

COMMUNICATIONS & THEIR LIMITATIONS FROM YEARS GONE BY[©]

by Dan Pemble, Kissimmee, Florida – July 21, 2025

As a formative youngster, I remember the telephone box on the wall. It had a hand crank on its side to generate a slight electrical charge to ring a bell and to alert a “switchboard operator”. It had a hand-held earphone and the mike was built into the box itself. So, to make a call, you first picked up the handset from its cradle, then turned the crank for a few revolutions, and stated: “operator”. When the operator answered, you advised the number you wished to call. I long have remembered that one of my Aunt’s numbers was simply “44”! Interesting enough, especially in smaller towns, everyone knew the “operators” (employees of the local phone companies) by name; so, as an example, instead of simply stating “operator”, it became quite common to pick up the phone and say “Hi Helen will you please connect me to number “XX”! Needless to say, making an international call on such an antiquated system was not possible! So, we were relegated to writing letters and sending cards – via a “slow boat to China”, as the expression goes!



In line with the subject of this article, I want to share with YOU some of my own earlier communications limitations experiences in offices I managed at various world-wide locations.

During 1978-1979 (46 years ago), I managed an office located in the British Airways facility at London’s Heathrow Airport. I had just 2 methods of communicating to/from my home office in Long Beach, California: by telephone or via written messages sent/received by British Airways SITA network connection. A definition of the SITA network from Wikipedia is: “SITA is a multi-national information technology company providing IT and telecommunication services to the air transport industry. The company provides its services to around 400 members and 2,500 customers worldwide, which it claims is about 90% of the world’s airline business. Due to the 8-hour time difference between London and Long Beach, spontaneous communications were not always possible. Interestingly, most all phone calls were via the “Atlantic Cable”, an under-the-sea actual cable connecting the US east coast to Europe! Cable phone conversations at the time were often plagued by conversational delays and echoing; so they were not that effective!

During late 1979-1980 (45 years ago), I managed an office located in the VARIG Brazilian Airlines facility at Rio de Janeiro's International Airport. Here again, my best option for communications with my home office was via the airline's SITA network. Rio's telephone connections were notoriously unreliable because there were actually 2 systems that were basically incompatible with one another and wires were crossed! In rare phone calls that I attempted to make to Long Beach, there were often 5 or more conversations going on in Portuguese while I was trying to talk to my home-base colleagues & they sometimes remarked that it sounded like I was having a heck of a party! Going to the post office to mail documents to home base was always a unique experience! They did not have all the various denominations for stamp costs nor did the stamps have any adhesive. So, each individual stamp had to be glued on the envelope by hand (glue pot and brush) and when all was over and done, the total number of stamps came close to occluding the address on the envelope! Well, if all else failed in Rio, you could always do the Samba and "let the music take ahold of you" and we became quite good at that!

During late 1980-1987 (38 years ago), I managed offices first as located at the Pacific Southwest Airlines facility at the San Francisco International Airport and later at their headquarters in San Diego. It was during this time that I had a variety of communication tools in my office including a multi-lined telephone with an answering recorder, data fax equipment, and an on-line Sidereal word processor & printer for sending and receiving messages to/from the home office. The only real limitation was in sending and receiving data faxes - both of which depended on the availability of dedicated phone lines. Also, it was always necessary for a follow up phone call to the intended recipient of a data fax to assure it was received legibly! For routine issues, Memo's were written for mailing to and from the home office and the service was satisfactory. Other than the minor limitations related to my data fax, my communications capabilities were mostly "optimal" for this period in time.

During late 1987-early 1992 (33 years ago), I managed an office at Alisarda, an airline located on the island of Sardinia at the Aeroporto Costa Smeralda in the town of Olbia. During this stint in my career, my earlier communications limitations kicked in again! I was once again dependent on the airline's SITA network connection for communications to/from Long Beach. My office phone was marginally dependable for all but local calls, I had no data fax capabilities, and frankly, the postal system was a "group grope"! I had a new desktop computer and a printer, but with no connectivity to the outside world; thus, it was little more than a word processor but without any easily usable word processing software! I also had an Italian typewriter with a keyboard that had a long-learning curve! I was actually out of the mainstream and joked to a few colleagues in California that perhaps I would use "jungle drums" and "smoke signals" to communicate! Quite frankly, even with the noted limitations, I will always count this assignment and many (lifetime) friends we met in Sardinia to be one of my all-time favorites.