

## THE AMERICAN FORCES NETWORK OVERSEAS

While AEF broadcast to the Allied troops advancing across Europe, the American Forces Network continued to provide American Forces in the British Isles with full radio service. Johnny Hayes was now a major. To operate the network, he scoured American encampments throughout Great Britain to find engineers, newsmen and announcers who'd worked in commercial radio before entering the military. Volunteers, especially from combat units, were easy to find.

### AFN PROGRAMMING

The AFRTS package from Los Angeles gave the network a solid base of programming. However, from the start, Hayes felt it was important to fill out his broadcast schedule with locally-prepared news and special events programs.

To attain this goal, Hayes "borrowed" G.K. Hodenfield from *Stars and Stripes* to serve as AFN's first Director of News and Special Events. Hodenfield's staff included Ford Kennedy, Marty Smith, Johnny Vrotsos and later Russ Jones and Bob Light.

The British Ministry of Information was more security-conscious than the Americans. They were also more used to strict censorship of news. So, they kept two men on duty in the AFN studios just to monitor the live broadcasts. According to Hodenfield, there was little reason for the effort "since virtually all our news had already been censored before we got it." In any case, for the first six months, the news staff did little more than rewrite this carefully edited material and prepare some "March of Times" style radio documentaries.

In January, 1945, AFN moved its microphones "on location." Hodenfield and announcer Keith Jamieson took a wire recorder to a Royal Canadian Air Force Base north of London. There they would interview members of bomber crews about to take part in a massive 2,000-plane nighttime air strike against Berlin. Leaving Jamieson on the ground, Hodenfield boarded one of the Lancasters and accompanied the mission sitting next to the bombardier. As the armada reached Berlin, it encountered heavy flak. The bomber in front of his plane received a direct hit and exploded. Hodenfield later recalled, "To say I was scared is an understatement. I was absolutely petrified! I couldn't even speak. The anti-

aircraft fire was fierce. I didn't see how we could make it!"(1)

Despite heavy losses on the raid, Hodenfield's plane returned to base. He then joined Jamieson to interview some of the fliers, pieced together the recordings and broadcast the completed program the next day on AFN. The Canadian military broadcast service also carried the show. It was the first AFN special events remote and set the pattern for thousands of other broadcasts that the Network would do over the years.

The staff didn't always have to go on location to bring the war to AFN listeners. When Germany launched its last-ditch rocket attacks on London in June, 1944, the halls would shake and lights would sway from the near misses of the V-1 buzz bombs and later the V-2 ballistic missiles. Somehow, the announcers and engineers gradually grew accustomed to it and went about their jobs. One day, Major Bob Light and Captain Jack London, the Network's Executive and Operations Officers respectively, climbed to the roof of 80 Portland Place. They took recording equipment to capture the sounds of the attack. When they heard a particularly loud buzz bomb chugging along in their direction, the men switched on their recorder and listened, as all Londoners had learned to do, for the cut-off of the rocket motor, which meant that the missile had begun its downward plummet. In this instance, the motor cut off a few seconds after passing Portland Place. The recording, which AFN then broadcast, picked up on the rocket's sound, the silence following engine cut off, and the explosion that rocked the area.(2) Great reporting!

By D-Day, the Network had expanded to include more than sixty 50-watt transmitters, all connected by landline to the studios at 80 Portland Place, next door to the BBC headquarters. Included among the AFN outlets were six transmitters in Northern Ireland fed by cables across the Irish Sea. Again, because of BBC restrictions, AFN couldn't broadcast over the air in the London area. So, AFN sent its programming over landlines into the city's American military facilities. Despite the BBC restrictions on transmitter power and locations, the Network thrived. By the end of its first year of operations, an estimated five million Britons listened to AFN with regularity.(3)

AFN's popularity and recruitment of its staff within the European theater helped to create a feeling of virtual autonomy from AFRS. Ben Hoberman had begun as a disk jockey in AFN headquarters. He recalls that "we were very proud of what we were doing in Europe, and most of it we were doing by ourselves."(4)

According to Bob Light, during the time he was in London, AFRS requested that AFN identify itself as being part of AFRS rather calling itself the American Forces Network. When AFN refused, the War Department

dispatched a representative who negotiated a compromise that mandated that every other station break would include "This is the American Forces Network of the Armed Forces Radio Service." Light notes that while "we gave them that concession, we printed all our programs in the *Stars and Stripes* saying AFN." During his inspection trip in early 1945, True Boardman found the AFN in London "really didn't like the idea of having to be considered part of Armed Forces Radio Service." (5)

Tensions remained between AFN and the AAFP. AFN never attached any of its staff to the joint operation on a full-time basis as the BBC had expected. As part of the negotiations to set up AAFP, AFN had agreed to establish no new stations in the British Isles after June 6. On D-Day, however, AFN took the first step in expanding its scope of operations when it inaugurated a seven-hour all-American weekly service, which it short-waved to the China/Burma/India theater. Then in October, disregarding Eisenhower's goals of a single radio voice with which he could reach all his troops simultaneously, AFN Chief Hayes began to establish stations in France under his control. X.O. Bob Light went from London to Paris to put an AFN station on the air. (6)

#### AFN IN FRANCE

Broadcasting in Paris began on October 13th with a 50-watt transmitter. The studios were in cramped quarters in the Shell Building just off the Champs Elysees. As Light recalls, although the station was "right in the middle of Paris, if we could be heard three blocks in all directions, we were lucky." After a couple of weeks, he obtained a fifteen-kilowatt transmitter from the French and then moved the station to 19 Avenue Dienna, which had a better equipped studio. That studio also became the center of operations for AFN in France, connected to the other fixed stations by landline and short-wave. However, V-E Day, the main AFN headquarters and news operation remained in London. (7)

As with all AFN stations that went on the air in permanent facilities, the AFRS package served as the basic programming for the Paris operation. To fill out the eighteen-hour broadcast day, the station had its own disc jockeys playing records. This included Specialist Fifth Class Grady Edney, a broadcaster from Boston, who originated the popular "Sigh by Night," a late night poetry and music show. The station also did live broadcasts with Sergeant Johnny Desmond and the Glenn Miller ensemble "Strings with Wings" from the Red Cross Club. They provided local sports coverage and news of the military advance.

The quality of the AFRS package and the locally-produced shows created a large "shadow audience" of local residents. When AFN-Paris closed down in June,

1946, following the departure of most American troops, French civilians asked the American ambassador to allow the station to continue. For diplomatic reasons, the Army and the State Department put AFN back on the air, with programs brought to Paris by landlines from the new AFN headquarters in Frankfurt. This operation continued until the end of '47 when AFN permanently closed the station. (8)

Once the Paris station was operating, Light went into the field. There, he would arrange for mobile stations to accompany the four United States Armies as they advanced across France into Germany. Light had as his model the "station on wheels" that was accompanying the Fifth Army through Italy. The first Allied transmitter on the continent began operations in Naples on October 25, 1943, with the announcement: "This is the American Expeditionary Station -- in the field with the Fifth Army."

#### AFN MARCHES ACROSS EUROPE

Initially, the station stayed in Naples. There it gained popularity with the soldiers fighting their way north from the city, with sailors aboard ships in the harbor, and with the Italian population itself. After the fighting had moved north and out of range of the broadcasts, the staff received a letter from a soldier along the Volturno River.

"Are you guys still broadcasting?" it asked. "We haven't heard from you in weeks. We thought you were supposed to be in the field." (9)

With that input, the station became truly mobile. The staff obtained two trucks and had special bodies built on them. It obtained two ninety-foot poles from the Signal Corps and headed into the field joining the Fifth Army on February 15, 1945. The new mobile station proudly displayed its jaunty crest consisting of a microphone on wheels, on the side of the van. By April 30, 1944, the station was at Mondrago, located on a small cape jutting into the Mediterranean between Naples and Anzio. Twenty-four hours later they were in direct competition with Axis Sally with a daily 16-hour schedule broadcasting primarily AFRS material, recorded songs and live shows. (10)

The only time the station stopped its daily schedule was when it moved to new positions. In July, 1944, Lieutenant Verne Carstensen, the stations' Commander, wrote to AFRS in Los Angeles with the news that the mobile transmitter had travelled five hundred miles since leaving Naples. The first time the staff had used buildings for quarters was when it reached Rome. Less than a week after the capture of the city, broadcasting began.

From his experiences running the station on wheels, Carstensen published a guide to operation practices on April 1, 1945. He emphasized the dominant position of the Field Commander over the functions of an AFRS

station. "The station will cooperate fully in carrying out the desires of the Commanding General, Fifth Army, on matters of administration, programming and hours of operation," he said.(11)

Carstensen provided a list of objectives that he considered essential for the successful operation of a mobile facility: "The staff should always try to make the listener, regardless of his surroundings, imagine that he is listening to the radio back home. The station should broadcast to the primary listener, the soldier in the field. The soldiers should be kept informed with dependable news, and other nonclassified information of the Armed Services, at home and in the world as a whole. The station should orient and educate the soldier by presenting information in a pleasant form. It should give the soldier a better understanding of the war -- its causes, reasons for fighting it, results, leaders, and those fighting with and against him. It should work toward building and maintaining morale. Finally, the station should give the soldier a voice. He should be encouraged to display this talent and to offer suggestions."(12)

To provide similar service to the troops fighting across France, Light located 1,000-watt mobile transmitters with the First, Seventh, and Ninth armies by the end of October 1944. Only Patton refused to allow a mobile station to accompany his Third Army across France. At first, the mobile transmitters served "primarily as relay stations for the program schedule of the AEF." The station was afforded a very limited amount of 'local option' time — just two-and-one-half hours per day — during which it could originate its own programs.(13)

Given the limited space in the stations on wheels, the staffs couldn't carry complete AFRS packages. Most of their programming would have to come from AEF material. As the mobile stations followed the troops, AFN set up fixed stations to serve the rear encampments and headquarters areas. Locales included Cannes, Nice, Marseilles, Dijon, LeHavre and Biarritz — not at all bad places from which to fight a war. Once in place, the stations joined the AFRS mailing list and began receiving the weekly shipments of transcriptions from Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, the stations on wheels continued to follow the troops as they moved into Germany. On a regular basis, they supplied the soldiers with music and news — sometimes right as it was happening.

#### **AFN'S FIRST WARTIME CASUALTY**

Such closeness to the fighting was not without its risks. The war found the stations occasionally subjected to bombings and shellings. Sergeant Jim McNally became AFN's first casualty when he was killed in a strafing attack on the Seventh Army's mobile station. Shortly

afterwards, Sergeant Pete Parrish, an AFN news correspondent, was killed while accompanying an airborne unit in France.

Bringing stations close to the action provided the AFN audience with a sense of immediacy to events and a morale boost in knowing that success was at hand. In one instance, Lieutenant General William Hodge stopped by the First Army's 500-watt transmitter and asked, "May I speak over this some time?" He got his chance that night when he returned to announce over the air that Cologne had fallen to the American advance.(14)

#### **WAR'S END**

Ironically, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the man who wanted a radio operation to communicate to his men, never got to inform them of the most important news of all — victory.

In late April, the war was about to end. Bob Light called Navy Captain Harry Butcher, General Eisenhower's chief aide, and asked that the General provide a statement that AFN could broadcast on V-E Day. About May 1, Light received a transcription, which he described as "awful." It was Eisenhower. He was saying 'Thank you' to the workers of Britain for the wonderful job they did in keeping the factories going — regardless of the bombs and the whole damn thing."(15)

Light immediately called Butcher back and asked "where was a message to the American soldier, for whom the broadcast was intended?"

Butcher responded that Eisenhower didn't have time to provide anything else. Light replied that he'd not play the recording. Butcher asserted that AFN had better.

Light called Kay Sommerville, Eisenhower's driver who was very close to the General. She was "very sympathetic, very sweet, very nice, but couldn't do a damn thing for me."

Thus, when victory was won, AFN didn't carry a word from the Supreme Commander because Light "would not play a 'thank you to the workers of Britain' to our American troops. That'd have been the worst thing in the world. It would have been terrible."(16)

#### **AFN ESTABLISHES HEADQUARTERS IN GERMANY**

With the fighting ended, AFN established permanent facilities in Germany. From Paris, Light flew to Frankfurt with Ben Hoberman, now a lieutenant working in the Paris station, and with a civilian engineer. The men then drove to Munich and began looking for a transmitter and studios. Light obtained the use of two 100-kilowatt transmitters from the Psychological Warfare Section of the Seventh Army, one in Munich and the other in Stuttgart that the Germans had used to jam allied broadcasts

during the war. To house the studios, Light requisitioned the mansion of the famed German artist Kaulbach. It'd also been the location where the Nazi Party was born and, during the war, it'd served as the headquarters of the Nazi Gauleiter.(17) With the first station on the air in Munich, Light gave General Patton the station he'd earlier refused to accept. He'd soon wish he hadn't.

To meet a June 10th on-air deadline, Light turned to the Seventh Army and borrowed their mobile station, promising to call the station "AFN, Seventh Army, Munich." When he obtained the temporary facilities, Light decided he'd put the station on the air on the designated date, even though he himself had never appeared on the air. At 5:55 AM on the 10th, Light announced: "This is Major Robert Light, signing AFN, Seventh Army, Munich, on the air for the first time." Completing the introduction, Light turned the station over to the staff and went back to bed.(18)

Unfortunately, in the rush to get the station ready the previous day, Light hadn't paid attention to the rumble of tanks moving into the city! Consequently, he'd not known that the Seventh Army had turned Munich over to Patton's Third Army that had arrived from Bad Tolz. As Light was preparing for his "debut" as an announcer the morning of the 10th, Patton had awakened and turned up the volume on his radio searching for a station. Finding only the hiss of a warming transmitter, the general began to shave.

When Light's voice boomed out over the radio, Patton reportedly lost control of his straight-edge razor causing him to cut his neck. To make matters worse, Light had credited the wrong Army for being in Munich! With blood streaming from the wound, Patton ordered his aide to find that announcer and court-martial the "son of a b-tch" who'd misidentified his Army. At 8:00 AM, Light found himself awakened by MP's with orders to arrest him. Only with the aid of a sympathetic police officer, did Light manage to slip out of Munich that night and returned to Paris. He never heard anything more about the incident.(19) On-air fame has its privileges!

AFN-Munich soon moved into its new headquarters at 15 Kolbati Strasse where it remained until February 1992 when it was closed; 47 years of broadcasting in one location! AFN-Stuttgart followed Munich on the air a few weeks later, also with 100,000 watts of power and using the same frequency. In sync, the two stations were able to blanket Western Europe and on occasion even reach the Southeastern United States with AFN programming. AFN-Frankfurt began broadcasting on July 15, 1945, in a requisitioned house on Kaiser Sigmund Strasse, with walls the staff lined with blue-grey Wehrmacht uniform cloth for sound-proofing purposes. In August, AFN put stations on the air in Bremen and Berlin.

## AEFP CLOSES SHOP

On July 28, AEFP ended operations. Shortly afterwards, General Eisenhower announced the move of SHAEF headquarters from London to Frankfurt. In order to locate where the troops and the Supreme Commander were, AFN Chief Johnny Hayes, by now a Lieutenant Colonel, dispatched Lieutenant Jim Lewis to Frankfurt to look for a building large enough to house the Network's headquarters. When he arrived, Lewis found the Frankfurt station in new facilities on the U.S. Military Compound. The studios were not only too crowded but too close to the military command to suit the non-military radio types who'd be running the operation.

His continued search brought Lewis to Hoeschst, a small, quiet village on the banks of the Main River, a few miles downstream from Frankfurt. There, he found the Hoeschst Castle dominating the skyline as it had since the mid-14th century. Built, and rebuilt, the Castle's most famous guest had been Napoleon, who stopped there during his retreat from Russia in 1812. After many changes of ownership, Count von Bruening had acquired the Castle in 1908. His descendants were not at all happy about losing their home. They were still living there when Lewis requisitioned it for AFN.

The AFN staff began remodeling the Castle. The tower, the oldest part of the structure, became billets for the unmarried staff. A tradition developed that the newest man at the station berthed in the tiny room at the top of the tower, four stories straight up! The renaissance addition became the offices and studios. By August 15, the new facilities were ready and without interrupting programming, operations transferred from downtown Frankfurt to Hoechst.

With the American military operations now centered on Germany, AFN London signed off the air for the last time on December 31, 1945.

But, there were more chapters still to be written in the genesis of Armed Forces Radio.

## NOTES - CHAPTER 12

- (1) Unpublished AFN history, n.d.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Ibid.; Interview with Robert Light, September 28, 1982.
- (4) Interview with Ben Hoberman, April 7, 1983.
- (5) Ibid.; Boardman interview, June 12, 1972, in Larry Dean Miller, "An historical profile the American Forces Radio and Television Service," unpublished Masters Thesis, Iowa State University, 1974.
- (6) Light interview.
- (7) Ibid.

- (8) "Newsweek," May 13, 1946.
- (9) "The Army Weekly," n.d., late 1944.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Cited in Lieutenant Colonel Russell Fudge, "The Armed Forces Radio Service," Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Missouri, 1949.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Light interview; True Boardman to John Hayes,

- "Recommendations on Operations of Expeditionary Stations on the Continent," January 23, 1945.
- (14) "Billboard," May 5, 1945.
- (15) Light interview.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) Light interview.
- (18) Ibid.
- (19) Ibid.