

Radio Australia Pennant Hills - Transmitter Usage

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The Full Story

During the dramatic era of World War 2, the Pennant Hills radio station was owned and operated by AWA, Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia) and several of its transmitters were in use with the programming of "Australia Calling" - Radio Australia. In the pre-war era, AWA Pennant Hills was well known for its international shortwave programming via the 10 kW transmitter, VK2ME. In fact, AWA had also established two other shortwave transmitters, VK3ME in Melbourne and VK6ME in Perth, and these were also on the air with regular program services that were heard quite widely.

Immediately following the outbreak of the European Conflict over the first weekend in September 1939, AWA offered to the Australian government the usage of its broadcast transmitters for the introduction of a new international radio broadcasting service. One of the requests lodged by AWA at the time was that they be granted a broadcast license after the war to re-introduce their own international program service on shortwave, though this requirement was never fulfilled.

When this new program service on shortwave was launched on December 20, 1939 the AWA transmitters at Pennant Hills were taken into usage for "Australia Calling", a name derived from the BBC London with its identification as "London Calling". Two additional transmitters owned by the ABC were also taken into service with "Australia Calling", the low powered 2 kW VLR at Lyndhurst near Melbourne, and the new VLW at Wanneroo near Perth, which was at the time under the final stages of installation.

Sir Ernest Fisk, at AWA in York Street Sydney, offered the usage of two AWA transmitters, the eleven year old VLK and the eight year old VLM both at 10 kW, and these went on the air as VLQ & VLQ2. Unstated though at the time, was the fact that the fifteen year old and cumbersome VK2ME transmitter was also re-introduced into service with regular programming on behalf of "Australia Calling". This transmitter was on the air at times without callsign and sometimes with other VLQ designations, though usually it was on the air as VLQ7 on 11880 kHz. For a short period of time, the 2ME transmitter was noted in the United States with a parallel relay from VLQ under its own regularized callsign, VLT.

The transmitter VLK had been in use part time before World War 2 with AWA programming as VK2ME, and under "Australia Calling", this unit was on the air on the familiar pre-war programming channel 9615 kHz as VLQ. The transmitter VLM seems to have been in regular usage usually on the one channel 11870 kHz as VLQ2.

In mid December 1939, during the preliminary preparations for the launching of "Australia Calling", AWA made a series of test broadcasts and, for example, VLK was

heard in both Australia and the United States with AWA programming on 9600 kHz. At sign off, the announcer gave the callsign as VLK, "V for Victory, L for London, K for Kangaroo".

Right throughout the five year period that the AWA station at Pennant Hills was on the air under "Australia Calling", the programming and transmitter scheduling was changed very frequently. The three-fold reasoning for this was to dodge intentional jamming, to escape unintentional interference, and to achieve improved propagation from these lower powered transmitters.

There were supposedly "secret" transmissions to the Australian army personnel on duty in North Africa and the Middle East and these broadcast channels were changed frequently, usually on a daily basis. The regular program service to Europe, North America, Asia and the Pacific was also changed very frequently, usually each month but quite often more frequently.

On a couple of extended occasions, the AWA transmitter VLN was on the air with a relay from "Australia Calling", mainly because a higher frequency was needed and none of the other three transmitters, VK2ME, VLK nor VLM, could be tuned up into that area of the spectrum. The channels in use for the short term usage of VLN were always in the utility section of the shortwave spectrum, not within the standard shortwave broadcast bands.

After the outbreak of the war in the Pacific, American servicemen flooded into Australia and the south Pacific and the AWA transmitters were pressed into service for the relay of commentaries and interviews for broadcast back home on the mediumwave networks throughout the United States. Many of these program relays were noted by listeners in the United States and the South Pacific, though the actual transmitter callsign was not always known. Among the transmitters not previously noted that were in use for these relays were VLY, presumed to be a 10 kW unit, and another that was described in the American ISWC Bulletin, as a "strange station" under the callsign VLX. Though not stated, it is presumed that VLX was another unit located at AWA Pennant Hills, perhaps a newer unit and perhaps lower powered.

In January 1943, the broadcast callsigns of the Pennant Hills transmitters were changed from the VLQ sequence to the VLI sequence. Almost immediately, the VLQ callsign was taken over for the ABC's new 10 kW shortwave transmitter at Bald Hills near Brisbane in Queensland, and four years later the VLI callsign was taken over for the ABC's new 2 kW shortwave transmitter at Liverpool near Sydney in New South Wales. At this stage, there were usually only two AWA units on the air for "Australia Calling" and it would be presumed that these were VLK & VLM, though sometimes only one was on the air. The sequence of callsigns in the VLI series extended from VLI all the way up to VLI12.

Over a period of time the PMG Department was providing additional new shortwave transmitters, including VLG & VLH at Lyndhurst in Victoria, and VLC in Shepparton, also in Victoria. The inauguration of these new ABC transmitters meant that the usage of the older AWA transmitters was no longer a high priority and therefore the usage of the Pennant Hills station began to decline. In fact, it was stated at one stage that one of the AWA transmitters was emitting poor modulation, and it could only be presumed that this would have to be the old original unit VK2ME.

The historic radio files for this era, while the Shepparton station was under construction, show that three transmitters at 100 kW were planned and they would identify on air as VLC, VLA & VLM. However, there was a lengthy delay in procuring these three transmitters at 100 kW and finally the Australian government accepted an offer from the United States of an RCA 50 kW unit and this was installed at Shepparton under the callsign VLC. In exchange for the transmitter, "Australia Calling" carried a relay of the program, "The Philippine Hour" from the "Voice of America". Subsequently, Australian engineers constructed two units at 100 kW and these were installed at Shepparton as VLA & VLB.

The usage of the AWA transmitters at Pennant Hills was finally terminated on November 8, 1944 and by this time "Australia Calling" was using VLC Shepparton and VLR & VLG Lyndhurst, and VLW Wanneroo. The Pennant Hills station remained in service for communication traffic and the occasional relay of broadcast programming to other parts of the world. On some occasions for example, transmitter VLY was noted with program relays to the United States from VUD in Delhi India and SEAC in Colombo Ceylon. Pennant Hills was finally closed on December 3, 1955 and the new station at Doonside took over the full load of international communication traffic from Australia. Some of the newer equipment at Pennant Hills was re-installed at Doonside, including the 10 kW transmitter VLN.

Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of QSLs were issued by the ABC and the DOI (Department of Information) on behalf of the broadcasts from "Australia Calling" over the AWA transmitters at Pennant Hills. These QSLs were in the form of letters, form letters, and QSL cards. The first printed card was colored orange and it showed a kangaroo and the callsigns VLQ VLW & VLR. A later card in blue, showing a map of Australia with rays of light extending into the world, was issued for VLQ. Then, there was another QSL card issued to verify reception of the AWA transmitters under the callsign VLI. An American listener received a QSL for the short term usage of transmitter VK2ME under the callsign VLT, and it is presumed that this QSL was a letter. Letters were also issued for the short term usage of VLN in the services to North America and Japan. One listener in Australia received a QSL from the OWI office in Sydney for the "Voice of America" relay over the new VLC in Shepparton, Victoria.