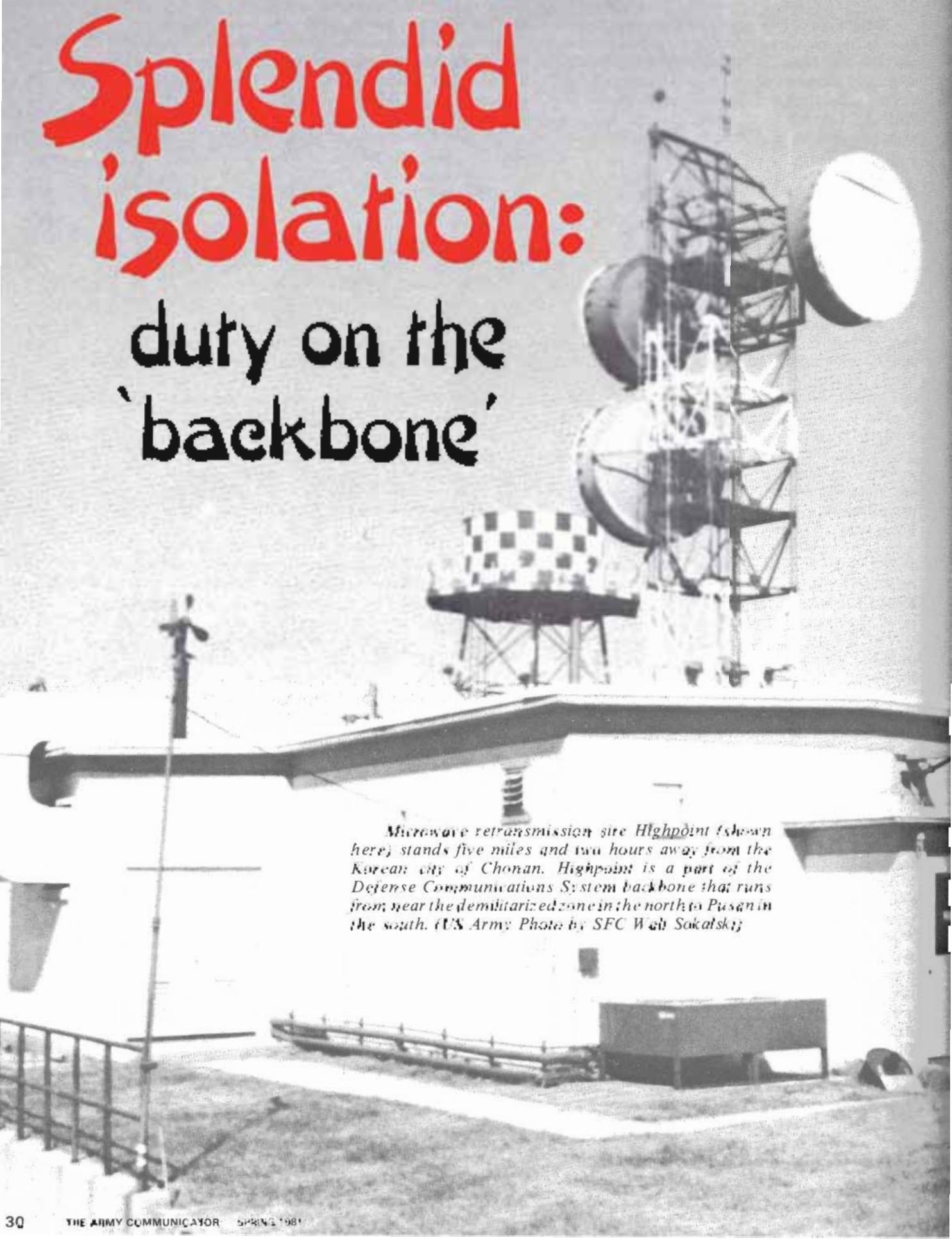


Splendid isolation: duty on the 'backbone'



Microwave retransmission site Highpoint (shown here) stands five miles and two hours away from the Korean city of Chonan. Highpoint is a part of the Defense Communications System backbone that runs from near the demilitarized zone in the north to Pusan in the south. (U.S. Army Photo by SFC Walt Sakatski)



Story and photos by SFC Walt Sokalski

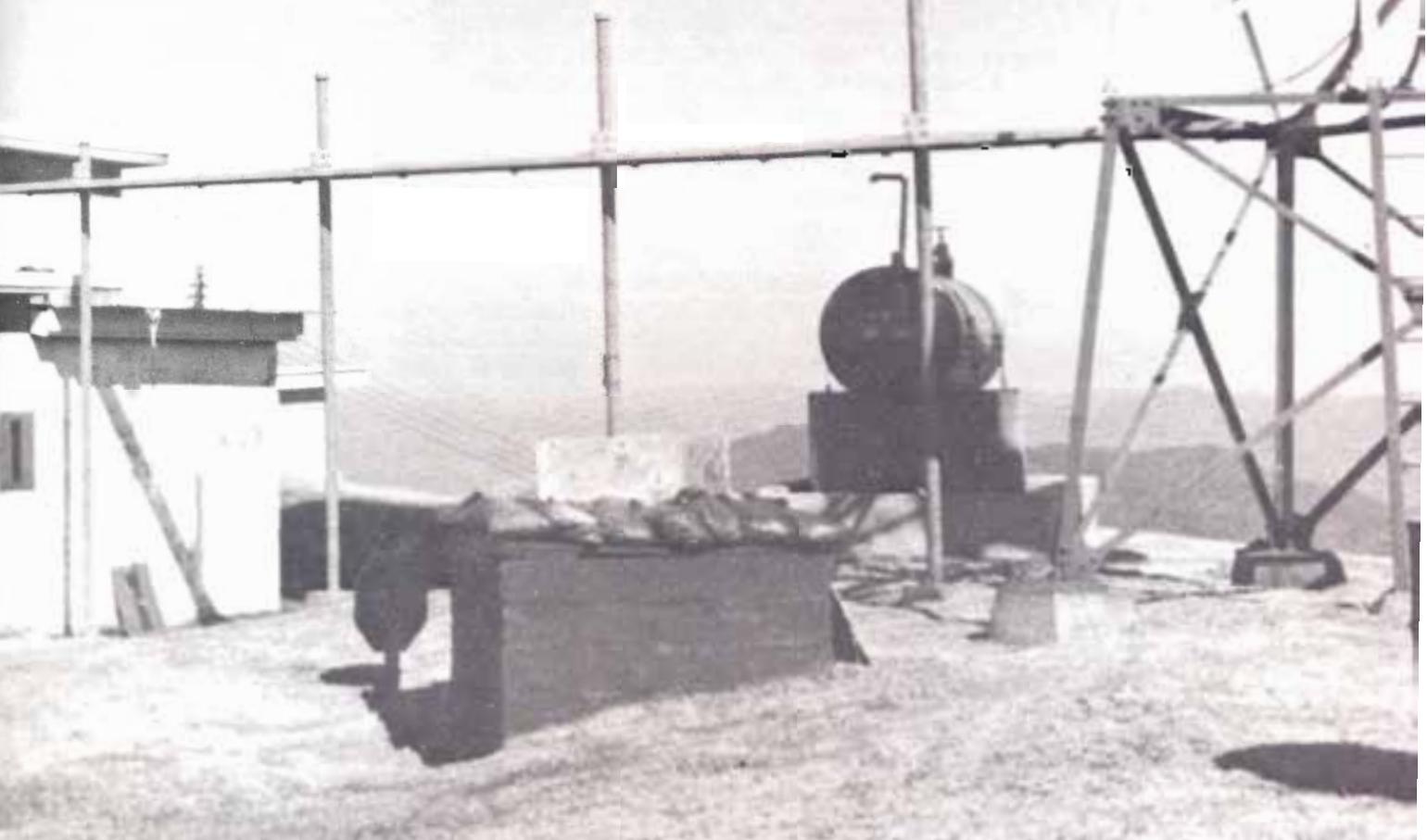
Korea is known as a remote tour of duty. First Signal Brigade soldiers assigned to one of the microwave sites along the "backbone," the term "remote" takes on new meaning.

Many of these sites are accessible only in a four-wheel drive vehicle. Although the site may be only 15 to 20 miles from a military installation, a trip by "road" to the site may take up to two hours along winding mountain roads. A few sites can only be reached by air or by a two-to-three-hour climb up the face of the mountain. Mail runs are infrequent. Trips down the mountain into the city are even more so.

Yet, these remotest of remote assignments are popular. Soldiers sent to a site for a six-month tour of duty often volunteer to remain "at the top of the world" for their entire year in Korea.

Facilities at the sites are often better than those at sea-level garrisons. Dining facilities are excellent. The cooks who prepare the meals are all reportedly "top notch."

These sites are also living proof that the "NCO runs the Army." Senior NCOs are the facility chiefs, and the sites are their domain. There are officers appointed as officers-in-charge at each site, but they rarely live at the facility.





The Namsan microwave facility located on Namsan (South Mountain) in the center of Seoul is the hub of the Defense Communications System backbone in Korea. (US Army Photo by SFC Walt Sokalski)



(Above, top) The Song So satellite facility is located on the outskirts of Taegu. The area in front of the antenna dome will be the site of a second antenna. (Above) The dramatic, modern Seoul skyline reflects Korea's fast growing economy. (US Army Photos by SFC Walt Sokalski)

The Namsan Microwave Facility is somewhat typical of the sites on the "backbone." Known as "the Hub," the facility sits on a mountain overlooking the main military compound it supports, Yongsan Compound.

Site chief, SFC James Carico and his staff maintain microwave and VHF communications in support of US Forces Korea and Eighth Army. Also perched on Namsan with Carico and company is the Flight Operations Center-South belonging to the 125th Air Traffic Control Battalion. A transmitter site for the American Forces Korea Network also occupies the site's buildings. Similar set-ups of ATC and AFKN personnel and equipment exist at the other sites. But there's a dramatic difference at Namsan. The mountain is in the center of Seoul. The site has its advantages and disadvantages, according to Carico. The big plus is that "civilization" is located at the base of the mountain just a short cab ride away. Because of their location, the site personnel enjoy all the advantages of remote-site life, such as good food and facilities without having to do without some of the benefits of garrison living, such as the PX, movie theater and other recreational activities.

Being the most accessible site, "the Hub" is the brigade's showplace. Visits by V.I.P.'s interested in the brigade's microwave operations are common.

Namsan and the other sites on the backbone transmit communications traffic up and down the Korean Peninsula. They are also Eighth Army's link into the worldwide Defense Communications System (DCS).

Funneling all this communications traffic into the DCS is the job of the Song So Microwave site. The site takes the microwave signal from the backbone and translates it into a signal capable of being retransmitted by the Song So Satellite Terminal.

The satellite communications terminal located on the outskirts of Taegu came on line in early 1974. It links the US military in Korea with other military installations around the world via the DCS "stationary satellite" over the Pacific.

Both the satellite terminal and the microwave site are undergoing extensive upgrading. The work is being accomplished by members of ACC's Communications-Electronic Engineering Installation Agency at Fort Huachuca. When completed, the project will bring both facilities up to today's level of technology in the field of communications. It will greatly enhance the quality and quantity of communications links in and out of Korea.

Yes, Korea is a remote tour. But through the efforts of the 1st Signal Brigade, the US military in Korea is not completely shut off from the rest of the world.