

numbers in that central office without the verification operator knowing what they're doing, and of course without the two parties to the connection knowing there is a phantom listener present on their line.

Toward the end of my hour-long first conversation with him, I asked the Captain if he ever tapped phones.

"Oh no. I don't do that. I don't think it's right," he told me firmly. "I have the power to do it but I don't... Well one time, just one time, I have to admit that I did. There was this girl Linda, and I wanted to find out... you know. I tried to call her up for a date. I had a date with her the last weekend and I thought she liked me. I called her up, man, and her line was busy, and I kept calling and it was still busy. Well, I had just learned about this system of jumping into lines and I said to myself, 'Hmmm. Why not just see if it works. It'll surprise her if all of a sudden I should pop up on her line. It'll impress her, if anything.' So I went ahead and did it. I M-Fed into the line. My M-F-er is powerful enough when patched directly into the mouthpiece to trigger a verification trunk without using an operator the way the other phone phreaks have to.

"I slipped into the line and there she was talking to another boyfriend. Making sweet talk to him. I didn't make a sound because I was so disgusted. So I waited there for her to hang up, listening to her making sweet talk to the other guy. You know. So as soon as she hung up I instantly M-F-ed her up and all I said was, 'Linda, we're through.' And I hung up. And it blew her head off. She couldn't figure out what the hell happened.

"But that was the only time. I did it thinking I would surprise her, impress her. Those were all my intentions were, and well, it really kind of hurt me pretty badly, and... and ever since then I don't go into verification trunks."

Moments later my first conversation with the Captain comes to a close.

"Listen," he says, his spirits somewhat cheered, "listen. What you are going to hear when I hang up is the sound of tandems unstacking. Layer after layer of tandems unstacking until there's nothing left of the stack, until it melts away into nothing. Cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep," he concludes, his voice descending to a whisper with each cheep.

He hangs up. The phone suddenly goes into four spasms: kachink cheep. Kachink cheep kachink cheep kachink cheep, and the complex connection has wiped itself out like the Cheshire cat's smile.

The MF Boogie Blues

The next number I choose from the select list of phone-phreak alumni, prepared for me by the blue-box inventor, is a Memphis number. It is the number of Joe Engressia, the first and still perhaps the most accomplished blind phone phreak.

Three years ago Engressia was a nine-day wonder in newspapers and magazines all over America because he had been discovered whistling free long-distance connections for fellow students at the University of South Florida.

Engressia was born with perfect pitch: he could whistle phone tones better than the phone-company's equipment.

Engressia might have gone on whistling in the dark for a few friends for the rest of his life if the phone company hadn't decided to expose him. He was warned, disciplined by the college, and the whole case became public. In the months following media reports of his talent, Engressia began receiving strange calls. There were calls from a group of kids in Los Angeles who could do some very strange things with the quirky General Telephone and Electronics circuitry in LA suburbs. There were calls from a group of mostly blind kids in ----, California, who had been doing some interesting experiments with Cap'n Crunch whistles and test loops. There was a group in Seattle, a group in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a few from New York, a few scattered across the country. Some of them had already equipped themselves with cassette and electronic M-F devices. For some of these groups, it was the first time they knew of the others.

The exposure of Engressia was the catalyst that linked the separate phone-phreak centers together. They all called Engressia. They talked to him about what he was doing and what they were doing. And then he told them -- the scattered regional centers and lonely independent phone phreakers -- about each other, gave them each other's numbers to call, and within a year the scattered phone-phreak centers had grown into a nationwide underground.

Joe Engressia is only twenty-two years old now, but along the phone-phreak network he is "the old man," accorded by phone phreaks something of the reverence the phone company bestows on Alexander Graham Bell. He seldom needs to make calls anymore. The phone phreaks all call him and let him know what new tricks, new codes, new techniques they have learned. Every night he sits like a sightless spider in his little apartment receiving messages from every tendril of his web. It is almost a point of pride with Joe that they call him.

But when I reached him in his Memphis apartment that night, Joe Engressia was lonely, jumpy and upset.

"God, I'm glad somebody called. I don't know why tonight of all nights I don't get any calls. This guy around here got drunk again tonight and propositioned me again. I keep telling him we'll never see eye to eye on this subject, if you know what I mean. I try to make light of it, you know, but he doesn't get it. I can head him out there getting drunker and I don't know what he'll do next. It's just that I'm really all alone here, just moved to Memphis, it's the first time I'm living on my own, and I'd hate for it to all collapse now. But I won't go to bed with him. I'm just not very interested in sex and even if I can't see him I know he's ugly.