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John Goeken, Who Led MCI and Splintered AT&T, Is Dead at 80

By [GRAHAM BOWLEY](#)

John D. Goeken, a tenacious entrepreneur who founded the long-distance carrier MCI, which changed the shape of the nation's telephone industry by challenging the monopoly of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, died Thursday night in Joliet, Ill. He was 80. Mr. Goeken, who died at Provena St. Joseph Medical Center, had been treated for esophageal cancer for five years, said Patricia A. Schneider, executive vice president for the Goeken Group Corporation. He lived in Plainfield, Ill., near Chicago.

Mr. Goeken, known as Jack, had a long track record of creating communications companies, often in the face of stubborn opposition and heavy skepticism. His ventures include Airfone and In-Flight Phone, which are credited with establishing air-to-ground telephones, and the digital network used by FTD florists.

But probably his most important achievement was MCI, which he began in the early 1960s to sell more two-way radios. The company would eventually lead to a transformation in the telephone industry, bringing lower-cost long-distance service to millions of American households and businesses.

In 1974, Mr. Goeken helped start the process that broke up AT&T. An antitrust suit against [AT&T](#) that year, in which MCI was joined by the Justice Department, led to a settlement in which AT&T agreed to break itself apart a decade later. This allowed AT&T, nicknamed Ma Bell, to supply long-distance service and seven regional companies, known as the Baby Bells, to provide local phone service.

Mr. Goeken (pronounced GOH-ken) started his company, originally called Microwave Communications Inc., after being discharged from the Army, where he had learned about microwave technology.

At the time, truckers who traveled between Chicago and St. Louis could not use two-way radios to speak with their home offices because their radio signals covered only shorter distances. Mr. Goeken's answer was to construct a network of microwave towers following the routes between the two cities to relay the radio signals from one tower to the next.

However, Mr. Goeken's business was challenged by other communications companies. They filed briefs with the [Federal Communications Commission](#) opposing Mr. Goeken's company, beginning MCI's long battle to establish itself.

In 1971, the F.C.C. granted MCI the right to compete with AT&T for long-distance service throughout the United States. In 1974, MCI filed its antitrust suit against AT&T, accusing it of unfairly thwarting the expansion of competition in the long-distance market.

Mr. Goeken left MCI that same year after disagreement over the direction of the company with William G. McGowan, whom he had brought in to help raise money when MCI became a long-distance phone company for consumers. Mr. Goeken had wanted MCI to focus on businesses. Mr. McGowan went on to become the longtime chairman of MCI Communications, as the company was later known. Mr. Goeken kept an ownership stake when he left.

He soon went on to new projects. Mr. Goeken established the computer network, known as FTD Mercury, that florists used to wire flower orders.

In spite of industry skepticism that executives would not want to make calls from the air, he founded Airfone. He sold an interest to the GTE Corporation to raise cash, but eventually left after disagreement over how GTE wanted to run the operation.

While not all of his businesses were profitable while he was at the helm, Mr. Goeken was considered a brilliant entrepreneur, a man with vision and dogged determination who created companies that changed industries.

In 1995, he started the Goeken Group, a holding company to foster new ventures. His most important current new business was PolyBrite International, an LED lighting company developing energy-efficient technology to replace traditional bulbs, Ms. Schneider said.

Ms. Schneider, who knew Mr. Goeken for 35 years, said that the company was destined to have a big impact on the lighting industry and was typical of his way of doing business.

“He found an area and went for it in a big way,” she said. “He could change the world.”

She remembered he was called “Jack the Giant Killer” for his business battles. But she added that he had not changed throughout his life and that he and his wife had lived in the same house in Plainfield for more than 40 years.

John D. Goeken was born on Aug. 22, 1930, in Joliet, where his father was a Lutheran minister. He stayed close to Joliet all his life, Ms. Schneider said, and developed a passion for flying, becoming a pilot.

Mr. Goeken is survived by Mona Lisa Goeken, his wife of 59 years, whom he had met in high school; his daughter, Sandra Goeken Miles, who worked closely with Mr. Goeken in his business ventures; a son, John, and seven grandchildren.