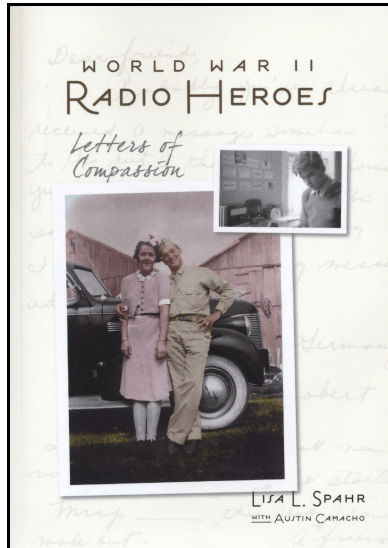


A second edition of *World War II Radio Heroes* was published in 2013. See pgs. 7-8 of this review for comments on the 2d ed. and new information on availability and URL.



**World War II Radio Heroes:
Letters of Compassion**

by Lisa L. Spahr

www.powletters.com

2008, ISBN 978-0-9762181-7-3, 76 pages, softcover

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The story of POW message monitoring during World War II is a familiar one in the shortwave listening community. Many SWLs monitored the Axis shortwave stations in Germany, Japan, Singapore and elsewhere for such messages, which were usually voiced by announcers. The monitors would write down the POW's contact information and send the POW's loved ones a postcard or letter summarizing the message. These messages were often the first time that a family learned of the status of a husband, son or brother. For more on POW monitoring, see www.ontheshortwaves.com ("DX History/POW Monitoring"), and *On the Short Waves, 1923-1945*, pp. 246-48.¹

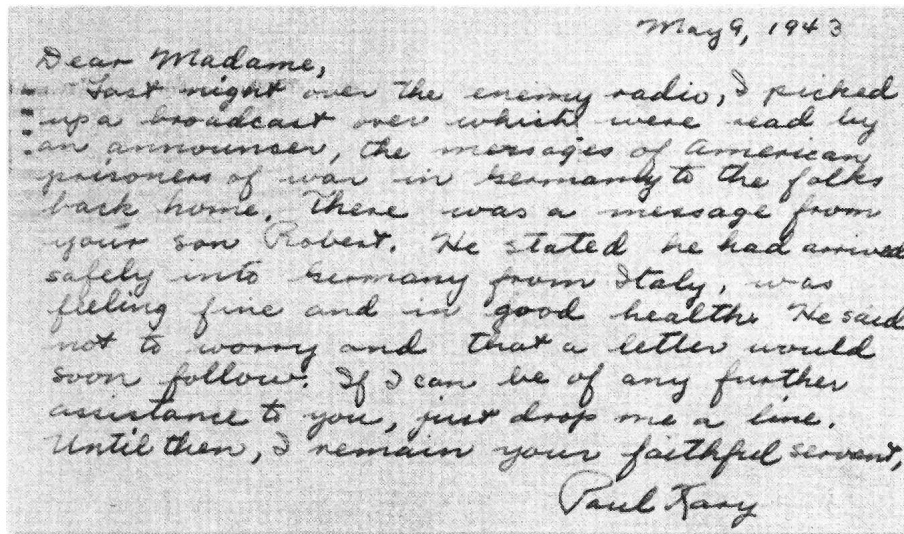
SWLs have usually viewed POW monitoring from the standpoint of the listener: times and frequencies monitored, and the techniques used for jotting down the information and contacting the family. (Most listeners hand wrote or typed individual postcards or letters. Some used specially designed forms.) Author Lisa L. Spahr, in her recent book, *World War II Radio Heroes: Letters of Compassion*, looks at POW monitoring from the viewpoint of the POW's family, for this is the story of the monitoring of an over-the-air message from her grandfather, Robert May Spahr, a 25-year old army infantryman who spent 26 months as a POW in Germany. While examining the contents of an old trunk full of his wartime items, she discovered 69 cards and letters received by Robert's mother—her great grandmother—in May 1943 after Robert's name was mentioned in a German POW broadcast on May 8 of that year. (Robert died in 1984.)

To students of shortwave history, the most interesting part of the book is the good-quality reproduction of 35 of the cards and letters, and the author's focus on various aspects of the

¹Jerome S. Berg, *On the Short Waves, 1923-1945—Broadcast Listening in the Pioneer Days of Radio* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999).

correspondence. In addition, the author shares responses that she received from a few relatives of the monitors whom she was able to locate.

One postcard that caught my eye was from a listener whose name the author gave as “Paul Kany” of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. His handwritten signature could easily have been mistaken for that, but I recognized the name as Paul Kary, with whom I had had considerable correspondence 20 years ago when



May 9, 1943

Dear Madame,

Last night over the enemy radio, I picked up a broadcast over which were read by an announcer, the messages of American prisoners of war in Germany to the folks back home. There was a message from your son Robert. He stated he had arrived safely into Germany from Italy, was feeling fine and in good health. He said not to worry and that a letter would soon follow. If I can be of any further assistance to you, just drop me a line. Until then, I remain your faithful servant,

Paul Kary

he donated his QSLs to the Committee to Preserve Radio Verifications, of which I am the chair. Kary, whose full name was Paul A. Karagianis, will be remembered by DXers of the 1950s as a professional monitor at the U.S. government’s Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) listening post on Cyprus. His DX news appeared in various magazines and club bulletins under the pseudonym “Middle East Correspondent.” Kary moved from Portage, Pennsylvania to Johnstown in 1941 at age 15 and began his listening in 1942 with a Sears Silvertone receiver (which he soon replaced with a Hallicrafters Sky Buddy). He would have been 17 when he heard the POW message about Robert Spahr. Kary joined the military in 1944, and the FBIS in 1948. He graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in 1952 and worked for FBIS, usually in a non-monitoring capacity, during most of the years through 1974. However, he did three monitoring tours on Cyprus during the 1940s and 1950s. Eventually he retired to the U.K. His hobby focus was on SWBC listening until 1982, when he switched to utilities. He dropped his radio monitoring activities in 1988.

Two aspects of the POW monitoring story as told through the cards and letters in this book are worthy of special note. One is “SWAM,” the Short-Wave Amateur Monitors Club, a group of listeners organized by Mrs. Ruby Yant of Lima, Ohio. She assigned each member a specific night of the week to monitor so that no messages would be missed. A copy of a SWAM newsletter (containing a membership list), and a SWAM postcard invitation to membership, both reproduced in the book, indicate that the group was formed in 1943 and had around 50 members in 1944. It was active until 1945.

The membership list is interesting. Of the 48 persons who were members on January 1, 1944, fully 21, or 44%, were women. Of six new members welcomed in March 1944, four were women. The percentage of women in SWAM is far greater than the female representation in either the ham radio or the shortwave listening communities, suggesting that POW monitoring was a home front activity that extended well beyond organized hams and SWLs. Some of the monitors had themselves been the recipients of messages about their imprisoned loved ones, or were listening in hopes of hearing such a

message. Mrs. Yant's exact connection with radio is unclear. However, the SWAM materials are informal and non-technical, with a look and feel different from what might be expected of the radio cognoscenti.

Listening Post!

ALEX. E. GORDON, Indianapolis, Ind.—legislative representative of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen—brings good news to hundreds of mothers of missing servicemen, through his hobby and his faithful 16-tube, 1940 model

MIDWEST RADIO

ALWAYS a short-wave radio enthusiast, Alex E. Gordon has spent many a night listening over his 16-tube Midwest Radio to foreign broadcasts. Several months ago he noticed that the Nazis, along with their propaganda, were mentioning the names of a few American prisoners each night. Mr. Gordon began to jot down the names and sent post-cards to the parents of the men named. The response to these cards was so instantaneous and gratifying that Mr. Gordon induced others to join with him in a Short Wave Listeners Club—each member of which is allotted a definite time at his listening post.

Mr. Gordon feels that he is amply repaid for his trouble by such grateful expressions of appreciation he has received: "It is a patriotic service for which I cannot thank you enough" . . . God bless you for your kindness" . . . and other similar statements received by this Midwest Radio owner.

Just another case where a Midwest Radio, famous for its ability to pull in long distance stations even under the most adverse conditions, is doing yeoman duty, until Victory will permit us to turn from our production of radio and electronic devices for our Armed Forces and resume the manufacture of finer radio receivers—at lowest Factory - To - You prices and at savings up to 50%.

BUY MORE WAR BONDS

SEND FOR **FREE INTERNATIONAL TIME CHART CALENDAR**

An attractive 4-color calendar with International Time Calculator will be sent FREE on your request if accompanied by 10c in stamps or coin for which we will send you a War Savings Stamp.

MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION
DEPT. 11-G ESTABLISHED 1920 CINCINNATI, OHIO

February, 1944

429

Some of the SWAM monitors approached their job with a vengeance. Although surely not typical, at least two SWAM members had relayed 3,000 messages each. Another, Sanford Lowe of New York City, had sent over 5,000, and, according to a website referenced in the book (see note 3 below), eventually exceeded the 10,000 mark. (Both of these members were men.)² In one issue of the SWAM newsletter, members were alerted that a photo of one of their number, Alex E. Gordon, would appear in *Radio News* and *Popular Mechanics*. I dug up the February 1944 issue of the former, which shows Mr. Gordon (see left). Surely the club that is referenced was SWAM.

World War II Radio Heroes also reminds us of a usually-overlooked aspect of POW monitoring: the suspicion with which it was viewed by the government. This is mentioned in a website³—itself very informative—which is referenced by the author; in a 1943 *American Legion Magazine* article which she cites; in the comments of a son of one of the monitors of the Robert Spahr message whom Lisa Spahr located; and in a *Monitoring Times* article on POW monitoring (see note 2 above). It is also confirmed by my own research.

Some of the cards and letters depicted in the book seem to echo the issue. One begins, "By accident tuned my radio onto a German station and heard" Another: "I tuned in last Sat. night on a

²The work of one who had sent 3,000, Leroy F. Schum of Reading, Pennsylvania, was featured in *Monitoring Times* ("Homefront Hero of Word War II," July 1995, p. 30). Schum's work, along with Lowe's and that of other monitors, is also discussed in Alice Brannigan, "SWLs: WW II's Homefront Heroes!" *Popular Communications*, February 1999, p. 10.

³"Honoring Those Who Listened," <http://www.usmm.org/duffyhonoring.html>.

foreign broadcast quite by chance” Another: “While dialing among the shortwave stations on our radio late Saturday night, my father accidentally picked up a German broadcast from North Africa.” And: “In case you should have missed a message to you by your son, which I by chance overheard on the radio”

Shortwave listeners know that the casual or accidental reception of a station with sufficient clarity to permit one to write down the content of messages, and contact information, and without any advance preparation or premeditated focus on the task at hand (and with no recording equipment), while certainly not impossible, is a fairly unlikely scenario, even in the case of a powerful station like “Zeesen,” as Berlin shortwave was known. Were these writers attempting to inoculate themselves against charges that, by listening to foreign broadcasts, they were facilitating enemy propagandizing and being disloyal? Most of the cards and letters did not indicate that the monitoring was accidental—in many cases it was clearly intentional and well planned—suggesting that citizen concern over the government’s attitude toward their activities, whatever it was, was small. After all, information on enemy shortwave broadcasts was hardly secret. The times and frequencies of the news from Rome, Berlin and Tokyo were reported daily on the radio page of *The New York Times*.

As the author indicated, *The American Legion Magazine* article cited in the book⁴ mainly provided details on the official sources of prisoner information. In its folksy style it also said:

There are several ways by which the folks might hear about it [a prisoner’s status], but only two are reliable, and only one of them is official. If Pop tunes in on short-wave Radio Berlin, he might hear Johnny’s name among those which Axis broadcasters announce as prisoners. That is neither reliable nor official. It is Nazi propaganda which is flavored with American names, sometimes fictitious, as bait to get us to listen. It might be true, but there’s nothing anyone can do about it and the worst move that Pop can make under such circumstances is to write a letter to somebody, or spend money on a phone call or a telegram. He’d probably get the wrong party anyway, and even if he talked to Major General Allen Gullion, who is Provost Marshal General and handles the whole prisoner of war problem, the General couldn’t tell Pop whether the Nazis were lying or telling the truth. It’s tough—mighty tough—but Mom and Pop will just have to sit tight and wait for the next development. ¶This can take the form of either an official or an unofficial notice from the War Department, in Washington. * * * *

There is no doubt that the POW messages were “unofficial,” and part of a propaganda effort, presumably intended to attract listeners and perhaps highlight supposedly-humane POW treatment by the Axis countries. There is no specific evidence cited for the proposition that some of the names were fictitious. Clearly, however, the article seeks to discourage reliance on POW news contained in enemy broadcasts.

The extent to which reported FBI visits were part of a concrete effort to “monitor the monitors,” or just isolated events, is unknown. What is clear from my review of wartime reporting in *The New York Times* is that the government did not like, and actively discouraged, citizen monitoring. It felt that the POW broadcasts were merely bait in the Axis propaganda war, and were intended to weaken the morale

⁴A. D. Rathbone IV, “Johnny Doughboy, Prisoner,” *The American Legion Magazine*, October 1943, p. 13.

and the “will to fight” of relatives and friends of missing men.⁵

By 1943, unnamed government officials were reportedly “increasingly concerned” over citizen POW monitoring, which the *Times* said was “playing directly into the hands of the country’s enemies.” The monitors were, “in fact, primarily building up an audience for the propaganda broadcasts,” and because there was no assurance of the information’s accuracy, the monitors might be “precipitating needless disappointment and heartache.”⁶ The American Red Cross reported that hundreds of families had received “false casualty reports,” and that enemy news of prisoners should be ignored. It quoted the FBI to the effect that “the spreading of such reports indicated a substantial force of enemy representatives strategically placed throughout the country, working under enemy orders to undermine American morale.”⁷ Although SWAM was not specifically associated with false reports, might the tenor of the government’s reaction to citizen POW monitoring cause the man or woman on the street to actually mistake Ruby Yant and her SWAM cohorts for enemy agents?

In 1944, the *Times* pointed out a darker side of POW monitoring: “several self-appointed busybodies” calling relatives and asking for “fees ranging from \$3 to \$100 before repeating what they heard,” or suggesting that “a few dollars would help to meet ‘expenses.’” It suggested that the numerous “well-intentioned and patriotic” civilian monitors should leave the matter to the government.⁸ A *Times* reader (and SWAM member) responded, and cautioned against making “the good suffer with the bad” and “smear[ing] those of us who are really rendering patriotic and altruistic service, absolutely gratis . . .” He noted that the hundreds of grateful replies from relatives, each one providing further comfort, proved the efficacy of the service, and he observed that the SWAM constitution prohibited soliciting funds for services rendered.⁹

The matter came up again in a book published in 1945. The authors of *Wartime Racketeers* included in their review of scams on POW families the relaying of shortwave broadcast POW information—sometimes “garbled, incomplete and inaccurate”—to relatives, by hams, for a “substantial fee,” normally \$25.¹⁰ This was accomplished days before the arrival of the information through official channels. Offenders were said to have lost their ham licenses and become liable to criminal prosecution. However, as the *Times* pointed out in a review of the book, in fact no ham had been found guilty of such charges. “The offenders,” it pointed out, “were unscrupulous short-wave listeners and not representative of a patriotic group of hobbyists.”¹¹

The military warned families not to accept enemy broadcast “news” as authentic, and not to be victimized by persons attempting to “sell” such information and to encourage them to listen to enemy

⁵ *The New York Times*, January 17, 1942, p. 3.

⁶ *The New York Times*, May 9, 1943, p. X7.

⁷ *The New York Times*, September 20, 1943, p. 7.

⁸ *The New York Times*, March 12, 1944, p. X7.

⁹ *The New York Times*, March 26, 1944, p. X5.

¹⁰ Harry Lever & Joseph Young, *Wartime Racketeers* (New York, NY: G. T. Putnam’s, 1945), pp. 31-32.

¹¹ *The New York Times*, April 8, 1945, p. 100.

broadcasts. They should “close their ears and pocketbooks” to the monitors, said an army official.¹²

Meanwhile, of the 35 cards and letters reproduced in *World War II Radio Heroes*, one writer asked, “Will you please donate a stamp or so to keep up the good work of message relays?” and another gave Robert’s mother the name of a person who had donated postage as thanks for a message that she had received from the writer. There were no other references to payments or expenses.

It is important to note that there was indeed a government program designed to provide POW information free to relatives “in a matter of hours” by way of an initial telegram from the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service (an early name of the FBIS for which Paul Kary later worked). By one governmental account, a preliminary telegram to relatives contained the name of the captive and the country holding him, and a promise to check the accuracy of the information and advise further. This check (to confirm the soldier’s serial number, whether he was in the combat area, and whether he was a POW) was said to take only 24 hours, and if the soldier’s status as a POW was confirmed the full message was then sent to the relative in a second telegram.¹³ By another account, the full message was always sent, and the telegram either confirmed his status as a POW or indicated that it could not be confirmed.¹⁴ In April 1945, a month before the war ended in Germany, four months before it ended in Japan, German and Japanese POW messages were being intercepted by the government at a rate of 115 a day.¹⁵

How well the government system worked is not known. Reproduced in Lisa Spahr’s book is a telegram to Robert Spahr’s mother from the Provost Marshal General advising her that they had just received a report from the International Red Cross that Robert was a POW in Germany. The telegram is dated May 7, 1943, and was received at 6:09 a.m. on May 8. The broadcast was heard by the various monitors on the evening of May 8, local time. Thus the telegram predated the broadcast.

World War II Radio Heroes: Letters of Compassion is a valuable contribution to the body of information on this wartime shortwave activity, and I commend it to anyone interested in the subject. I also wish to thank Lisa Spahr for her help in the preparation of this review.

This Florida monitor used a detailed card for reporting prisoner messages, and requested a photo. (National Archives and Records Administration, courtesy of Ann Elizabeth Pfau, author of “Miss Yourlovin: GIs, Gender and Domesticity During World War II” <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/pfau/>)

Talked over Radio from Normandy now POW in France Safely Well

WAR PRISONER INFORMATION
A Free Humanitarian Service Given by
"DAD MAC MANNIS' LISTENING POST"
"A Veteran of Both Wars Keeping Faith With His Buddies"

I have just received News from Radio Station DXJ, Berlin, Germany 8-7

that Your Son (mentioned no name) Serial No. [redacted]

is a Prisoner of War in Germany. The report indicates that he is (well) (wounded) and is being well taken care of. dont worry, he be home for Xmas - tell Frank its the baby. We see them soon - came thru unscathed without scratches - Love to all your Son

Please
May I have His Picture and a reply to this report? Thank you.

"Dad" Mac Mannis
315 Victoria Way
West Palm Beach, Florida

¹²*The New York Times*, October 23, 1944, p. 5.

¹³*The New York Times*, March 12, 1944, p. X7.

¹⁴*The New York Times*, October 23, 1944, p. 5.

¹⁵*The New York Times*, April 5, 1945, p. 5.

World War II Radio Heroes: Letters of Compassion

Second Edition

www.powletters.com

2013, ISBN 978-0-9891914-0-1, 210 pages, softcover
Available from internet booksellers, including www.amazon.com

Much is the same and much is different in the second edition of Lisa Spahr's excellent book.

In several introductory sections of the first edition ("Discovery of the Trunk," "A Reflection on Times Past," "A Granddaughter's Quest"), the author provided background on her grandfather, Robert May Spahr, and his military service; on the discovery of the letters from listeners who heard Robert's message from Berlin; and on the author's attempts to learn more about the letters and their writers. These sections are carried over into the second edition in substantially their original form (with some additional graphics).

The biggest change in the second edition is in the author's treatment of the letters and cards themselves. The total number of letters and cards received following Robert's message has been restated as 83 (up from 69 in the first edition). The first edition reproduced 35 of the cards and letters, mostly in Chapter 4, "The Letters Came in Drove." Those 35 (including the related text) are repeated in the second edition. However, added to them, in a new section called "The Rest of the Letters," are 48 additional cards and letters. Thus, the second edition contains all the cards and letters received, whereas the first edition contained fewer than half.

In both editions, the face of each of the original 35 cards and letters is reproduced so that the content can be read. For the additional 48 cards and letters that appear only in the second edition, the author has also included partial photos of the fronts of the cards or envelopes. Of more importance, in the second edition the author has accompanied almost every card and letter, old and new, with a shaded box containing the text in printed form (see next page). In the case of cards and letters that were handwritten, which is most of them, this obviates the need to go through a mass of handwritten documents where the penmanship often is not easy on the eye. This is a big help to the reader, who can now read individual cards and letters with ease, and is important to anyone interested in the specific language of the cards and letters.

Of the 70 cards and letters where the writer's gender is evident, 36% were men and 64% were women. This is similar to another group of letters presented in "[POW Monitoring and the Messages of Alfred R. Young](#)," where the parallel figures were 39% and 61%. The Spahr letters reflect many of the same characteristics as those in the Young study.

The second edition expands the supplementary material in the first. The discussion of SWAM, the Short Wave Amateur Monitors Club to which many POW message monitors belonged, is expanded, and now includes excerpted material from several SWAM bulletins. "Robert Spahr's Legacy" is carried over from the first edition. New in the second edition is a section devoted to the author's quest to obtain congressional recognition for the shortwave listeners who relayed POW messages during the war, and how readers can help in that effort. Also new is a list of the names and locations of 280 listeners and hams who relayed POW messages.

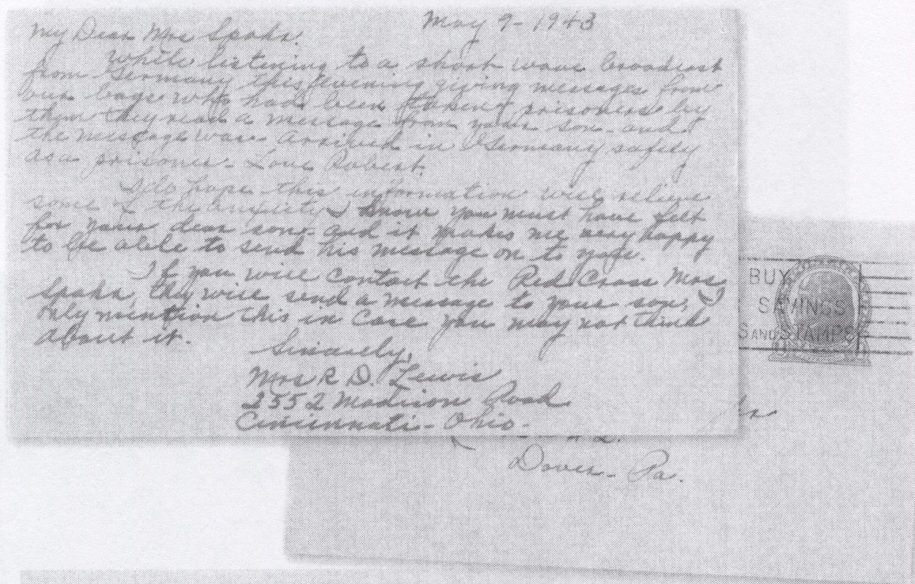
A new and very interesting 15-page section is devoted to Pvt. Robert B. Heer, who had been held by the Japanese for 39 months. His family received 18 messages as a result of his POW broadcast, and

his considerable research on those letters and their writers adds yet another interesting chapter to the story of POW messaging.

The author presents some ideas on other steps that might be taken to expand knowledge of the World War II POW messaging phenomenon. She wraps up the book with some reviews of the first edition (including mine).

To sum up: If you liked the first edition, buy the second one too—it's worth it.

Mrs. R. D. Lewis, Cincinnati, OH



May 9, 1943

My Dear Mrs. Spahr

While listening to a short wave broadcast from Germany this evening giving messages from our boys who had been taken prisoner by them they read a message from your son- and the message was- Arrived in Germany safely as a prisoner. Love Robert.

I do hope this information will relieve some of the anxiety I know you must have felt for your dear son. And it makes me very happy to be able to send his message on to you.

If you will contact the Red Cross Mrs. Spahr, they will send a message to your son, I only mention this in case you may not think about it.

Sincerely,
Mrs. R.D. Lewis
2552 Madison Road
Cincinnati- Ohio