal location for broadcasting, the site was remote and tactically exposed. The radio station was essentially an outpost—it was not inside any unit’s defensive perimeter. As such, the small compound was very vulnerable to attack. Only barbed wire and concertina fences surrounded the outlying compound. A single wooden guard tower provided early warning. It was guarded by a Vietnamese Army (ARVN) squad. The 23rd ARVN Division was responsible for outer perimeter security in Pleiku. What distinguished the compound from the other American facilities in Pleiku was the 250-foot radio antenna. It quickly became a Viet Cong (VC) rocket and mortar aiming post and rounds were received almost daily.³



MACV shoulder patch.

In the darkness of Saturday night, 23 March 1968, a team of VC sappers kept edging closer and closer to the American perimeter. Their target, while physically small, had a tremendous capacity to send broadcasts. While aimed at the northern part of II Corps and I Corps, this station could be heard in North Vietnam. The 250-foot tall radio antenna stuck up like a giant aiming stake that oriented the camouflaged demolition men as they silently approached the outside defenses. The American radio station was a thorn in the Communists’ side because “Voice of the Army” broadcasted well into North Vietnam. The enemy was determined to silence it. At approximately 0215 hours, 24 March 1968, about twenty Communist

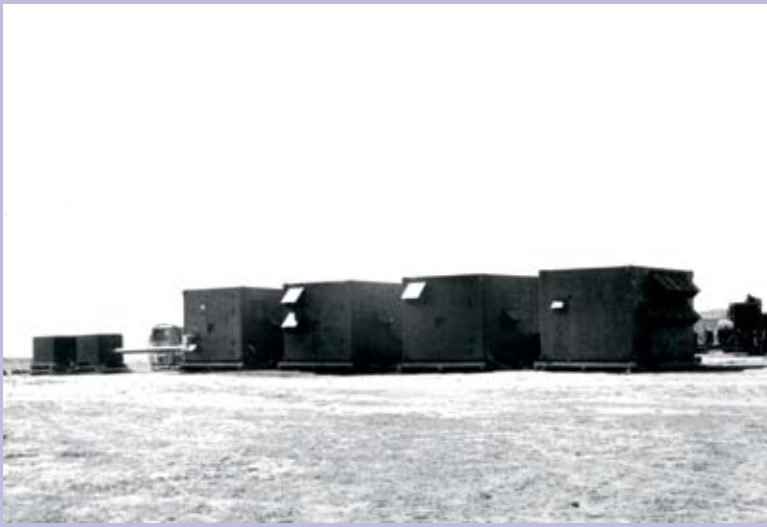
Various PSYOP units from the 7th PSYOP Group in Okinawa, Japan, had done temporary duty service in Vietnam since 1965. By 1967, the demand for PSYOP led to the formation of the 4th PSYOP Group in December 1967. The 4th PSYOP Group was formed from the existing 6th PSYOP Battalion and its companies already serving separately in Vietnam. The 7th PSYOP Group remained on Okinawa, responsible for the rest of Asia. Still, it continued to provide assistance to Vietnam.

*4th PSYOP
Group Dis-
tinctive Unit
Insignia*



*7th PSYOP
Group Dis-
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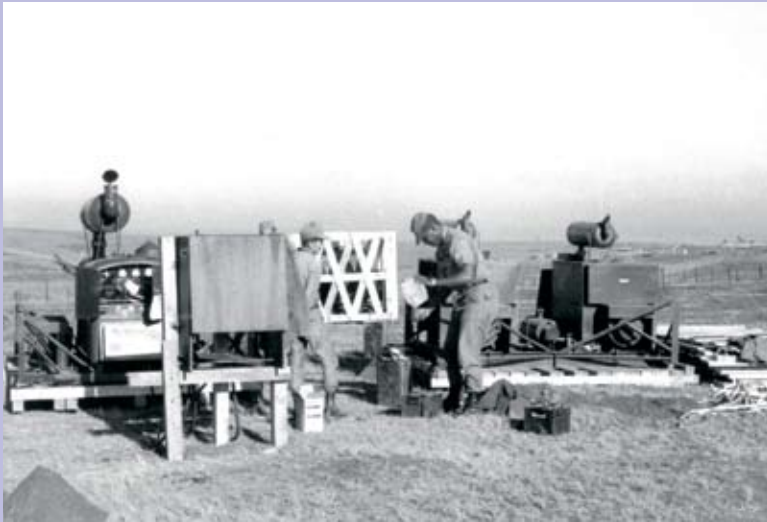




The radio station main component, the TRT-22 before (above) and after (above right) force protection is added.



View of the force protection for the radio system. The 55-gallon drums were filled with dirt. Two rows of drums served as the base with a third row on top to protect the facility from rocket and mortar fire.



Installing the generator power distribution system. The generators provided the power for the 50,000 watt radio station.

By early 1968, the area around Pleiku had become a huge cluster of bases. Within a 15-kilometer circle of Pleiku city were compounds and base camps for the ARVN II Corps Headquarters, MACV II Corps Advisory Group, 4th Infantry Division, the 23rd ARVN Division, the 20th Engineer Brigade, the Pleiku Air Force Base, and several Special Forces units. In perspective, the area was the home to 18,000 to 25,000 American and Vietnamese soldiers.



Soldiers of the 7th PSYOP Group take a break while building the site. Civilian radio technician Bill Hamby is at the right.



A variety of major military headquarters were located in and around Pleiku, a major city in central South Vietnam.



View of the completed radio station from the guard tower. The TRT-22 transmitting modules are in the center of the stacked 55-gallon drum barrier. The 250-foot antenna base is clearly visible. To the left of the photo are the generators and the generator mechanic's shed.



Pleiku radio site perimeter activity. The M48 tank had broken down on the road passing the compound. Both ARVN and US units patrolled the Pleiku area around the radio station. Also visible is a section of the barbed-wire fence around the site.



Wooden guard tower at the site. The tower was manned solely by PSYOP personnel.



Tent for the ARVN guards. A squad of ARVN guarded the entrance to the station. Internal security was provided by the PSYOP soldiers. In the right rear of the photo are the generator sets.



One of the TRT-22 modules—the soldier leaning into the door is First Lieutenant Michal Merkel.



Team bunker being built at the radio station. This is the bunker where the team gathered during the attack.



Photo courtesy of Douglas Elwell

The AM single frequency radios were dropped by small parachute over North and South Vietnam.

The radio station was a critical component of the American and Vietnamese PSYOP campaign. The Americans bought tens of thousands of small battery-powered transistor radios and distributed them all over the country so that people could listen to the broadcasts. The first radios had fixed frequencies and thus could be easily jammed by the Communists. Later U.S. Army PSYOP provided tunable transistor radios, so that listeners could change stations when Radio Hanoi began jamming on a specific frequency.



Example of a PSYOP booklet dropped over North Vietnam explaining how to use the accompanying transistor radio.



sappers broke through the wire surrounding the radio station as a barrage of B-40 rockets hit the compound. The rockets awoke the sleeping American soldiers of the 7th PSYOP Detachment (Provisional). Occasional mortar and B-40 rocket harassment fire was common at night, but this was to be an extraordinary attack.⁴

The explosions prompted Captain Michael Jordan, Mobile Advisory Team 21, and First Lieutenant Michal Merkel, the 7th PSYOP Detachment commander, to put on flak jackets and grab their weapons. "Since there were so many rockets falling between the bunker and the sleeping huts, we determined that it would be best to remain where we were," said Jordan.⁵ Suddenly a rocket slammed through the corrugated metal roof of the building and exploded, seriously wounding Merkel. Jordan, wounded in the left leg and face, administered first aid to Merkel in the darkened hut. Then, Jordan dragged Merkel outside to the nearest trench for protection. As Specialist Fourth Class Henry Baldys and Sergeant Jimmie Carroll made their way to the team bunker, they came across the wounded Captain Jordan. Helping him to the bunker, Sergeant Carroll was wounded in the back by AK-47 fire. Inside the bunker they encountered Specialist Fourth Class Norman Batino and Specialist Five Roy Inman. They had made it there only minutes after sappers had tossed a satchel charge inside. Luckily, the heavily sandbagged and log-reinforced bunker was not seriously damaged.⁶

Specialists Batino and Baldys realized that Merkel was missing. Looking outside they saw that the unit orderly room and supply room were on fire. The two men crept outside and covered one another for thirty yards as they moved under fire to the trench. They found Merkel lying in the trench unconscious. Batino helped Baldys get Merkel into a fireman's carry. Then Baldys, covered by Batino, carried Merkel back to the bunker while the attack raged about them. Just as they got inside the team bunker, a tremendous explosion rocked the compound. Looking out through the dust and debris, the men saw that the radio antenna had been knocked down.⁷

The sappers had succeeded with their main target, but their mission was not complete. They began throwing satchel charges into the sandbagged radio modules that were the core of the transmitter system. While the PSYOPers defended themselves with small arms fire from their bunker, the ARVN unit responsible for perimeter security broke inside the compound to counterattack and hunt down the sappers. By 0330 AM, it was quiet—the VC had been dispersed. The Communists lost a half dozen sappers and the Americans had three wounded, one seriously.⁸

The cost of the VC attack cannot just be measured in damaged and destroyed equipment. The U.S. Army suffered three wounded. All the wounded were evacuated to the hospital at Pleiku Airbase. Merkel died of his extensive wounds shortly after arrival.

The next morning, Radio Hanoi bragged about the successful attack against "The Voice" radio station. MACV

was determined to get the station back on the air as soon as possible. The 7th PSYOP Group in Okinawa quickly responded by shipping a replacement antenna and radio modules to Vietnam. Civilian contractors were flown in from the United States to set up the radio antenna. With all of the radio modules replaced and the antenna up, "The Voice" was back on the air ten days after the 24 March attack.⁹

First Lieutenant Michal A. Merkel, a 1965 Electrical Engineering graduate of Purdue University, was awarded the Bronze Star, Purple Heart, National Defense Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal, and National Order of Vietnam, Fifth Class. His wife Patricia, daughter Terri, parents, and brother David survived him. Merkel's Bronze Star Medal citation captures his contribution to the American effort during the Vietnam War:



Second Lieutenant Michal Merkel at graduation from Signal Officer Basic Course in 1967. A 1965 Electrical Engineering graduate of Purdue University, he received his commission through the ROTC program.

... Of primary significance . . . was Lieutenant Merkel's brilliant work in the establishment of a 50,000 watt radio transmitting station at Pleiku, Republic of Vietnam. As a direct result of his technical expertise and relentless dedication to duty, he overcame numerous technical difficulties and complications to insure rapid construction of the station. Despite a shortage of trained administrative and maintenance personnel, Lieutenant Merkel completed the arduous and extraordinarily difficult construction of the transmitter in minimum time. First Lieutenant Merkel's professional competence and achievements were in keeping with the highest traditions

of the United States Army and reflected great credit upon himself and the military service.¹⁰

During 2007, the 4th PSYOP Group will dedicate the new Media Operations Complex in memory of First Lieutenant Michal A. Merkel. The proposed memorialization plaque reads "1LT Merkel made the ultimate sacrifice for his nation and the people of the Republic of Vietnam. His sacrifice will serve to inspire all PSYOP dissemination soldiers, past, present, and future as to the significance and danger of their mission." ♣

This article would have not been possible without the contributions of Mr. Douglas Elwell, 3rd PSYOP Battalion, Major Nicholas Kinkead, USASOC G-8, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Dulaney, Mr. Bill Hamby, Mrs. Terri Goodrich, and Mr. David Merkel.

Endnotes

- 1 The technical nomenclature for the radio station is the AN/TRT-22, 50kW AM Radio Broadcast System, and AN/TRR-18, Receiver System.
- 2 Douglas P. Elwell, e-mail to Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 9 August 2006, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 Dr. William W. Forgey, e-mail to Major Nicholas Kinkead, 6 October 2005, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Herbert A. Friedman, "Vietnam Order of Battle for Psychological Operations," 18 January 2006, <http://www.psywarrior.com/VietnamOBPSYOP>; David Sage, "VC Attack Pleiku Radio Station," *Credibilis*, Volume III, Number 4, April 1968, 1, 4.
- 5 Sage, "VC Attack Pleiku Radio Station," 1,4.
- 6 Sage, "VC Attack Pleiku Radio Station," 4.
- 7 Sage, "VC Attack Pleiku Radio Station," 4.
- 8 Dr. William W. Forgey, e-mail to Major Nicholas Kinkead, 6 October 2005, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 Dr. William W. Forgey, e-mail to Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 7 September 2006, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Bill Hamby, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones, Jr., 26 September 2006, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Department of the Army, Bronze Star Medal citation for 1st Lieutenant Michal A. Merkel, 9 April 1968, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

Location of the Media Operations Complex, Smoke Bomb Hill, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.



The USASOC Media Operations Complex at Fort Bragg.

