

WRUL and the West Indian Radio Newspaper

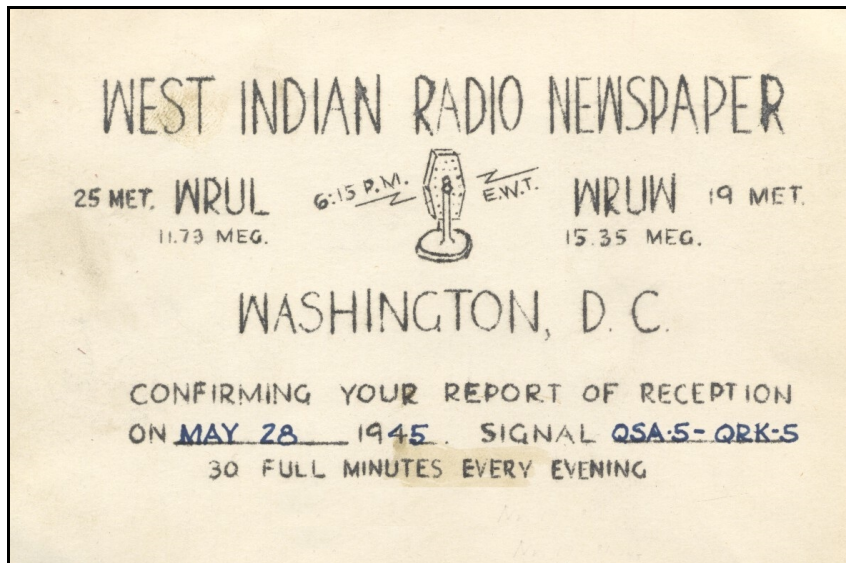
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History has largely forgotten the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission, formed in March 1942, and its progeny, the radio program, West Indian Radio Newspaper. The commission was a joint British and American effort which encompassed the two nations' interests in the greater Caribbean, including the various English-speaking Caribbean islands, plus British Guiana, British Honduras and the Bahamas, and, on the American side, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The broad goal of the Commission was to improve the economic, social, cultural, educational, agricultural, industrial, and transportation conditions of the area. A major focus was insuring the means for distribution of food in the area. This was motivated in part by the Caribbean's perceived susceptibility to Axis activities and propaganda, in particular the considerable German U-boat presence.

The U-boats inhibited shipping, which in turn affected the dissemination of news, and communications generally. In addition, German propaganda broadcasts were seen as taking their toll on the local population, with limited push back from the Allied side. One strategy to counter these broadcasts was the West Indian Radio Newspaper, a magazine-style radio program that took to the air on a date given as either December 1, 1942 or February 1, 1943, depending on which resources one relies on. It was produced in Washington, D.C., at first by the U.S. Office of War Information, at the time the parent of America's nascent international shortwave broadcasting efforts. From September 20, 1943, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, which had assumed a support role for American media efforts directed toward the countries of Central and South America and the Caribbean, took over responsibility for arranging transmission of the program, while the Caribbean Commission itself took over production.

The program was carried by a variety of local stations then on shortwave, including ZFY, British Guiana (6,000 kc.), ZNS, Bahamas (6,090), and ZQI, Jamaica (4,700), plus the rediffusion stations in Barbados and Trinidad. However, its main transmitting partner was Boston's WRUL, which carried the half-hour broadcast at 1715-1745 EST daily on two channels, which varied by season.

The program opened with a theme of local music, then went into greetings in various dialects, followed by the world news headlines and a feature. Among the program fare were "Creole Cook," "Letters from the West Indies," "Caribbean Theater of the Air," "This is Puerto Rico," "West Indian Story Page," "The Vagabond Traveler," etc. There were also war-oriented programs, like "Freemen Against the Axis" and "Freedom on the March." The program ended with the popular "Caribbean News Page," a summary of local news. Many sources of information fed the program.



The WRUL signal was widely heard, and Ken Boord, shortwave editor for *Radio News*, called the West Indian Radio Newspaper one of the most interesting programs on

shortwave, and recommended it to listeners everywhere (*Radio News*, Dec. 1944). The man behind the program was William W. Harris, the Commission's Director of Radio Communications (see *Radio News* photo below). Shortwave hobbyists were not forgotten, as evidenced by the QSL shown on the previous page. The exact date of the demise of the program is not known. In early 1946 (*Radio News*, Feb. 1946), Harris described elaborate plans for the program's post-war continuation, but it is likely that the West Indian Radio Newspaper closed down soon after that.



Recent photo of the staff of the West Indian Radio Newspaper, which recently observed its third anniversary. Seated (left to right): Gerard de Freitas, Caribbean News Commentator; Jean Russ Kern, Dramatic Script Writer; Peggy Boyd, The Creole Cook; Jane Hart, Actress-Writer; Jack Lawrence, Announcer. Standing (left to right): Warren Matts, Master of Ceremonies; Frank Randall, Announcer; William Harris, Director; Arnold Low, Producer.

*West Indian Radio Newspaper
and "Station Debunk"*

What does German World War II black clandestine Radio Debunk have to do with the West Indian Radio Newspaper? Perhaps not very much, but in the course of researching this article a statement was noted in Gaylord T. M. Kelshall's book, *The U-Boat War in the Caribbean* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Paria Publ. Co. Ltd., 1988, p. 290), to the effect that because Allied military activities in the Caribbean were mainly in the air and on the ocean, land-based soldiers were "bored and lonely," leading the Germans to target them through a German propaganda station called "Debunk". Kelshall says the station broadcast "towards Trinidad" in order to disrupt relations between local troops and Allied soldiers on Caribbean duty.

Radio Debunk, or Station Debunk, whose goal was to encourage belief among Americans that active sabotage efforts were underway in their country, was operated by the North American section of Germany's international shortwave broadcaster, "Zeesen." The station purported to be located in the American midwest, something that never fooled anyone. Although Radio Debunk is well known in World War II shortwave history, I have never before seen Trinidad specified as its target zone. Another author has stated that it was pro-Axis Trinidadians themselves who operated the station, citing Kelshall. Ligia T. Domenech, *Imprisoned in the Caribbean—The 1942 German U-Boat Blockade* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2014), p. 54-55. There is no doubt that Trinidad was an important part of Caribbean war planning on all sides. It was an air crossroads, and it had a major oil storage capacity. But that it had its own "Station Debunk," or that it was the target zone of Germany's "Debunk," seem unlikely.

Kelshall says it was these German propaganda efforts that led to the creation of American Armed Forces Radio Service station WVDI in Trinidad, in May 1943. Domenech says it was the German broadcasts that led to the creation of the West Indian Radio Newspaper.

Other resources:

The Caribbean Islands and the War: A Record of Progress in Facing Stern Realities (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of State [prepared by the U.S. Section of the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission], 1943), pgs. 10-11, 44-46.

Report of the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission to the Governments of the United States and Great Britain For the Years 1942-1943 (Washington, D.C.: Anglo-American Caribbean Commission, 1943), pgs. 31, 93-94.

Report of the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission to the Governments of the United States and Great Britain For the Year 1944 (Washington, D.C.: Anglo-American Caribbean Commission [publ. date unspecified]), pg. 27.

Report of the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission to the Governments of the United States and Great Britain For the Year 1945 (Washington, D.C.: Anglo-American Caribbean Commission, 1946), pgs. 12-13.

