

THE EARLY DAYS OF ARMED FORCES RADIO

The directive that established Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS) on May 26, 1942, commanded Tom Lewis to "provide education, information and orientation for our Armed Forces overseas by means of entertainment and special events broadcasts."

To accomplish this, the AFRS was to maintain a weekly schedule of transcribed radio programs that would be distributed to the various overseas outlets. In a report on May 26, 1942, to the radio sub-committee of the Joint Army and Navy Committee, Tom Lewis interpreted the order. "It is," he said, "a formal way of saying that the Armed Forces Radio Service is directed to assist in supplying the American soldier with the emotional and intellectual impetus he needs, in addition to his technical knowledge and training, to make him a better fighting man, and to strive to maintain in him the mental attitudes of a free American." (1)

Lewis acknowledged he had no illusions about his job. "We're not foolhardy enough to think that we can change the entire mental attitude of a soldier by the appropriate use of a loudspeaker. Neither radio nor any other media can completely reconcile a boy from Grand Rapids to a military life in Persia. But we can help in his adjustment, for frequently the dividing line's not too definite between the soldier who merely submits to his job and to the one who'll apply himself whole-heartedly to the achievement of an end." (2)

Lewis had defined his philosophy, found a location for his operation, and begun putting a staff together. He then turned to his two initial objectives. First was to conduct a scientific survey of the listening habits and attitudes of the troops. Second was to consolidate all military broadcasting operations under one command.

It took him almost 16 months of continuous effort to gain control of radio operations such as "Command Performance" from other agencies. The survey proved much less of a problem. The Research Branch of the Special Services Division conducted the study for Lewis during July and August and produced a report dated September 3, 1942.

The survey questioned 3,286 enlisted men of the Army ground forces in fifteen camps from coast to coast. The researchers found that a little more than half of the troops listened to the radio at some time on a typical work day. Peak listening periods were from 6:15 to 7:00 AM, at

midday, and in the evening from 7:00 to 8:30. Most of the men listened to the radio in their barracks. In order of popularity, the favorite types of programs were dance music, news, comedy, sports, variety, swing music, radio plays, old familiar music, and quiz programs. The least liked programs were serial dramas, classical music, and hillbilly and western music. Favorite specific programs, mentioned by more than 20 percent of the men, were "The Hit Parade," Kay Kyser, and Bob Hope.

While Lewis was in Washington receiving his commission, Robert Sherwood, the noted playwright and then a special assistant to President Roosevelt, approached him. He suggested that he transfer to the office of General William Donovan. The President had appointed Donovan as the Coordinator of Information (COI), which was the forerunner of the Office of War Information and the United States Information Agency. Sherwood worried that the Army's restrictive bureaucracy would differ with Lewis' own freewheeling style. That would keep him from fulfilling General Osborn's mandate. The COI had begun to expand shortwave broadcasting facilities in August, 1941 and Sherwood assured Lewis that he "could operate freely there." (3)

Lewis declined the offer, believing that he "should do the job within the military as I'd been commissioned to do." Moreover, Donovan's organization might use radio for its own purposes. Lewis didn't want to take the chance that the troops would "be propagandized" by COI programming. Instead, he'd rely on an organization that reached the men with credibility. Despite the turn-down, Sherwood promised to help Lewis in any way possible. He invited Lewis to take a trip to Alaska to see for himself the soldiers' needs for information, education and recreation in the field. (4)

Accepting the opportunity as a chance to gain first-hand knowledge of the status in the field, Lewis accompanied Murray Brophey, Chief of the COI Overseas Facilities Bureau, to Alaska. For Lewis, the trip provided a clear-cut picture of the audience he'd be reaching and a good idea of what to provide in the way of programming.

Lewis later recalled how his driver complained about not knowing why the military had sent him to Alaska. "I don't know what's happening, he'd say. 'All I do is drive VIP's back and forth on this road. I don't know of anything else.'"

To Lewis, the confused driver became his image of the soldier who'd win the war. The chance meeting influenced Lewis' perceptions of Armed Forces Radio as an "operation by the enlisted man, mostly, for the enlisted man." If the American fighting forces were going to be successful, Lewis believed they would have to understand for what they were fighting. Radio could help provide that information. (5)

On the trip, Lewis learned of the existence of the radio stations at Kodiak and Sitka. He also learned that the Nome Civilian Defense Commission had started broadcasting by a "carrier current" type of transmission that used existing power lines, telephone lines, pipes, etc., as conductors for broadcasting waves. The station covered limited areas such as camps, quartermaster's depots, etc., and was in essence a closed-circuit radio system.

From studying these small, local, self-help operations, Lewis acquired the model for future AFRS stations. The Alaska trip also helped him realize and appreciate the scope of the work to be done. Shortwave transmission from the United States wouldn't reach the millions of troops worldwide.

As the first step in solving the problem, Lewis entered into an informal arrangement with Brophy. AFRS didn't have a formal budget yet, but Brophy and the COI did.

At Lewis' request, Brophy agreed to transfer some radio transmitters and operating personnel to expand coverage to military areas in Alaska and the Aleutians. He also committed the COI to provide radio coverage for American troops in the United Kingdom.

In support of the operation, which was to become the Armed Forces Network (AFN), the COI would supply Tom Lewis low-powered transmitters and personnel. He'd also arrange for connecting landlines. In return, once AFRS had become fully operational, Lewis agreed to take over the facilities in Great Britain with his own people. According to Brophy, the official basis for the COI commitment came from President Roosevelt himself, declaring that "when they declared peace, he wanted his voice heard by all the people around the world".(6)

The Lewis-Brophy arrangement provided service to American forces in both Alaska and Great Britain. More important, it became the reference point for all AFRS expansion during the war. In mid-June, however, AFRS still didn't have a budget and was facing a challenge to its directive from the Army's Radio Branch, Bureau of Public Relations. Even worse, the AFRS table of organization called for only three officers and not a single radio production or broadcast facility.(7)

With the help of General Munson's aide, Colonel Jack Stanley, Lewis solved the immediate budget problems. Although Stanley could not expedite approval of the budget for AFRS, he explained that a fund existed in the Army earmarked for "the welfare of the enlisted man."

Lewis exclaimed that his project existed for just that purpose. Stanley replied, "I know how you can borrow \$50,000 from that fund if you sign yourself personally responsible for it. When your budget is approved, you can pay it back. It'd even expedite getting your budget approved."(8)

Lewis asked, "what happens if my budget is not

approved?" Shrugging, Stanley observed, "Hell, Tom, that's like saying 'Are we going to win the war?' If we don't, what good is money anyway? You'll be out \$50,000 -- and your country."

Lewis agreed with Stanley's logic, took on the personal responsibility and used the money to move into his Hollywood headquarters.

LEWIS GOES TO WASHINGTON

Lewis, accompanied by his wife, Loretta Young, and his staff went to Washington in July, 1942. There he and his staff met with Army officials to discuss the structure and procedures of AFRS and to deal with the challenge of the Bureau of Public Relations.

In order to provide the troops "a little bit of home," Lewis and his group wanted to use discs as the heart of their effort to deliver both entertainment and information. This was in contrast to the Bureau that used the less-than-dependable shortwave for all their transmissions. AFRS would use shortwave only as a means to deliver timely material such as news, sports, and special features.(9)

From the Washington meetings, which included a session with General Osborn on August 4, the AFRS staff returned to California with a "Memorandum of Projected Initial Program Schedule." The radio program activity would parallel the efforts of the motion pictures and publications of the Special Service Division. Its activity would come from two major sources. First, they would select from commercial network broadcasts "the material most adaptable for our purposes." Second, they'd use organization-produced material "to fill specific needs in the language and the psychology of the Army."(10)

The memorandum recognized that "commercial broadcasting can exist only in its relation to the normal civilian mode of life and is directed to the entire public." Such broadcasting, it said, "cannot [therefore] wholly fulfill the needs of the men or soldier-interest in respect to type of program."

As a result, within the continental United States, AFRS accepted the "responsibility of producing daily a volume of information and recreational programs for the soldiers' exclusive use." AFRS proposed to deliver these programs to camps in the United States and larger bases abroad by carrier radio. As troops began to move overseas, AFRS would supply a greater volume of material, using short-wave broadcasts where possible. Where locations precluded receiving these broadcasts, the material would be delivered by phonograph records.

The memorandum also recognized that seasonal and climatic phenomena would restrict the troops' outdoor free time. It stated such a condition "logically leads to an increase in the amount and variety of program material to fill these hours which otherwise might become a psycho-

logical problem." Such BPR programs as "Command Performance," "The News From Home," and "Grandstand Seat" had been doing, "a consistently good job, but they represent[ed] only the beginning of the work to be done."

The memo's writers considered the expenses involved in such an extensive program. While "Command Performance" had so far been able to have artists appear without cost, it couldn't "be expected to provide an unlimited amount of free service." Fortunately, they were wrong. Throughout the war, radio and film stars donated their time regularly and did so without cost to the government. Their contribution to the war effort relieved AFRS of the need to negotiate for services. Working through several leading Hollywood agents, the producers of the individual programs simply requested particular entertainers to fulfill requests from the troops or requirements of scripts.

"After all," the memorandum maintained, "every program that's expressly designed for and directed to the soldiers overseas, gives to those men a stronger tie with home and a deeper realization that they're not the 'forgotten' men of 1942." Stars were a necessary part of every program.

In presenting its schedule of original program material, the memorandum stressed, "The key-note of the entire operation of the Radio Section of the Special Services Division must be flexibility. The schedule of programs outlined herewith will be constantly subject to change and improvement. Continuing correlation with the whole shortwave picture will cause some deviation. As our research determines which programs are most effective, we may wish to elaborate on these shows, and later the formats of others."

The outline included new programs produced by Special Services "especially for the entertainment and information of troops overseas." Commercial network broadcasts and backlog programs could to be used by local stations for their own broadcasts. Of all the specially-created programs, the best was "Mail Call," which drew its inspiration from "Command Performance." According to the writers, the Backlog Program Reserve (BPR) program "has proved how effective well-produced shortwave radio programs can be in building morale of troops overseas. Its record indicates that more programs should and must be built along these lines."

The other proposed programs included "Music For Sunday," which featured religious music. Another, "Yanks On The March," contained "dramatized news of the war, slanted directly for soldiers abroad, and presented in the authentic format of the present March of Time." There sports, of course, news from the homefront and symphonies. The memorandum pro-

posed to dub into current network shows "messages directed especially to information of particular interest to overseas soldiers. These tie-ins will give the shows a soldier-slant, which they lack in their original broadcast form." The Back Log Program Reserve would act as a reservoir of material with which stations could fill out their broadcast schedule.

Once in operation, AFRS programming didn't follow the Projected Program Schedule in all respects. Actual programming included both military-produced programs and network staples. Although only a few of the proposed in-house programs were to see the light of day, "Mail Call," the first AFRS program, survived throughout the war and beyond.

As a matter of policy and in agreement with the unions, the service removed all commercials from the programs that it sent overseas. To ensure better distribution and quality than could be achieved by shortwave, it distributed them on discs. As the technicians became more efficient in recording programs and as distribution lines became firmly established, they included more and more network and local programs in the packages sent to the troops. Instead of a Back Log Reserve, they included music-only discs in the package for use on locally-originated programs.

Lewis continued to work in Washington to wrest control of military broadcast operations from the Bureau of Public Relations and other war Department agencies. Soon after he returned from Alaska, the USO agreed to transfer carrier current stations that it had been operating to AFRS.

In June, President Roosevelt issued an executive order transferring the responsibilities of the COI to a new agency, the Office of War Information (OWI). General William Donovan, the former Coordinator of Information (COI), regained and built up a new unit, the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. President Roosevelt appointed Elmer Davis to head the new OWI.(12)

Davis manifested no interest in relinquishing his control of the radio operations, maintaining, "The broadcasts to the Armed Forces were started by one of OWI's predecessor organizations... and they were going strong when I came in... It was started because nobody else was doing the job." Consequently, Lewis found himself in "extensive and often heated negotiations" that finally involved Dr. Milton Eisenhower, General Osborn, and certain members of Congress.

In the end, Davis ordered that the OWI would cease production of troop shows on September 1, 1943, and made OWI shortwave equipment available to AFRS. During the periods of its use by AFRS, the service excluded OWI personnel, with military guards placed on all

doors. To Lewis, this was "a big step that enabled us to develop our 24-hour globe-girdling system of shortwave operations free of propaganda and totally operated by soldiers for the welfare of soldiers. Now the average GI could hear another GI giving out the same news heard by his family at home. He could depend upon its veracity. That, I believed, was not only morally correct, it was good ol' American common sense." (13)

Lewis had won. The Bureau of Public Relations accepted the inevitable and turned over control of "Command Performance" to AFRS on December 15, 1942. By that date, AFRS was working out of the Fox Studio, producing its programs and developing its methods of distribution.

As United States troops started landing on foreign territory, more stations were beginning to go on the air. AFRS was off and running.

NOTES - CHAPTER 5

- (1) Armed Forces Radio Service, "Progress Report," May 26, 1942 – December 1, 1945, p 4, Cited hereafter as "Progress Report".
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Lewis, Autobiography; Lewis interview, September 15, 1982.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) Lewis, Autobiography; "Progress Report" pp 13-14.
- (7) "Progress Report," p. 13.
- (8) Lewis, Autobiography.
- (9) Interview with True Boardman, September 8, 1982; interview with Jerry Lawrence, September 30, 1982; interview with Bob Lee, September 30, 1982.
- (10) "Memorandum of Projected Initial Program Schedule," N.D./August 1942.
- (11) Ibid.
- (12) Lewis, Autobiography.
- (13) Ibid.