

Back at my motel, I dialed the number he gave me for "Captain Crunch" and asked for G---- T-----, his real name, or at least the name he uses when he's not dashing into a phone booth beeping out M-F tones faster than a speeding bullet and zipping phantomlike through the phone company's long-distance lines.

When G---- T----- answered the phone and I told him I was preparing a story for Esquire about phone phreaks, he became very indignant.

"I don't do that. I don't do that anymore at all. And if I do it, I do it for one reason and one reason only. I'm learning about a system. The phone company is a System. A computer is a System, do you understand? If I do what I do, it is only to explore a system. Computers, systems, that's my bag. The phone company is nothing but a computer."

A tone of tightly restrained excitement enters the Captain's voice when he starts talking about systems. He begins to pronounce each syllable with the hushed deliberation of an obscene caller.

"Ma Bell is a system I want to explore. It's a beautiful system, you know, but Ma Bell screwed up. It's terrible because Ma Bell is such a beautiful system, but she screwed up. I learned how she screwed up from a couple of blind kids who wanted me to build a device. A certain device. They said it could make free calls. I wasn't interested in free calls. But when these blind kids told me I could make calls into a computer, my eyes lit up. I wanted to learn about computers. I wanted to learn about Ma Bell's computers. So I build the little device, but I built it wrong and Ma Bell found out. Ma Bell can detect things like that. Ma Bell knows. So I'm strictly rid of it now. I don't do it. Except for learning purposes." He pauses. "So you want to write an article. Are you paying for this call? Hang up and call this number." He gives me a number in a area code a thousand miles away of his own. I dial the number.

"Hello again. This is Captain Crunch. You are speaking to me on a toll-free loop-around in Portland, Oregon. Do you know what a toll-free loop around is? I'll tell you."

He explains to me that almost every exchange in the country has open test numbers which allow other exchanges to test their connections with it. Most of these numbers occur in consecutive pairs, such as 302 956-0041 and 302 956-0042. Well, certain phone phreaks discovered that if two people from anywhere in the country dial the two consecutive numbers they can talk together just as if one had called the other's number, with no charge to either of them, of course.

"Now our voice is looping around in a 4A switching machine up there in Canada, zipping back down to me," the Captain tells me. "My voice is looping around up there and back down to you. And it can't ever cost anyone money. The phone phreaks and I have compiled a list of many of these numbers. You would be surprised if you saw the list. I could show it to you. But I won't. I'm out of that now. I'm not out to screw Ma Bell. I know better. If I do anything it's for the pure knowledge of the System. You can learn to do fantastic things. Have you ever heard eight tandems stacked up? Do you know the sound of tandems stacking and unstacking? Give me your phone number. Okay. Hang up now and wait a minute."

Slightly less than a minute later the phone rang and the Captain was on the line, his voice sounding far more excited, almost aroused.

"I wanted to show you what it's like to stack up tandems. To stack up tandems." (Whenever the Captain says "stack up" it sounds as if he is licking his lips.)

"How do you like the connection you're on now?" the Captain asks me. "It's a raw tandem. A raw tandem. Ain't nothing' up to it but a tandem. Now I'm going to show you what it's like to stack up. Blow off. Land in a far away place. To stack that tandem up, whip back and forth across the country a few times, then shoot on up to Moscow."

"Listen," Captain Crunch continues. "Listen. I've got line tie on my switchboard here, and I'm gonna let you hear me stack and unstack tandems. Listen to this. It's gonna blow your mind."

First I hear a super rapid-fire pulsing of the flutelike phone tones, then a pause, then another popping burst of tones, then another, then another. Each burst is followed by a beep-kachink sound.

"We have now stacked up four tandems," said Captain Crunch, sounding somewhat remote. "That's four tandems stacked up. Do you know what that means? That means I'm whipping back and forth, back and forth twice, across the country, before coming to you. I've been known to stack up twenty tandems at a time. Now, just like I said, I'm going to shoot up to Moscow."

There is a new, longer series of beeper pulses over the line, a brief silence, then a ring.

"Hello," answers a far-off voice.

"Hello. Is this the American Embassy Moscow?"

"Yes, sir. Who is this calling?" says the voice.

"Yes. This is test board here in New York. We're calling to check out the circuits, see what kind of lines you've got. Everything okay there in Moscow?"