

Amazing War Effort by a Small Group

by

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There can be few, if any, radio clubs in the world to claim a record like the New Zealand Radio DX League. The League, formerly the New Zealand DX Club, has the distinction of taking part in monitoring radio stations involving three wars in 23 years. The DX members brought hope to thousands of people in many countries who poured their gratitude and praise on a group of radio listeners who gave many hours listening to enemy shortwave broadcasting stations.

It all began early in 1941, when, as president of the Otago branch, I was called to the radio inspector's office in Dunedin to meet two men who questioned me closely about my hobby and what I listened to. What followed set the pattern for an important role DXers were to play during World War II in the next four years and the ones to follow during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. The two men were from the Security Intelligence Bureau (now Security Intelligence Service), and asked me to set up a system to monitor enemy shortwave broadcasting stations. The assignment was to report on any item broadcast about New Zealand and New Zealanders. Through this, the bureau was able to trace the source of the items and whether there was any leakage from New Zealand other than by official means.

An interesting point arose out of this meeting when I mentioned that Radio Tokyo (NHK) was sending out questionnaires with verifications, asking for information such as where were the nearest telegraph office, transformers, tram lines, nearest railway station, distance from the sea, and many other vital details. They were greatly interested, and it looked as if the Japanese were collecting data about countries with which they were soon to be at war. I was able to supply some of these forms.

A team of Otago members, including Arthur Cushen, of Invercargill, was set up to carry out the monitoring. Little did they and other DXers who undertook this task realize what it would lead to in the remaining war years and the ones that followed. At this stage, Germany and Italy were the countries with which New Zealand was at war. It meant monitoring the shortwave stations in these countries, and it expanded to enemy-operated stations that had been captured.

When I entered the New Zealand Army later that year, Arthur took over the DX control, and I recall taking an old battery-powered Gulbrandsen Radio to various camps in the South Island. Fortunately, being in a Divisional Signals unit I had special permission to carry out monitoring when duties permitted. Radios used by DXers were ordinary domestic ones, mainly mantle ones, and the aerials were simple dipoles. I transferred to the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1943 and was able to continue monitoring in the South Pacific. When Japan entered the war in December 1941, it brought more monitoring of stations in the Far East, including the station in Batavia of the Dutch East Indies (PLP, 11.000 MHZ), which was the strongest.

While the enemy had files on New Zealand, much of their news was propaganda, and exaggerated. They concentrated on the fighting in the Middle East and Italy and that related to the 2nd Division New Zealand Expeditionary Force, sinking of warships and other naval engagements, and shooting down planes with New Zealand crews.

Some idea of what was monitored by DXers is outlined by Arthur Cushen in a supplement, "Secrets of Wartime Listening to Enemy Broadcasts," to his *Radio Listeners Guide* in 1990. He obtained the clearance of classified information from the Attorney General, Right Hon. David Lange. It tells many interesting things that were broadcast by enemy stations. Now, so many years later, it must seem strange to the modern generation.

Japan entered the war on December 7, 1941, and New Zealand was drawn closer to the likelihood of an invasion. In March 1942, Berlin was broadcasting that the last bastion in the South Pacific was Australia and New Zealand, and if Australia fell there was no hope for New Zealand, as the Japanese moved quickly south through the

Pacific.

Prisoners' Messages of Cheer

Listening to the enemy shortwave stations resulted in what was to become the greatest operation by DXers that brought hope to thousands of anxious families back home in New Zealand, Australia and England. It was to earn the DX club its greatest accolade through the work of the Prisoner of War Monitoring Service that resulted in an estimated 6,000 messages being handled.

It began when those monitoring the enemy shortwave broadcasts began picking up names and later messages from Australian and New Zealand servicemen and civilians who were prisoners of war.

Initially, DXers began picking up and sending messages to next-of-kin. I recall meeting one of my old work mates on leave at a service club in Christchurch and asked how his father was doing, to be told he was missing in action. I knew he was a prisoner of war in Germany, as I had heard a message some weeks earlier and decided to tell him the news. Arthur had a similar case, and it was realized that official word was slow. The result was the establishment of the Prisoner of War Monitoring Service. Arthur became the central point for pooling reports from members throughout the country. Reception varied throughout the country, and a vital word in the address may be heard by one listener and not another.

Equipment in those days was usually household radios. There were no tape recorders, and it was a case of getting it right the first time, and often the only time, it was broadcast. At the height of the monitoring service, signals were being checked from Berlin, Rome, Warsaw, Tokyo, Shanghai, Peking, Bangkok, Penang, Singapore, Manila, and Batavia.

As the war impetus increased and more members were called into the services, it fell in the main to Arthur Cushen and a few who were not in the armed forces. While in the Army, and later RNZAF Signals, I was able to assist with monitoring from various locations in New Zealand and the South Pacific. The benefit of the latter location was shown in a letter Arthur sent to me in November 1944, acknowledging a report with messages picked up in Fiji which were not heard in New Zealand. That year, 1,100 POW messages were picked up from enemy stations.

Unlike the fast service the Germans and Italians provided, with names of men broadcast soon after internment, the Japanese often took two years before a message was received that a civilian internee in Singapore or some other part of the Far East was alive. During the Italian campaign it was not uncommon to receive messages from men recently captured and to pass them on to relatives before they were reported missing by the New Zealand government, thanks to picking up a German station known as Radio Debunk.

Initially, Berlin would broadcast a list of up to ten names and addresses, but no messages, during their news. During 1942, the Germans introduced a programme and titled it "Anzac Tattoo." Later it included messages and entertainment. This programme continued until near the end of the war in Europe, when enemy stations were silenced.

Examples of these messages were:

From: Charlie Venning, POW No. 33441, Stalag 18
To: Mrs. E. C. Venning, 6A Cadiman Street North, Avon, Christchurch
Text: Dear Mum and all, loving Christmas wishes to all. Remember me to all my friends. Always thinking of you. Your loving son. Chas.

From: Corporal H. A. Milne, POW No. 127920, Stalag 7A
To: Mrs. Milne, 44 Naylor Street, Hamilton
Text: All is well. Have had several letters but no parcels. Hope shop is doing well. Love. Harold.

There was little doubt that messages from prisoners in Japanese hands were ones that indicated to monitors

how hard life was for those in the Far East camps. It was not until the war ended that we learned of the stark conditions they had gone through in the past four years. For many back home, the messages were the first they had received in two or so years. The prisoners asked for news from back home. An attempt was made to get the government to send messages over the Australian Broadcasting Commission stations, which transmitted an hour long programme of Australian messages each day. These were picked up by the Japanese and delivered to the prisoners, but the New Zealand government did nothing.

Grateful letters with glowing tributes poured into Arthur's home every day from families thrilled with news of loved ones behind barbed wire in camps throughout Europe and the Far East. The number of messages picked up by New Zealand DXer was estimated at around 6,000 from the first one in 1941 until the war finally ended in 1945.

The Korean War in the 50s saw the League again in action, monitoring Radio Peking for prisoners who, in the main, were Americans and British. No mail service existed between Korea and America, and while New Zealand was technically at war, the mail service was unaffected. As a result, the hundreds of messages from New Zealand made their way back to the states. News of the DXers' work became widely known in America after *The New York Times* and other leading newspapers ran stories of the monitoring service.

After the war ended, the United States Embassy in Wellington wrote a letter thanking the League. The ambassador wrote, "The work which your organization performed during the conflict in Korea was, I should think, of immeasurable value in alleviating anxiety on the part of countless relatives of allied prisoners of war held in custody by the communists."

The League's final Prisoner of War Monitoring Service was in 1964, when all their previous work was repeated listening to Hanoi Radio in North Vietnam. Technology had advanced, and recorded messages were airmailed to next of kin in America.

So ended an outstanding performance which must rate as one of the rarest to be performed by any organization in the world of DX listening.

Footnote: Today, 58 years later in 2003, the DX League is still receiving requests from overseas researchers in countries like Australia and England, for information on the Prisoner of War Monitoring Service.

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