

VWOA NEWSLETTER

Email Issue #22

2006



pictures back to Tom in England, but he persevered and ran around them and delivered the mail to the home of Wendell Benson. A little late for the original edition, but not too late for Tom to be recognized for his enthusiastic demeanor. So here it goes:



Tom St John-Coleman and XYL Margaret

The response from the VWOA Membership on Email Edition #19 with the featured story of Memories of Wireless by Tom St John-Coleman was very enthusiastic, but critical that I had not included pictures of the sites or even one of Tom St John-Coleman, nor had I included the article written in the VWOA SUMMER NEWS LETTER in the year 2000 .

The main US Post Office foul-up returned a correctly addressed envelope to VWOA with

GKB: PULLING THE BIG SWITCH *By Tom St John-Coleman*

“Portishead Radio has closed”, said the ground radio operator at Oceanic Control. An airliner had enquired about the Portishead frequency early on Thursday morning, 18 May. I found myself asking in my mind, “Can this really be true?” I knew perfectly well that the world-wide call-in extended to international amateurs on 29 May did indeed happen. Yes, and the following day the final message had gone out: “BT regrets to announce the closure of GKB . . . 1200Z Sunday 30 April 2000 . . . We send our thanks and best wishes to the maritime community, which we have served for over 90 years”.

It’s just that, for the radio officer at sea, Portishead was always “there”. Occasionally, a medium range station would become redundant and close. Some would re-locate. Anglesey/GLV (formerly Seaforth), had done

just this in 1960, from Liverpool to the North Wales coast. Oban/GNE disappeared, then Ilfracombe. Anglesey in its new situation eventually closed in the mid-1980s. But Portishead? Unthinkable. Now it's gone too. The many voices of the sprawling station behind the dunes and knolls of the Bristol Channel shore are silent – for ever.

Portishead Radio took its name from its first remote transmitting station situated further upstream near Bristol. But to the coast station staff in the UK it was invariably called "Burnham".

This was because its geographical location was close to the north side of the old trunk road from Bristol to West of England, at the end of Worston Lane about half way between the town of Highbridge and the small holiday resort of Burnham-on-Sea.

In the great days of expansion, the transmitting station at Portishead began to prove inadequate. Transmitters at other remote sites such as the giant Post Office station at Rugby in Warwickshire, and Leaffield in Oxfordshire – to mention just two – were remotely keyed from the operational centre in Worston Lane with its extensive receiving aerial "farm" spreading over the surrounding fields. With the eventual introduction of narrow band direct printing (radioteletype) and extended SSB radiotelephone services, remote receiving facilities at nearby Somerton augmented the

on-site equipment at Burnham. A state of the art computerized message handling system replaced the traditional floor-waling postmen and mechanical conveyor belts.

As many as 300 operators working shifts throughout the 24 hours manned GKB before other methods of communication gradually began to take the lead from about the mid-1980s.

Amongst these were a small detachment of telegraphists from the Royal Navy under the command of a lieutenant and with a naval yeoman of signals who also advised civilians on warship procedures and the naval point-to-point network.

Following its vital duties in the Second World War, Portishead formed the hub of what became known as the Commonwealth Area Scheme.

The world was divided into sectors served by radio stations at British naval bases such as Cape Town, Singapore, Halifax, Malta and Mauritius. Those stations were themselves linked by a point-to-point network which, to widen its usefulness and potential readiness, was made also to carry the traffic of British and Commonwealth merchant ships. Such ships could pass traffic to, say, Cape Town (ZSJ), and if it was addressed to the UK it would reach Portishead over the naval point-to-point system to be treated and charged as

if the ship had directly contacted Portishead by radio.

With the improvement of ships' transmitters and Portishead's refining of its receiving systems to target specific areas of the world at arranged times in addition to its normal omnidirectional watches, the Area Scheme became less necessary. Besides, the British naval bases were closing one by one.

Portishead Radio had to become more than ever a world-wide station with direct global responsibilities towards its own and other nations' vessels, not unlike its famous counterparts which had also long served the world's maritime community – Amagansett, Chatham, San Francisco, Tuckerton and many others.

The Portishead Radio receiving station centred on a 2-storey red brick Post Office building with three "wings" or extension radiating from it to form a T-shape.

The ground floor of the central building acted as a supervising and traffic distribution area whose walls were covered by panels forming a huge world map.

The central of the three wings housed landline and broadcast telegraph machines and, until the 1960s, a glass-partitioned enclosure containing the operating console for Burnham Radio/GL, the medium range coast station

which served the southern Irish Sea and the Bristol Channel until its relocation and renaming as Ilfracombe Radio/GL.

The other two wings had pairs of long operating benches with bays cut into them at intervals. Each bay had a communications receiver let into the table-top at an angle to suit the operator of that position. Each of the positions also had a control switch box to select remote transmitters and a terminal of the intercom telephone system switchable to each operator's headset. A box carrying a rotary switch enabled the choice of one of an array of directional aerials covering 360 degrees.

In its heyday, Portishead had "search" operators keeping watch on the common frequencies of each marine HF band. After these searchers had made contact with a calling ship and taken a rough "bearing" with the array of directional antennae, particulars, including the ship's working frequency expressed as the last three figures, would be passed on the intercom to a free operator for the exchange of traffic.

In its most typical days, the transmitters keyed for direct working by Portishead controlled independent sidebands of each answering frequency. One of the sidebands was used to pass telegrams to ships whilst the other was used purely for the answering of calls and the acknowledgment of shorebound traffic. Each

of the sidebands was allocated its own callsign in the GK-series.

Portishead Aeradio had conducted telegraphy service with aircraft during its earlier days. The Israeli airline El Al – continuing to employ flight radio officers later than most – was among the last patrons of this air-ground morse service. In the 1970s the Portishead operation began to include long distance radiotelephone communications with airliners in a somewhat similar way to Universal Radio in the USA.

Space limits this brief (and in some ways dated) memoir of Britain's largest maritime station which merits a book to itself comparable to the fine work on the medium range service written by Brian Falkener in 1996. There are some indications that his need may be met in the not too distant future.

The writer remembers sitting at one of the bays in an operating wing of Portishead Radio and looking out of a rain-washed window on to the level landscape of coastal Somerset. At the same time, with what could he called the "eyes" of hearing (a faculty peculiar to the wireless operator, perhaps), I could "see" a cargo vessel, whose "TR" I had acknowledged, just then leaving the port of Saigon. That impression has never left my mind.

As there is something special about the profession itself, there was certainly something

unique about "Burnham". More than one generation of men behind those same windows had been in finger, voice and mind touch with famous liners, the world's cargo fleets, warships, aircraft, round-the-world yachts, latter-day commercial sailing ships and even, on occasion, military units on distant battlefields.

The Portishead working population would have been reluctant to admit that what they sometimes called "The morse factory" was in any way romantic. But romance there certainly was, and it would be surprising if there were not tears in some eyes when that very last signal went out in the forenoon of 30 April 2000.

Tom St John-Coleman, 28 May 2000

FLASH!! Tom also sent in the notice that MF Radio Telephone Service (2182 kHz and all) by BT ceases on June 30, 2000 and that will be the complete end of Britain's Coast Station Service.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

In his letter to the Editor, which contained the recent photos, Tom writes:

“Of all the memories I have of various kinds from my work, the one I miss the most is 500 kHz which, when I started training in 1944, was still sometime referred to as 600 metres. There was never another frequency like that. It was a world in itself.

Now, when occasionally I tune it in I can hear nothing but the quiet hiss of background noise.

All the personalities, the famous ships and stations with their characteristic notes, the occasional aircraft – airships, even, before WW II – the dramas of life and death, heartache and joy, the gigantic mutual surround of intelligence which it extended to and from every one of its participants over a wide area (a concept different in kind from the web of the internet because ours was thoroughly corporate) – all have gone, at least from this part of the world.

There is nothing but the empty grey “sea” of background atmospherics across which the watchkeeping radio operator “saw” with his hearing far, far beyond the location of this station.

Frank, I send you our traditional greeting, 73, and thanks for the VWOA and all it means. I

also say God Bless America, as I say God Save the Queen, for I believe that we should stand closely with the U.S., our real friend in these perilous times.”

Sincerely,

Tom St John-Coleman

Frank:

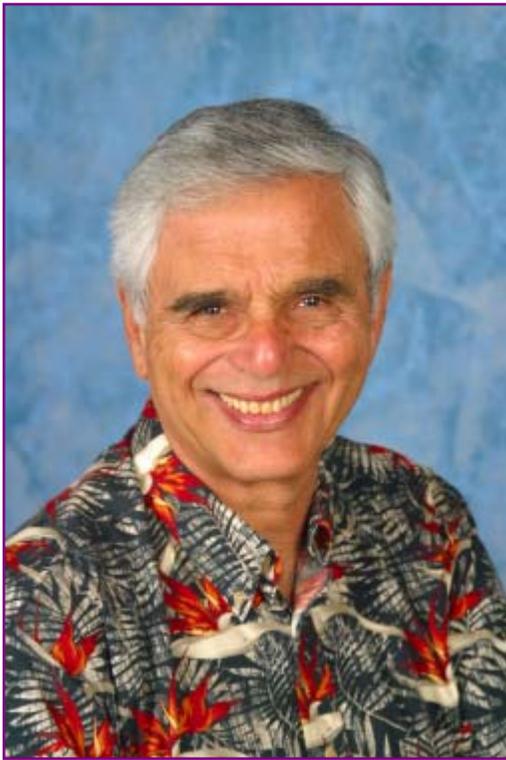
After reading through the Nineteenth Edition of the VWOA newsletter I want you to know that I did enjoy the information and updates and especially the "Memories of Wireless" by Tom St John-Coleman where it dealt with the British maritime coastal radio stations. It surely did bring back a lot of memories for me about working GLD back in the early to middle 40's. Thanks for the good works.

Clay S Scott
North Carolina

Wendell Benson recommends you visit the following URL

<http://www.gka.btinternet.co.uk/index.htm>

And take a tour of the links provided.



Bottom row, 2nd from the left---1965

BERNIE KERSHNER KB2U
VWOA MEMBER NEWS

Updating the Membership Data Base with new information from **Bernie Kershner KB2U** your Editor asked him for some words to go with the SR 71 Blackbird Photo attached to the new information submitted and Bernie provided the following:

I saluted the Ensign and walked down the gangplank on the USS Sellers DDG-11 for the last time. It was 1962 and I was being discharged from the US Navy.

I stood on the dock in May Port, Florida wondering what to do and where to go. In the next few minutes, all my questions were



BERNIE KERSHNER 1965

answered when a recruiter approached me from Honeywell, Aero Space Division, St. Petersburg, Florida. Since he was looking for anyone with a technical background, my rank

of Second Class Guided Missile Man drew his interest. I liked the thought of living in Florida, so I accepted the position he offered. It was during my first week of indoctrination when I was asked, if I would be interested in working on a "black program". With no idea of what program, what location and what responsibilities, I said yes.

Six months later after my security clearance came through, I was off to California, and the Skunk Works at Lockheed, Burbank. After spending a couple of days relocating, I was taken to Area 51 in Groom Lake, NV where for the first time I saw what I would be involved with for the next five years. An SR-71 was being towed from the hanger as we taxied in. Needless to say it was more than I could ever have expected to be working on. Amongst other duties, my responsibility was aligning the Inertial Guidance System before and after flights. Since getting, a BS degree from Florida Atlantic University after leaving Honeywell my time has been devoted mainly in the electronics industry in sales and design. I am now on my way Knoxville, Tennessee where I look forward to my retirement
..... if there is, such a thing

Bernie Kershner KB2U

WENDELL'S NEWS CORNER

----- Original Message -----

From: [Clay and Margaret Scott](#)

To: [Wendell R Benson](#)

Sent: Wednesday, September 13, 2006 9:17 PM

Subject: Re: SS Flying Enterprise
Wendell,

Thanks for the info on Delaney's book about the SS Flying Enterprise and its Capt. Kurt Carlson. It brought back to my mind these somewhat vivid memories.

On December 3, 1951, the SS John Morton, KFIJ, arrived in port at Baltimore after a trip to LeHarve and Rouen, France. While in Baltimore, I signed off as Radio Operator to return home to pursue other interests. I was then on between trips status.

A few days after returning home, the world began hearing about an unusual maritime disaster occurring in an area that I had just passed through a few days earlier. Having been in that area and being a mariner, I became intensely interested in the reported disaster and spent much time listening to radio and watching my black and white TV for the latest news update about the SS Flying Enterprise and its Capt. Kurt Carlson.

The saga of the Flying Enterprise held the world's attention for many days, remaining the top or main news item. The names--Flying

Enterprise and Capt. Carlson--became fixed in many minds at that time as surely as it did in mine. This was a fascinating story of courage and determination, especially for those who have had some experience or familiarity with the sea.

After a long struggle by the captain, and those who came to help, in an effort to save the vessel and its valuable cargo, the cause was lost, when on January 10th, 1952, the Flying Enterprise sank while the captain was being saved.

The Captain died during October 1989. His ashes were scattered 40 mile from Falmouth -- the exact spot where his beloved, "FLYING ENTERPRISE" went down.

I returned to sea in September of 1952.

Clay Scott

We at the VWOA Newsletter would like to hear from you and try to pass along to the rest of the VWOA stories of events that you have experienced and that you feel the rest of the membership would enjoy hearing about. Send us a picture or two and we will try to include it in one of our Email Newsletters.

As a courtesy to the Dennis A. Roland Chapter in New Jersey the **EDITOR** brings to our VWOA Members attention the following fund raising venture of the Dennis A. Roland Chapter:

The Dennis A. Roland Chapter of the American Merchant Marine Veterans has produced a limited number of this 8th printing of this important book. Copies are offered on a first come first served basis.

"A CARELESS WORD---A NEEDLESS SINKING" by Captain Arthur R. Moore

A documented account under one cover of the catastrophic losses suffered by the American flag Merchant Marine, both in ships and personnel during WW II.

The 716 page book includes Panamanian flag ships in which many American seamen and U.S. Navy Armed Guard served and died without recognition and in addition the story of the awards of the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal. The names of lost seamen are recorded by vessel with a photo in many cases of the ship. Additional illustrations bring the magnitude of this tragedy to light.

The order form with details of price for book purchase is available by going to the following linked URL:

[ORDER FORM -- Eighth Edition](#)