

The Voice of America In the Aegean

The story behind the first floating VOA radio relay station, the Coast Guard cutter 'Courier'

By David Newell and Martin J. Manning

From 1952 to 1964, the Coast Guard cutter "Courier," a unique element in the Voice of America's history, served quietly in the Aegean sea, off the island of Rhodes near the southern coast of Turkey. It broadcast 10 hours a day, from about 3 p.m. until approximately 1 a.m.

Programs were broadcast to Eastern Europe (after 5 p.m.) and to the Middle East (after 8 p.m.) in 16 languages: Persian, Turkish, Azerbaijani, Hebrew, Armenian, Arabic, Tartar, Albanian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Russian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Czech, Georgian, and English.

Those were tense years, and the sea station was alert to crisis. The ship could move to a "hot spot" and begin broadcasting in a matter of hours.

HISTORY

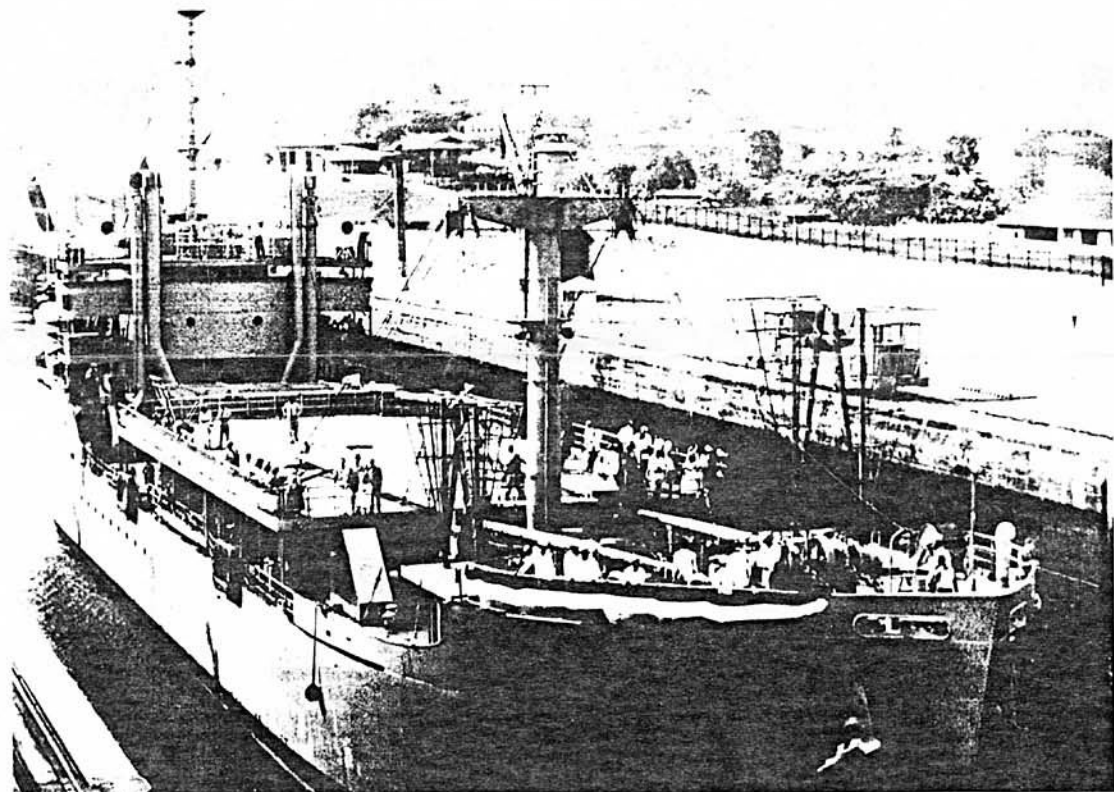
The "Courier" was not the first ship used for broadcasting purposes by the U.S. government. During World War II, the Office of War Information (one of VOA's parent agencies) decided to convert a Greek merchant ship, the "Phoenix," into a broadcast vessel for the Mediterranean. Problems developed, and the departure of the ship was delayed. Eventually, OWI decided to send the ship to East Asia. However, by the time the ship arrived, the war was over.

In August 1950, George Q. Herrick, chief of VOA's Facilities Plans and Development Division, assigned VOA engineer Jean W. Seymour as project engineer to investigate the feasibility of mounting a

complete radio relay station aboard a seagoing vessel.

This project, known as "Operation Vagabond" or "Vagabond A," was approved by the president and the Joint Chiefs of Staff and announced by the Department of State in April 1951. Then Congress was asked for an additional funding authorization for six more proposed "truth transports" to further relay VOA broadcasts to listeners behind the Iron Curtain and to fill the information gap that the Communists had imposed upon East Asia, but these were never built.

Herrick noted two basic reasons for launching a floating radio relay station: 1) the ship could serve as a "temporary" relay base, immediately after consummation of agreements concerning site and frequency



The "Courier" transmitting from the Panama Canal during a shakedown cruise in 1952.

for a permanent relay base, and 2) the project would permit operations where a permanent shore base was not warranted.

The ship would be used to receive radio broadcasts from Washington and to originate others aboard ship. It then would relay the broadcasts through a powerful standard broadcast transmitter (medium wave) and shortwave transmitters—via antennas mounted on the ship. Provisions would be made for shore-based UHF-link connected receiving equipment and a shore-based directional transmitting antenna.

Other features would include Diesel engines capable of generating 1,500,000 watts of electric power; a small studio and control center to use for special programs; iron flasks filled with 150,000 cubic feet of helium; five barrage balloons, each measuring 69 by 33 feet, which could lift the antennas aloft to "place" the broadcasts; and a winch under a hole in the flight deck to spool the balloon cables up and down.

VOA engaged the New York firm, Philip L. Rhodes, to study the project and choose a vessel. After studying vessels built by the U.S. Maritime Commission during the preceding years, the firm recommended a C1-M-AVI type cargo vessel — based on dimensions, displacement, space for equipment, storage and antenna mounting, fuel capacity, and low operating costs.

In the fall of 1951, the nucleus of the original 80-man crew of the ship — Capt. Oscar C.B. Wev (the "Courier's" first captain), Chief Warrant Officer Lodge, Electronics Technician (ET) Chief Henderson, ET First Class Brusar, ET Second Class Koslowski, and ETA Second Class Federicks — was sent to the VOA relay station in Munich to be trained on the RCA BT 105 transmitter, which was then being installed on the ship along with two 40-kilowatt Collins medium-wave transmitters.

The 338-foot, 5,800-ton ship was commissioned in the Bethlehem Steel Co. shipyards, Hoboken, N.J., as the "U.S.S. Courier" on Feb. 15, 1952, and dedicated by President Harry S. Truman from his deck at Pier 4, Maine Ave., S.W., Washington, D.C., on March 4, 1952. The ship then had a six-week shakedown cruise in the Caribbean, the Canal Zone, and Mexico.

Then, as stores and small arms were being loaded, they were told that their next assignment was to change from Korea to the island of Rhodes, Greece, in the eastern Mediterranean, where a receiving station had been erected.

The "Courier" could only operate within the territorial waters of nations which granted their permission. It could not broadcast while on the high seas. (Article 28, Section 1, Paragraph 5, of the Atlantic City Convention and Regulations prohibited "broadcasting by mobile stations at sea and over the sea.")

The ship arrived in Rhodes, which had been under Italian domination from 1912 until the end of World War II, in August 1952 and began broadcasting on Sept. 7.

At the time, Greece was just seven years out of World War II and five years out of a bitter civil war against communism. So the "Courier" encountered a mixed reaction from the economically poor inhabitants. When the "Courier" finally arrived in



Hiking through the island of Rhodes one afternoon, U.S. Coast Guard "Courier" crew members found an idyllic spot called "Island Valley Center of the Butterflies," where two native Greeks invited them to share a beer.

Rhodes, "things were touch and go," says former crew member David Newell. "A Communist newspaper had just published an article stating that a submarine had been sent to sink the 'Courier.' Capt. Wev and his crew sailed the ship into a protected harbor and waited out an anxious night," but there was no attempt to sink the "Courier."

When the excitement was over, the crew found a Rhodes still recovering from the effects of the war. In time, however, the "Courier" crew members were accepted, even loved, and the people on the island began to feel as though they were part of the world again.

LEARNING AND LIVING ABOARD THE 'COURIER'

Many lessons were learned during the six-week shakedown cruise through the Caribbean, the Canal Zone (where the ship also broadcast programs for three weeks with a VOA feed from Panama), and Mexico.

The cruise continued to Washington, D.C., where the first accidental launching of a barrage balloon took place (the broadcast band antenna was carried aloft by a helium-inflated barrage balloon).

The barrage balloon continued to present problems on various occasions. It broke free to float to Turkey and scare the local populace — including the cattle. Several times the balloon was attacked with pitchforks and shotguns. On one occasion, the balloon was returned with two shoe-sole patterns cut out. The U.S. government paid several farmers for the loss of revenue because their cows purportedly stopped giving milk after watching the balloon alight in their pasture. Finally, VOA's Ivan Boor ended the problem by designing an antenna that could be supported between the two masts of the ship.

Frequently, ships that were unfamiliar with the Aegean would "buzz" the "Courier" on the way into harbor, and on several occasions, the radio frequency set their ves-

sels on fire due to arcing in their rigging. The loose cargo stashed on decks would be the first to go up in flames.

The "Courier" would always fly a warning signal, only when it was on the air, and warnings were published in all of the "Notice to Mariners" publications, but some skippers chose not to heed them.

In the years that followed, a sizeable antenna farm and receiving site was constructed on a large hill called Monte Smith, just south of the city of Rhodes. There were many anti-jamming antennas designed and tested at this site, and a UHF link bonded the ship to the site. Most of the program material was received fresh from various feeders at the Monte Smith site and relayed to the "Courier" via the UHF link. The ship had its own receiving equipment in case of a geographic move, but the material from Monte Smith was usually of a better quality.

THE 'COURIER' FAMILY

In the 12 years that followed the "Courier's" arrival in the Aegean, many permanent friendships were formed. Marriages between the locals and the crew occurred, babies were born, and the crew became as attached to Rhodes as the inhabitants did to the crewmen. Newell says that "so many many things happened that it would put the movie 'Mr. Roberts' to shame."

The closeness of the "Courier" crew was such that what deaths did occur, from freak accidents, were very upsetting to the "Courier" community.

As a result of both the closeness of the crew and the sense of mission, many crewmen returned for second and third tours or extended their duty.

THE COURIER CLUB

Beach parties, softball games, biking: some of these activities spawned nonprofit clubs that helped local orphanages and other needy groups. But the premier club was the



Cmdr. Oscar C.V. Wev points to the "Courier's" ship's lofty antenna equipment as he is interviewed in the early 1950s by VOA reporter Bob Jones, left.

Courier Club, and it is this group that organized the three previous "Courier" reunions of the crew.

The Courier Club was started in 1953 at Ali Beach with a \$5 donation from each crew member, both officers and enlisted men. The club remained at the location for one year, then moved to a roomier area — complete with softball field.

The crew members hired Vassilus (Bill) Romeos, a native of Rhodes, to be the club's first business manager and number one bartender. Romeos remained in charge of the club for the entire time the "Courier" was in Rhodes and today is still the proprietor of the "Elli" night club of Rhodes, the site of the original "Courier" club.

As time went on, the club prospered. It contributed money — and time — to the needy in the local area and transmitted both an American spirit of compassion as well as a sense of optimism and just plain fun. The club, in essence, brought America up close to the people of Rhodes.

THE 'COURIER' IS RETIRED

The "Courier" remained at Rhodes until May 1964, when a land-based VOA relay facility replaced it, and then sailed for the last time in July 1964.

The physical facilities of the club and its furniture were left to Vassilus, who still runs it. The assets of the club were divided among the crewmen according to length of duty. Proceeds from remaining liquor went to rebuild the Coast Guard Academy Chapel.

The ship was taken to a shipyard in Piraeus, Greece, for 30 days' work on the engines. Its transmitters and alternators were removed and given to the Greek government. The "Courier" then sailed home to Yorktown, Va., with stops in Naples, Barcelona, and the Azores, and converted to a freighter used to train Coast Guard



George Q. Herrick, right, then chief of the Voice of America's Radio Facilities Plans and Development Division, explains the powerful transmitting equipment of the "Courier" to a group of VOA and government officials at the vessel's commissioning on Feb. 15, 1952. From left: Foy D. Kohler, chief of VOA; Howland Sergeant, deputy assistant secretary of state for public affairs; Cmdr. Oscar C.B. Wev, the "Courier's" captain; Dr. Wilson Compton, administrator of the U.S. International Information Administration (a predecessor of USIA).

Reserve units. Ultimately, the ship was decommissioned as a reserve ship, stripped of its cargo booms, and then sent to a dead ship fleet, where the vessel remained until it was scrapped.

Newell says that "although the concept of the 'Courier' was brilliant, times changed and the cost of running a land-based station drove it to extinction." Still, its 12 years of duty were unique, and the "Courier" served her country well.

THE 1989 REUNION

On April 15, 1989, the third USCGC "Courier" Reunion was held in Orlando, Fla. Seventy-nine former crew members, many of whom were from the original crew, along with 154 spouses, children, and friends attended the banquet and reminisced about old times.

The Voice of America was represented by Rosie Tabailloix, widow of Paul Tabailloix, relay broadcast supervisor.

The reunion ended with promises to meet again in 1992.

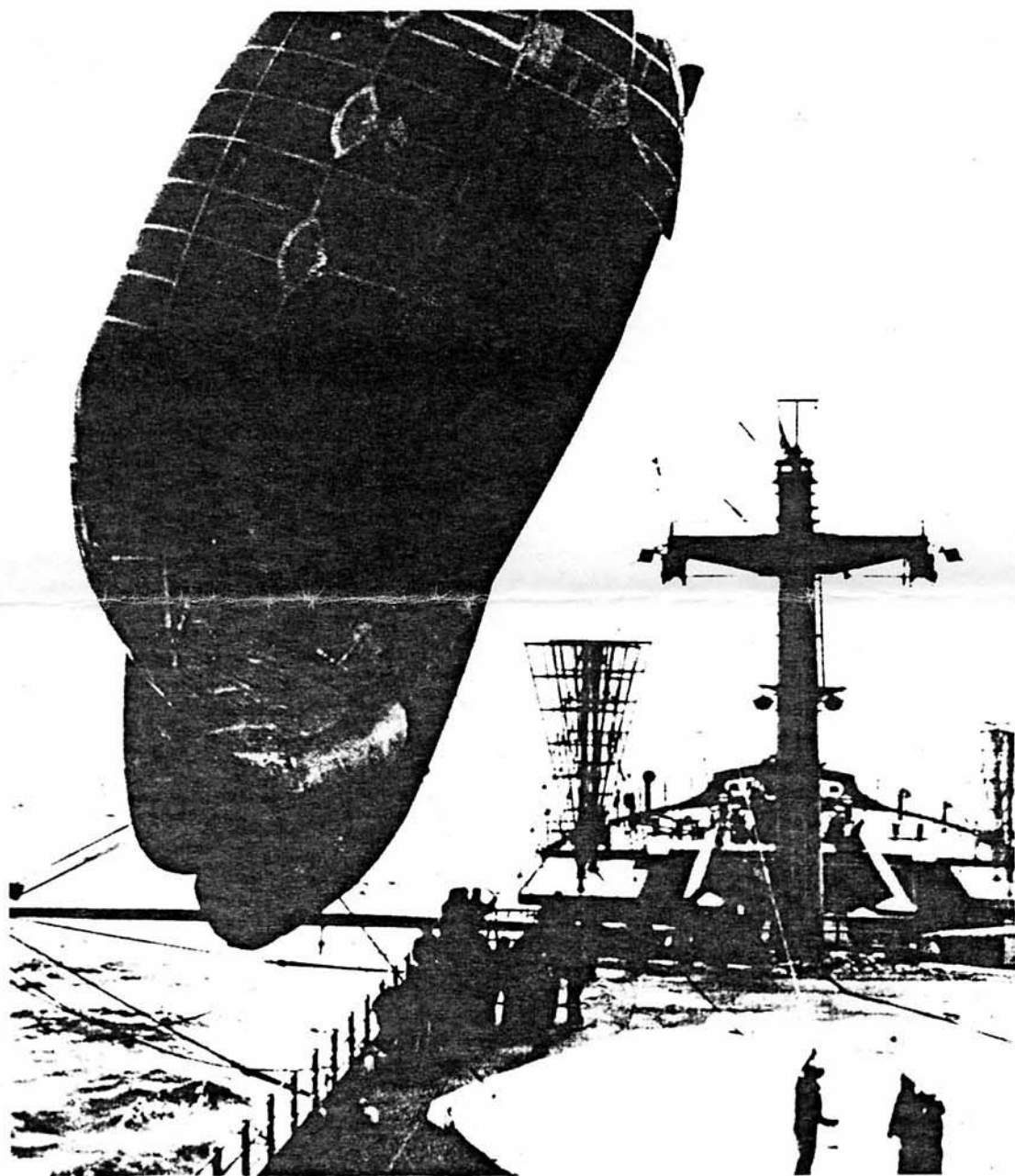
The group has compiled a 1989 "Courier" reunion book, filled with photos and data from this year's reunion, and two tapes: one, a "Courier" slide documentary by Bob Haldi, and another of the reunion by Jim Nettles, both crew members. The book

is available for \$12 from Reunions Inc., P.O. Box 876, Orlando, Fla. 32802-0876. The tapes are \$25 each. The documentary tape is available from Bob Haldi, 616 Ridgewood Court, Oakbrook, Ill., 60521, and the reunion tape can be obtained from Jim Nettles at 6437 Windham Ave., Alexandria, Va. 22310.

Newell, who now lives in Massachusetts and works in infrared research and development for the Air Force, helped organize the third "Courier" reunion. He is seeking missing crew members for the fourth "Courier" reunion in 1992. Newell requests that interested readers contact him at 42 Mill St., Pepperell, Mass. 01463; telephone (508) 433-2856.

USIA's Historical Collection, Rm. G-085, HHS-S, Switzer Building, 330 C St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20547, includes an oversized scrapbook on the "Courier," with press releases, news clippings, and photos of the ship and its crew, and as a file on "Project Vagabond."

David Newell served as an electronics technician with the "Courier" in 1958 and 1959. Martin J. Manning is USIA historical librarian.



Standing on the flight deck, crew members prepare for a test transmission in the early 1950s by launching a helium-inflated barrage balloon.