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Date: Sat, 2 Aug 2003 12:56:53 -0400  
From: Elizabeth McLeod lizmcl@midcoast.com  
To: old.time.radio@oldradio.net  
Subject: Re: Overseas News Transmissions.

*Anyway, as I was reading, I got to wondering about the technical requirements of getting field reports from the battlefield on the air. Before the relaxation of the recording ban, how did the reporter's story get routed from his transmitter in, say, North Africa, to the network in New York and then live to the rest of the country? Yes, I know that field transmissions were on short wave, and picked up somehow. Was it generally one or two hops to get home, i.e., transmit in N Africa, where it's picked up in, say, London, and then retransmitted to NY, etc? Something like that? And another thing. How did he know WHEN to transmit? He finds a story, writes it, and somehow locates a transmitter. How did the reporter know exactly when to start talking?*

It was actually a lot less complicated than this -- in fact, the entire process was strictly regimented and carefully controlled by the military authorities. The vast majority of reports were given from central transmitting points administered by Allied forces and made available on an equal basis to all networks. Correspondents would line up in the studio and, one by one, would take a seat at the microphone and deliver their reports, according to a schedule worked out well in advance by the military authorities and transmitted to the engineering departments of each network, often over the same circuit used to transmit the actual reports but sometimes over a separate frequency. Actual live broadcasts "from the field" were all but nonexistent -- most reports came from the safety of a studio, far from the actual combat lines.

In the NBC Collection at the Library of Congress, there are a number of recordings by RCA Communications in New York of raw news feeds from Allied headquarters in North Africa. The reports are counted down and cued by a droning-voiced engineer, and often include successive transmissions by reporters representing NBC, CBS, Mutual, Blue, the BBC, and

the CBC, along with not-for-broadcast reports read at dictation speed for the use of the wire services. In these transmissions, the Army engineer can be heard stating something like "Next is Joe Blow reporting for the National Broadcasting Company in New York transmitting two minutes from -- mark. Joe Blow transmitting one minute and forty five seconds from -- mark. Joe Blow transmitting to the National Broadcasting Company in New York one minute and thirty seconds from -- mark. Joe Blow transmitting to the National Broadcasting Company in one minute. One minute from -- mark." And so on until the final countdown: "A report from Joe Blow for NBC in New York in 5 seconds - 4 -- 3 --- 2..." and the final two seconds would be silent to allow the network to pick up the transmission. The New York announcer would be signalled by the engineer to announce the report, and hopefully, the introduction would end by the time of this silent cueing interval, and the report could be smoothly cut into the broadcast. Sometimes this didn't work, and the report would end up being upcut by a second or two, or the wrong circuit would be cut in, or any number of other problems could occur.

But even with these problems, the process was far from random. In fact, the most interesting aspect of these raw feed recordings is the fact that often the reports delivered by the various correspondents are close to *word for word identical*, indicating that the reporters were often doing nothing but reading what was put in front of them by the military authorities, rather than generating original reports of their own. This wasn't always the case, of course, but neither was it a rarity.

Elizabeth