

CLANDESTINE CORNERC A S T R O ' S   R A D I O   R E B E L D E

On February 23, 1958, underground members of Fidel Castro's revolutionary movement, MR-26-7, in Havana, in an effort to publicize their resistance to the Batista regime, kidnapped famed race driver Juan Fangio. Fangio was released unharmed several days later after the movement had received the publicity it sought.

On the same evening Fangio was abducted, a more important development was afoot in the mountainous country of Cuba's Oriente Province. Transmission bugs had been worked out and the first rebel broadcast went out directly from the Sierra Maestra.

Crackling across the shortwave 40 meter band from Oriente to Pinar del Rio went the message, "Aqui Radio Rebelde! Aqui Radio Rebelde! Transmitiendo desde la Sierra Maestra en territorio libre de Cuba."

A few days earlier the station, likely a revamped amateur station, had been conducted, but it had not been a propaganda success. There were only two listeners to this first test broadcast. One was a farmer who lived across the road from the transmitter site. The other was Fidel Castro himself, who had the only radio receiver in the rebel camp. But within days the bugs were eliminated and Radio Rebelde became a permanent fixture on the air. Though the station long since has left the Sierra Maestra, the call Radio Rebelde is still heard broadcasting Castro's propaganda messages.

In the months that followed these early transmissions, the broadcasts of Radio Rebelde and the other sporadic broadcasters became more popular with the Cuban people, particularly after censorship of the normal channels of communication was instituted by Batista. There was a general blackout of news of the insurrection by the stations controlled by the government.

Apparently in July 1958, and perhaps later, Radio Rebelde was still using a mobile radio unit, which the guerrillas moved from place to place to prevent location of their headquarters. A number of frequencies began to be reported by listeners in the United States. Listeners in Pennsylvania and Indiana reported hearing these clandestine broadcasting stations during the mid to late evening hours on frequencies that included 15,320 and 14,240 kc/s. The latter frequency in particular seemed to indicate amateur radio equipment was still being used by the rebel forces for their propaganda broadcasts.

DRAMATIC NEWS

There were many dramatic moments in the Radio Rebelde programs. On August 18 and 19, 1958, Fidel Castro spoke to the people of Cuba and Latin America concerning the major battle then underway between his forces and a reported 14 battalions of government army troops, naming units, casualties and the details of the battles.

The rebels had increased their attacks in Oriente Province. The army detachment was surrounded near La Plata on the south coast. Batista's air force failed to do major damage to the rebels. Finally the commander of the government forces, Maj. Jose Quevedo surrendered his troops to Castro, considered the turning point of the revolution. Radio Rebelde reported, "hundreds of soldiers had been killed and wounded" and 442 wounded government troops were released to the Cuban Red Cross by Castro. Due to the news blackout, the population tuned to Radio Rebelde for news of the combat in Oriente.

Early in September, the rebel radio announced that Castro was going to begin an offensive. Six columns of guerrillas set out across the island to assist smaller groups of rebels in the Escambray Mts.

That autumn, Radio Rebelde announced that all candidates for office in the scheduled November elections would be disqualified from running again for the next 30 years once he took power.

The Cuban people awoke on the first day of 1959 to learn that Batista had fled the country. Radio Rebelde was then the most listened to station in Cuba. While the call Radio Rebelde continued to be heard on shortwave for a while, now one hears the slogan only on certain of the Cuban medium wave channels.