

AFRTS: the First Sixty Years

Introduction:

Historians choose to record what is interesting and important to them. In the process much that needs to be written is often left out and not told. This is perhaps not the fault of the historian; rather it is the nature of his profession. He is confronted with massive amounts of information and is compelled to pick and choose. Nevertheless, some stories must be told. The history of the American Forces Radio and Television Service is one of them.

Most people outside of the armed forces probably have never heard of the AFRTS. It is the story of a seemingly small organization that does an outstanding job serving the Armed forces men and women, the diplomatic staff and their families in a myriad of places around the world and at sea. It all started in 1942 in the midst of the World War II.

The radio service for the soldiers, however, was not a war department idea. General George C. Marshall had been thinking about it as a means of educating and informing the troops. He believed that the men and women in uniform needed to know why they were fighting. Radio, Marshall reasoned, was the best medium to do that.

Early beginnings of Military Broadcasting:

While the army was thinking about a radio service, soldiers in the field began to put it into practice by setting up, sometimes illegally, radio stations in Panama and then Alaska. The commanders in Panama were unable to communicate with their troops because often the soldiers had their radios turned off. Soldiers probably would keep their units turned on if they have music and entertainment interspersed with command information. So a transmitter was set up and they began to broadcast music and entertainment and of course command information as well. These broadcasts began in 1940.

The first radio broadcasts, however, were short-wave transmissions beamed to the Philippines by KGEI in San Francisco beginning in 1939. The response from the field was encouraging. In Asia, it was an answer to Japanese Radio Tokyo broadcasts that covered most of the continent. When MacArthur was struggling to save Philippines from the Japanese KGEI broadcasts were the only sources of news and information coming from America. MacArthur's people set up a transmitter at Baatan and then rebroadcast KGEI programs. When the transmitter was, however, moved to

Corrrgidor with Macarthur it was used solely for propaganda purposes that did not do anyone any good. In any case, MacArthur's "Voice of Freedom" was an important step in the right direction.

The Panama Canal radio station (PCAC) was an immediate hit with the soldiers and the civilians. Therefore, the station had to look for programs from the United States. Many entertainers and agencies like Jack Benny and NBC were ready to supply these programs. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, this station, however, was closed down. In 1943, it reopened as part of the Armed Forces Radio Services.

The Sitka, Alaska station too had a short life. It also opened in response to soldiers' need for recreation in spare time. The KODK from Kodiak, Alaska was the one military radio station that worked without interruptions although it was beset by many technical and logistical problems. The pattern here, as at Sitka, was for soldiers to take the initiative to start the station to meet the entertainment needs of their friends. It went on air on October 28, 1941. It was a great success. Gradually other stations were coming up in other places.

Genesis of the Armed Forces Radio and Televisions Services

The Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor finally forced the hand of the military brass. American entry into the war and the posting of American soldiers in remote areas of the world necessitated that the war Department take steps to educate, entertain and inform the troops in the field. Finally on May 26, 1942 the department issued order creating the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS).

Thomas H. Lewis, a vice president at Young and Rubicam, a Los Angeles advertising agency, was promptly selected to become the first commander of the Armed Force Radio Service. Lewis received his commission as an Army major and later on promoted to the rank of a colonel. He, reportedly, was a 'man of prayer' who always got what he wanted from God. There is no question that Lewis was a capable commander who successfully built the department's Radio service from scratch.

Lewis chose Hollywood as the headquarters of the new service. It was certainly the most natural choice because of its close proximity to the entertainment industry as well as the well-known entertainers who made it their home. The organization was at first set up at the Taft building at Hollywood and Vince Streets. Later, on the advice of the famous movie director Frank Capra, himself a colonel in the army at the time, Lewis moved his operations to the old Twentieth Century Fox building in Hollywood.

Having established himself in his new position, Lewis set out to find the people to work for the new organization. Most of these first hires were his friends and close associates from the radio days in private industry. Lewis and his close associates and their staff during this time are sometimes referred to as the Genesis Group. It included people like True Boardman, Irving Fogel, Austin Peterson, Charles Vanda, Jerry Lewis, Robert Lee and Al Scalpone.

At first AFRS did not have any transmitters of their own? Therefore, they had to borrow short wave transmitters. Lewis sought established stations outside the U.S. to carry AFRS programs. He negotiated with foreign governments and commercial stations for such privileges. Moreover, they also used what is called “B kits” or “Buddy Kits, a sixteen inch turntable delivered with transcriptions of music and programs. As for programs, AFRS procured them from commercial networks in the United States. Talented stars and other entertainers continued to provide AFRS with free programs as well.

Using their time, talents and connections Lewis and his associates worked hard to make AFRS into a viable professional radio network spread throughout the world. At the height of the World War II in 1945, there were about three hundred radio stations under the AFRS. Once the war was over, however, the operations were scaled down and by 1949 the number of stations had declined to about sixty.

The History of Programming

As the early unofficial stations like PCAC and KODK became popular the need for regular programs became necessary. Comedian Joe Brown who visited Alaska during this time supplied his own programs and later encouraged his friends in the entertainment industry to donate programs. KODK produced its own programs. Network programs came to stations in Alaska and other places months after their original broadcast in the continental U.S. Nevertheless, they helped fill the need for programming.

Pearl Harbor had a positive impact on radio programs for army broadcasting. The Japanese attack solidified popular support behind the government and the armed forces. This gave fillip to what later came to be called the Command Performance series on military radio. The idea behind the name was for the soldiers to command the performers to appear for shows on the radio. The first program was broadcast on March 1, 1942. The programs were first transcribed on two discs and then duplicated and send to stations so that they can broadcast them at appropriate times. The American forces in different parts of the world were stationed at different time zones and so there was no possibility of simultaneous broadcasting.

The first six of the command performance shows were produced in New York. Eventually, however, the production moved to Holly Wood because the required talent was available there in abundance. Above all, the listeners wanted celebrities to appear on the show. While the War Department bore the production costs, the entertainment industry supplied the talent, studio facilities and the technical know how for the production. Until the creation of AFRS, Command Performance remained under the Radio Division, bureau of Public Relations in the Department of War. The “Wedding of Dick Tracey,” in 1945 was the most celebrated Command Performance show.

Command performance attracted a host of well-known Hollywood stars like Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Bing Crosby, John and Lionel Barrymore, Betty Hutton, Harry Cooper, Edgar Bergen and Gene Tierney and many others who appeared frequently on the show. Later on other programs like “Mail Call,” “Melody Roundup,” “Jubilee”, and “G.I.Jive” appeared. G.I.Jive was a musical request program hosted by “G.I.Gill,” (Martha “Marty” Wilkerson).

During the World War a large number of programs broadcast on AFRS had originated with the commercial networks. The commercials were removed, from these programs before they were rebroadcast by AFRS, because war department did not want to give the impression that they were endorsing any products or services. The sponsors accepted this arrangement.

What is remarkable is the fact that producers, performers and others agreed to provide their time and programs free of cost. Otherwise it would have been impossible for AFRS to continue to procure programs. AFRS staff produced the educational and informational spots. The spots took the place of commercials in the network programs. The spots dealt with a wide variety of issues and questions such as citizenship, brotherhood, American history and communism. From the very beginning religious programs found a place on all military broadcasting. Once the war was over, the focus of the spot programming shifted from morale building to helping troops adjust to the civilian life back in America. By 1950 AFRS had stopped producing its own programs.

The World War came to an end with the Japanese surrender in 1945. That, however, did not usher in a period of international peace. Before long there ensued the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cold War at times degenerated into proxy hot wars in different places like Korea and Vietnam. U.S. involvement in these wars led to the posting of American soldiers in those places. The Armed Forces Radio and Television followed the American “boys” and “girls” in combat.

Korea

Meanwhile war broke out in Korea and AFRS returned with the American soldiers. The Seoul station was in the Banto Hotel (the old American Embassy Hotel). When the Chinese entered Seoul in December, 1950, the crew moved to a mobile unit that was just completed and retreated to Taegu, Korea. There, in the mobile unit was the birth of AFRS Kilroy. In the Spring of 1951, additional mobile units were assembled and sent to Pusan, Seoul and Chunchon. By May 1951 the situation had stabilized and the Seoul station was reestablished. With the large number of American soldiers stationed in Korea, a number of other stations also were started. Famous TV series "MASH" was born out of American soldiers experiences in Korea.

Birth of TV and AFRTS

With the coming of commercial TV, radio's heydays were coming to a gradual end. Radio would remain popular but not as important as the new television. While the TV focused on game shows and drama and similar entertainment, radio concentrated its energies on news and music. The military's TV broadcasting began on an experimental basis at Limestone AFB in Maine. The results were quite encouraging. Television helped boost the morale of the personnel and their families stationed there. Before long TV became part of military broadcasting and consequently AFRTS became Armed Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS) in 1954.

AFRTS in Vietnam

As the American military presence in Vietnam increased AFRTS opened radio and later on Television stations there. One of the purposes was, of course, to counter Radio Hanoi propaganda. In Vietnam AFRTS, however, had a number of war related casualties. When an Air Force jet fighter crashed into the AFVN station in Udorn, Thailand nine AFRTS people were killed. Moreover, the station staff at Denang had been captured and spent time as North Vietnamese prisoners. Armed Forces Vietnam Network served around 500,000 at one time.

For Vietnam AFRTS developed a program along the lines of "G.I. Jive" of the World War II. This new program hosted by Chris Noel was titled "A Date with Chris". It was an instant hit with the troops. At this point a good many of the programs AFRTS broadcast were produced internally. A number of local disc jockeys helped make hour-long music programs for broadcast. As always, all the programs were uncensored and in Vietnam djs were playing even anti-war songs. Beginning in 1971 AFRTS began to pull out of Vietnam. The last station to close was in Saigon in 1973.

Advances in Technologies

Breathtaking developments were taking place in technological arena impacting the way radio and television signals were transmitted. As a result, starting in 1968, AFRTS began to use satellites to transmit live news and sports broadcasts. Similarly in 1972 color TV transmission took the place of black and white TV. In 1982 AFRTS using a worldwide satellite network, SATNET, began to broadcast programs around the clock. By 1988 short wave radio transmission became outdated and was discontinued. Radio signals were now sent through the satellites. More recently AFRTS uses digital compression technology to send radio and television signals to more than 400 outlets in over 150 countries. The Direct To Sailor (DTS) program help send audio sounds to American navy ships at sea. Also the single channel SATNET was replaced with three global satellite transponders to send live radio and television programs to ships at sea.

AFRTS in Lebanon, Honduras and Panama

When President Reagan sent marines to maintain peace in war torn Lebanon AFRTS dispatched a mobile broadcasting unit to serve them. The terrorist attack on Marine base in Lebanon in 1983 took AFRTS out of service. The attack cost the lives of more than 240 marines. Later on the president withdrew the marines from Lebanon.

During the 1980's while the president encouraged contras against Sadinistas in Nicaragua, a large number of American soldiers were stationed in Honduras. Three mobile broadcasting stations were dispatched to Honduras in support of the soldiers there. In 1989 when US invaded Panama, its ruler Manuel Noriega sought refuge in the Vatican Embassy. In order to drive him out of there, music was played outside the compound with ear splitting volume. The records came from AFRTS with tunes like "I Fought the Law" (and the law won) and "Nowhere to Run."

AFRTS-BC Going Places

The growth in the AFRTS service was notable in its move first from Hollywood to Sun Valley in 1986 and then from Sun Valley to March Air Base in Moreno Valley, California in 1995. This is the hub of all broadcasting activity for the AFRTS. The Broadcast Center has a world-class facility.

Desert Shield and Desert Storm

In 1990 Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait. Immediately President Bush dispatched thousands of American soldiers to the Middle East. Mobile broadcast stations also were sent out to Dhahran and Riyadh, two Saudi Arabian cities. Eventually there emerged the Armed Forces Desert Network with its headquarters in Kuwait. The stations were fed live news via satellite.

Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Hungary, Macedonia, Croatia, Kosovo and other places where American military personnel were stationed always received the AFRTS broadcasts.

AFRTS celebrates the 50th anniversary

In 1992 AFRTS turned 50. It was certainly a time to reflect and look back and celebrate the achievements of the past. That year AFRTS received the George Foster Peabody award for best broadcasting. It also received Golden Mike award from the Pacific Pioneer Broadcasters Association in Los Angeles, California.

AFRTS Today

Meanwhile changes were taking place in music programming. Rather than producing them in house, AFRTS began to purchase them from syndicated services. AFRTS continued to broadcast commercial network news and commentary programs. The programs received through the satellite are screened for commercials. The system replaces the commercials and places command information spots in their place. Today

overseas stations receive 7 channels of music 24 hours a day. Music libraries abroad are renewed on a weekly basis keeping them ahead of the stations in the United States.

The armed forces radio service thus started in 1942 is still around and perhaps it is one of the largest networks of its kind anywhere in the world. No wonder, in 1978 the AFRTS, in recognition of Lewis' services, established a Col. Tom Lewis Award for best broadcasting in military services. The prestigious Tom Lewis Award is given annually to the best broadcaster in the armed forces. A distinguished panel of broadcasters selects the finalist for the award from a list supplied by the three branches of the armed forces, army, navy and air force.

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