

Inside The CIA's Secret Radio Paradise: Part II



We Visit Remote Swan Island To See If The 50 kW CIA Clandestine Broadcaster Is Really There! (It Is!)

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Author's note: In the first part of this two-part series, we looked into the amazing history of this notorious 1960's anti-Castro broadcaster, checked out its ever-changing ownership by several CIA "spook" corporations, and discussed the years-long controversy in DX'ing circles as to whether the station was actually located where it claimed to be, on tiny, lizard-ridden, uninhabited Swan Island 97 miles off the coast of Honduras. Swan was host to American FAA and Weather Bureau facilities, and presumably to Radio Swan (which changed its name to Radio Americas after the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961). Since 1960, when the broadcaster went on the air, Swan Island had been off limits to everyone except those having official business there. This included a handful of Americans as well as a few Cayman Islanders who worked for the Americans as laborers. In 1968 I was surprised to find that I was able to get permission to visit this two-mile long (by 1/2-mile wide) tropical island in order to inspect the RA facilities. I was accompanied by Bob Beason, editor of Electronics Illustrated magazine. Here's the story of this eerie sojourn to one of the most remote places in the Caribbean area.

By the time I had received clearance to visit Swan, the controversy regarding the true location of the station was furiously raging. By circuitous logic and totally outrageous technical devices, some DX'ers had been trying to perpetuate the notion that the station was not on Swan Island. Eventually, claims for its supposed true location included Cozumel (Mexico), the Bahamas, south Florida, Navassa Island, Venezuela, even in a ship or aircraft. RA may have inadvertently contributed to this confusion by announcing Swan Island as its transmitter loca-

tion, but giving a Miami mailing address for its broadcast band operations and a Venezuelan address for its shortwave station.

While the RA people gave the green light for Beason and me to visit their Swan installation, they said that we would have to obtain FAA approval and also figure out our own way of getting to the remote Caribbean island (which was not served by commercial airlines or cruise ships).

It occurred to me that it might be interesting, before we left for Swan, to apply to the FCC for a 60-day authorization to operate a

Aerial view of the southeastern area of Swan, showing area where the Radio Americas towers were located.



Aerial view of Swan showing the western end of the island. The RA compound is at the top of the photo. Federal compound is towards the bottom.





Aerial closeup of the federal compound.



After a tense landing, we posed with the crew in front of the DC-3. Bob Beason is at the far left, your author at the far right.



Main Street on Swan Island wasn't easy to traverse while the local cows were out for their daily stroll.



The author seated at the announcer's desk in the small studio.

ham station on Swan. I wanted to confirm that, in 1968, the FCC was still exercising the right to license stations on Swan, even though RA had been there since 1960 without any license whatsoever. So I filed with the FCC for a KS4-prefix and I waited, and waited. Nothing happened.

Eventually I called someone in the license-issuing end of the FCC to ask what was going on. For one thing, he said, the license had been delayed because the FCC had to check with "another agency" to see if I was allowed to go to Swan. I asked if it was the FAA that had to give the okay; he was evasive and never gave me a real answer. Also, he said that Swan Island ham licenses were issued so rarely that the license computer wasn't programmed for giving out KS4 callsigns. Apparently the computer had a minor seizure when asked to do so. Finally, my license came through (KS4CH), but it was issued by hand, and valid for four years instead of 60 days!

(Ironically, during the four years I was listed in the *Callbook* as KS4CH, I was bombarded with cards from operators around the world asking me to QSL their "contacts" with KS4CH on every band from 10 through 80 meters and in all known

modes, during the period from 1968 to 1971. Either someone was bootlegging my KS4CH call or else a lot of operators figured they'd just try sending a QSL in the hopes of getting one from a rare country out of courtesy on my part—even if I couldn't find them in my station log! All of these operators received a special "You didn't really work KS4CH" non-QSL card. I did actually have a few 50 MHz contacts, however.)

Getting There

The biggest obstacle to visiting Swan was the transportation. To fly by private plane from Miami or Key West was impractical because we would have to skirt the west end of Cuba, stop for fuel at Cozumel Island, and then go on to Swan. This idea was discarded as being too long and complicated. Going by sea was also too involved and would have meant digging up a bucket-of-bolts island-hopper cargo ship that would have to lie offshore while we visited the island—and then we'd have to stop at other ports of call until we got to a place with an airport.

Eventually we decided to charter a 1938-vintage DC-3 airliner (they called it a "Dakota") from Cayman Brac Airlines. This

was a Costa Rican airline flying out of the British Colony of Grand Cayman near Cuba. The DC-3 wasn't scheduled for Wednesdays, so we were told it was available for charter. That meant we had to be at the airport on Cayman Island at 7 a.m. on Wednesday for the flight to Swan. In order to do this we flew out of New York on Monday morning to Miami. Monday in Miami was spent chatting with the FAA man who was in charge of Swan Island, and when we left him we spent time with several former RA employees (Cubans and Americans).

When we told them about our chartered DC-3 they became hysterical with laughter, offering to bet us that the clumsy DC-3 would never be able to set down on the rock-strewn grass landing strip that was only long enough for a twin Beech. This information didn't fill us with confidence.

On Tuesday morning we flew out of Miami on British West Indian Airways for the 55-minute hop to Grand Cayman. This was an exquisite and quaintly beautiful island with a coastline dotted with ancient forts, castles, and shipwrecks. Today it has been "discovered" by swarms of tourists and has probably lost some of the charm it had in previous years.

While we were on Cayman, we noticed that the words *Swan Island* had a definite effect upon all to whom they were uttered. While some of the Caymanians had done work-hitches on Swan, most had never been there and knew little about the place, except for the rumors everybody had heard. Virtually every time we mentioned our destination we were given a look of genuine shock, disbelief, and awe. A taxi driver responded to this news with only a long, low whistle. The proprietor of our hotel and his wife asked us point blank if we were with the CIA. We denied it; they smiled and gave us a knowing wink. We were the "talk" of Grand Cayman!

Tuesday night we took directional bearings on RA with portable equipment loaned to us by a manufacturer. Both the shortwave and broadcast band signals were coming from the direction of Swan (200 miles southwest of Grand Cayman).

On The Way, At Last!

When we got to the Cayman airport on Wednesday morning we were met by a fellow who introduced himself as Frank Roulstone, Jr., a lanky American who ran the U.S. Weather Bureau station on Grand Cayman. He told us that he had heard about our trip (as had everybody on the island) and he wanted to go along with us to visit his Weather Bureau cronies on Swan. We figured that since our airliner could accommodate 32 passengers, we could squeeze him in without much difficulty. And off we went toward Swan!

The twin-engine antique airliner slowly droned its way over the shark-infested Caribbean. Our Puerto Rican pilot and co-pilot spoke surprisingly little English (for airline pilots), but between their version of English and my version of Spanish we did manage a form of semi-confused communication.

They told me that they had never been to Swan but were homing in on the FAA's non-directional radio beacon, "SWA" on 407 kHz. As we came out of a thick cloud bank we were suddenly impressed when a tiny dot of an island appeared exactly ahead, and then was quickly lost when we went back into clouds.

We came out of the clouds at a lower altitude and Swan looked a lot larger than we had imagined. We made two recon runs around Swan and adjacent Little Swan, a small uninhabited islet the size of a football field lying at the eastern tip of Swan. Swan itself was distinctive in its appearance because of the tall radio towers covering the island. There were several clusters of quonset huts, concrete buildings, wooden houses, and a couple of unpaved narrow roads etched into the white coral.

The landing strip looked absolutely minute, and it was all grass, as promised. The pilots had somehow been under the impression that the runway would be better and longer than it was; they said that we might possibly be able to land but it would be a miracle if they could ever get the plane into the air again from such a short runway.



RA's Paul Collamore (at the right) shows me the gear in the quonset hut used for receiving and taping.



The RA transmitter had six gigantic tubes in the final amplifier stage. The signals head for the antenna via heavy cables overhead.

Frank Roulstone joked that in the plane's 30-year career it must have made at least 7,000 takeoffs, and it would surely be able to manage at least one more. That was a comforting thought!

The pilot then attempted to radio the ground only to unhappily find that there were no VHF air/ground communications facilities on Swan. He told us to cross our fingers as he swung in low from the west on his final approach with a stiff crosswind hitting us from the left. It was the greatest white-knuckle landing ever. The pilot crabbed the plane sharply left, then straightened out at the last instant. We touched down so softly that there wasn't even a slight bump! Even our welcoming committee was cheering!

We taxied around and ended up at the western end of the strip near the Radio Americas compound. While a small aircraft bringing supplies from Miami arrives twice a week, the sight of a DC-3 on the runway was a major event. The entire transplanted Swan Island "population" (40 persons) turned out. For the moment we were genuine celebrities.

A smiling and shirtless group swarmed over to help us out of the plane. These were FAA, Weather Bureau, and Radio Americas people. The RA station manager, Paul Collamore, gave us a hearty welcome and proudly pointed to the nearby RA facilities. It seemed that if RA wasn't on Swan, then Collamore had done a great job of hoodwinking his Miami superiors.

Big And Brassy

RA was there in all of its glory and making no attempt to conceal itself. The transmitting site was at the island's southeastern end, while the living quarters and recreation area were at the southwestern side.

First stop on our tour was the RA receiving shack and studio. RTTY machines were clattering away printing out reams of Spanish text. Maps of Cuba and Latin America covered the walls. Since most of the programs came on tape or via shortwave feed,

the studio itself was a tiny room with a single desk and microphone. A two-man Cuban staff handled all "live" announcing from the island (these were the only two RA staffers we didn't meet or even see wandering around). We also were not shown the inside of the living quarters on our otherwise comprehensive tour.

Leaving the receiving shack, we took a rusty International Harvester Scout 4WD vehicle to the eastern end of the island where the transmitter site was located. This trip was often interrupted as the driver had to take time out to convince a number of cows to stand somewhere other than in the center of this jungle version of Main Street.

Since RA wasn't on the air during the day, we arrived at the transmitter while maintenance work was being performed. This site was dominated by two 243-foot towers used for broadcast band operations. These towers were phase fed to produce a null in the signal pattern to the west and northwest to minimize interference to WJJD in Chicago and KSL in Salt Lake City.

A few hundred yards to the west there were a series of smaller towers used for shortwave transmissions.

The transmitters themselves were mounted in large trailer vans from which the wheels had been removed. A common roof covered all of the vans. Essentially this appeared to be somewhat of a semi-portable station which could be moved into place and put on the air in a far shorter period of time than it would take to build a regular 50 kW broadcaster in your home town. This is probably why hams who visited Swan in February of 1960 did not see the station (even under construction) only two to three months prior to its going on the air.

It should be noted that both the 50 kW broadcast and the shortwave transmitters were quite long in the tooth; both had obviously seen many better days at other installations. While we were there, the transmitters were on standby with their tube filaments lit.



RA's transmitters were all in vans parked under a common roof. The generator building is at the rear.



Another view of one of the transmitter vans.

Adjacent to the transmitter vans was a spiffy new structure housing two huge diesel generators used to supply all of RA's electric. Two diesel engineers maintained these units (and the vehicles).

There were six transmitter operators on staff in addition to the diesel engineers. RA also employed 10 Caymanian and Honduran laborers, along with two Cuban announcers. Two of the laborers had their wives and children on the island. They lived in a tiny and temporary ramshackle wooden "village" called Gliddentown.

Paul Collamore confirmed that he and the other Americans running RA on the island were actually employed by Philco's Tech Rep Division (an organization that rents or leases engineers to private industry). As Philco employees, they said that they didn't have answers to many of the questions I had concerning the station's policies, practices, ownership, and history.

Most questions I asked brought the advice to "ask Miami."

For instance, I wanted to know why the shortwave station had a Venezuelan address while the broadcast band station requested that its mail be sent to Miami. And why was the station operating a shortwave transmitter if it was mainly trying to cover the Caribbean area, since its 50 kW broadcast transmitter was doing a bang-up job.

(Miami later advised that the Venezuelan address was used to separate the shortwave reception reports and mail from those coming in from broadcast band coverage. This was pretty dumb reasoning to attempt to peddle. The shortwave transmitter was used, they claimed, to reach areas of Latin America where shortwave receivers were in heavier use than broadcast band receivers.)

I had no doubt that these technical people were truly employees of Philco and not CIA spooks. Such staffing of the station by private sector contract is not at all an uncommon procedure for federal agencies.

Social Set

On a small, remote, and confined place such as Swan, one might expect that employees of RA, the FAA, and the Weather

Bureau would be a rather close-knit group. This was, in fact, quite true. The island's temporary 40 residents shared the various American-run recreational facilities. These facilities consisted primarily of no less than two saloons—the Iggy Clyb and Playboy Club. This was probably a world's record—one gin mill for every 20 residents! Fishing was also a popular recreation, as was swimming. A beautiful all-band (6 to 80 meters) ham station was on tap for those who wished to pursue ragchewing. I was the first person to fire it up on the 6 meter band. I worked several really ecstatic operators!

The FAA/Weather Bureau compound was better looking than the RA digs. This compound consisted of freshly painted white concrete block buildings arranged neatly around a well-kept lawn. The FAA facility was staffed by one man; the Weather Bureau staff was four observers plus several laborers.

The RA compound had no direct communications link to its Miami office, but in an emergency they said that they could use the FAA's RTTY link to Miami. A two-way voice transceiver was in use to communicate with supply ships on 2738 kHz.

I asked one of the RA operators about the broadcast station's lack of an FCC license. This was another "ask Miami" question, although he did volunteer that the RA ham station (KS4CC) was FCC licensed, further commenting that an FCC commercial radio-telephone license was not required to be employed as an RA transmitter operator!

(I later again pressed the FCC in Washington about how this station could continue to operate from an American territory without a license. Three days later they said they had searched their files and couldn't locate any information on a station called Radio Americas. Once upon a time that question, asked via telephone, was answered by a fellow who said, "Government stations don't have to be licensed—no, forget I said that!")

As the day wore on, we took the grand tour of the island. The foliage was so dense that the Scout had to be driven in low range. Some parts of the island were so overgrown that all attempts to cut a road through had failed. Among the exotic sights were the



Just one reminder of Swan's past is an old cement marker that reads, "Boundary of property leased to the United Fruit Co. Dec. 10, 1912."

footings for the old United Fruit Company wireless station towers (four of them) that stood from 1912 to 1932.

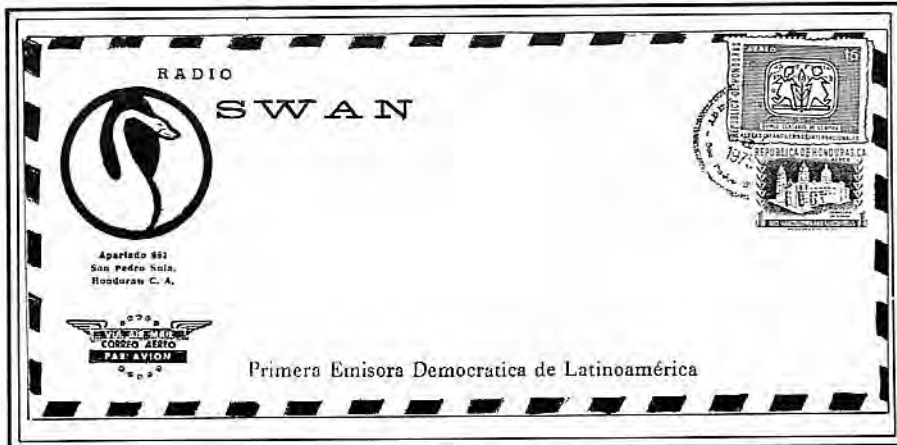
In 1955 a severe hurricane devastated Swan Island, removing virtually all of the vegetation and standing structures (except for one small concrete building). The remains of the towers of the FAA's radio range could still be seen lying twisted and mangled at various spots along the beach.

Homeward Bound

When it came time to leave later in the afternoon, one of the laborers (who said he was Honduran) asked us to take him to Cayman for emergency dental work he needed. He wanted to bring his wife, his brother, two small children, and his dog along with him. A boat trip would have meant a 48-hour sea trip. When we agreed to take him we were surprised to learn that a number of other laborers also discovered "important" reasons to travel to Grand Cayman.



At the federal compound, the FAA's radio range tower looms high above the dense but low foliage.



Copycat Radio Swan came on the air in the mid-1970's, implying it was related to the original station, but it was a hollow boast.



The antenna system at Radio Americas.

The result was that before we got ready to take off we stood by and watched our plane loaded with an endless parade of boxes, bags, and cartons. Someone even loaded a large wooden crate of (barracuda-like) wahoo fish which, although frozen, didn't smell particularly appetizing. The two pilots were talking to me in high speed Spanish while wildly waving their arms around in the general direction of the cargo and passenger loading operations.

From what I could gather, the gist of their message was that the plane was surely going to plunk straight into the drink as soon as we ran out of runway. The FAA man was laughing and kept telling the pilots not to worry. My suspicion was that the bored Americans on this island would have looked upon a DC-3 rolling into the Caribbean as the biggest event to happen there since the hurricane of 1955!

Eventually the pilots were convinced to attempt to takeoff. Yes, somehow they managed to get at least one more trip out of this old warhorse, as Roulstone had predicted. Of course, when we got back to Grand Cayman, we met head on with a distraught Customs Inspector. When we left for mysterious Swan Island that morning with only three passengers in a chartered airline, he looked at us like we were all crazy. But

when we returned to Cayman that same day with extra passengers, a dog, babies, assorted crates of dubious content, and a large carton of frozen fish, no doubt his suspicions were confirmed not only about Swan Island, but about Americans.

But our own curiosity was satisfied. If what we saw wasn't Radio Americas, then somebody went to a lot of trouble to put us on. Of course, our trip did not produce any specific proof of CIA ties, but it also didn't alter any of our earlier held beliefs about RA's ownership, purpose, or financing.

Certainly every person on Swan made our visit as cordial and pleasant as possible. There were no restrictions on taking photos and I took several rolls of Super-8 movies as well as numerous photos.

Why did they let us visit this off-limits island? That remained a mystery for a while. Inasmuch as RA ceased operations on May 15, 1968, only a few months after our visit, that lead me to believe that RA's owners figured they had nothing to lose by allowing the visit, especially since I had written so much about the station over the years. One DX-author has suggested that it was my writings that eventually ran RA off the air, however (to me, at least), this seems rather unlikely.

A later Radio Swan came on the air in mid-1975, eventually moving to the old RS/RA shortwave frequency of 6.000 MHz. The station implied that it was the original station in reborn form, but without ties to the CIA. This station operated for about a year from a site in Honduras but was mysteriously blown up in 1976. Although the station was anti-Communist, there was no reason to believe that it had any connection with the "original" Radio Swan or Radio Americas.

And what of the controversy surrounding the "true" location of RS/RA, and whether it was actually on Swan Island? For the most part, our visit (combined with the station's leaving the air) seemed to not only satisfy most everybody's curiosity, but also to taper off interest in the station. Yet one die-hard supporter of the old "not on Swan" school of thought felt backed into a corner. When last



The FCC had clearly demonstrated its authority over Swan by assigning licenses and callsigns on the island, except when it came to the 50 kW broadcasting station. This KS4AC card was from 1947.

heard from he was still insisting that the station was not on Swan and that our trip had proven nothing inasmuch as we were not there when the transmitter was in actual operation. His position was that the CIA had put all of the equipment on Swan for the purpose of our visit and it had all been a show just to mislead us. **PC**

Additional Reading

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