

A History of the Armed Forces Network (AFN)

By Brian Belanger

Introduction

During World War I troop morale relied on well-meaning private organizations such as the YMCA, Salvation Army, and the Red Cross. Radio for entertainment had yet to be created. Early in World War II the War Department realized that keeping up troop morale was a critical element of success in winning the war. Radio could play a role. By the time of Pearl Harbor, Americans depended on radio for news, sports, comedy, and more. Connecting soldiers and sailors stationed in faraway places to home would definitely boost morale. If our troops could hear the same music, comedy, sports events, and other radio shows that their families were listening to back home, it would be welcomed and appreciated.

In response, the War Department in May 1942 created the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS) led by Army Colonel Tom Lewis. Based in Southern California, its job was to figure out how to provide popular radio programs to the troops no matter where military personnel were stationed. On the 4th of July 1943, AFRS Europe was launched from London, with Lt. Colonel Charles Gurney in command.

Military Radio Stations Predating AFRS

Actually, a few radio stations were already broadcasting entertainment and messages to troops even before AFRS. General Electric had built 50-kW short-

wave station KGEI in San Francisco in 1939. (Later the station moved to Redwood City, CA.) KGEI's signals reached the American-controlled Philippines. The military began broadcasting over the station to provide competition for Radio Tokyo.

Station PCAC (a second source said its call letters were PCAN) in the Panama Canal Zone was another military-operated station predating AFRS. Anti-aircraft units were spread out over the length of the canal and the headquarters barracks needed to communicate with the dispersed units. Each unit was given a portable radio. To encourage the men to keep their radios turned on so as not to miss important messages from HQ, popular music was played between messages. PCAC may have been the first station to request and receive music transcription discs from radio networks. After Pearl Harbor, PCAC ceased broadcasting lest enemy bombers use its signals for direction finding.

In 1941 Army personnel stationed at Sitka, Alaska, who were amateur radio (ham) operators cobbled together a small transmitter and began broadcasting





Col. Tom Lewis, AFRS's "Father." (Photo Credit: Brass Button Broadcasters.)

Early in 2024 Museum representatives Brian Belanger and Steve Hansman met with four AFN representatives to discuss the possibility of a cooperative venture to present an exhibit about AFN's history. The AFN team was: Brook Dewalt, Director; Chris Vadnais, Deputy Director; Erik Brazones, Program Manager; and Jimmy Bention, Senior Enlisted Advisor. We agreed not only to mount the exhibit, but to prepare a special edition of the Museum's quarterly journal *Dials and Channels* devoted to AFN history. This article is the result.

When AFN's first predecessor organization, the Armed Forces Radio Service, began broadcasting to our troops during World War II it was concerned with radio only. When television was added in 1954, the organization's name changed to the Armed Forces Radio & Television Service (AFRTS). Today, headquartered at Ft. Meade, Maryland, AFN is a multi-media provider more sophisticated than any WWII soldier or sailor could have imagined.

as station KRB. Such unlicensed broadcasting violated Federal Communications Commission rules, but because the station was so popular, and did not interfere with other stations, the FCC chose not to intervene.

Tom Lewis

Tom Lewis was the right man to head AFRS. Married to actress Loretta Young, Lewis was Vice President for Radio Production at Young and Rubicam, a major ad agency. In the 1940s ad agencies were directly involved in producing radio programs for sponsors. (By the 1960s the networks produced programs and sold them to advertisers.) Colonel E. L. Munson, Jr. (head of the Information Services Section of Brigadier General Osborn's War Department Morale Branch) described Lewis's job thusly: "We're thinking of him for a job that would have scared off Hercules. We want a Superman who'll get up and run a worldwide radio service that'll be bigger than all our commercial radio companies put together." He added "They say he [Lewis] is a genius in getting things done." Lewis was urged to resign from Young and Rubicam, enlist, and take the job. He did, being promised a commission to be at least a Major.

Lewis had to struggle for resources to fund AFRS. It was hard to justify funding a radio service at a time when U.S. battle losses were high and when planes, tanks, guns and ammunition had the highest priority.

Lewis was a friend of award-winning director Frank Capra, who had also joined the Army, but to work on film projects. Lewis desperately needed office space and was waiting for funding to be released. He wanted to move into the Twentieth Century Fox lot on Western Avenue in Hollywood where Capra had already set up offices. Capra advised him to ignore the temporary lack of funding and move in anyway: "Do what you must to get the job done!"

Lewis knew everyone in the radio industry, and he began recruiting people he needed for his operation to succeed. Many joined the Army; some were hired as civilians. Anticipating draft notices, younger men in the radio industry probably decided that working for Lewis was preferable to being in the infantry.

Still another unauthorized station was KODK at Greeley Army Base (today, Fort Abercrombie) in Kodiak, Alaska. It also began as a "pirate" station, that is, the operators did not have official permission to operate it, or an FCC license. Kodiak did not have a civilian station at the time, so the station's audience was local civilians as well as Army

Transcription Discs

Prior to WWII nearly all network programs were aired live. But station WXYZ in Detroit, a flagship station of the Mutual Network, began recording shows such as “The Lone Ranger” on transcription discs that could be mailed to other stations to be aired at their convenience. So, the idea of distributing content on such discs was well established prior to the creation of AFRS. Announcers would say, “The program you are about to hear has been transcribed.”

Early transcriptions were on 78-rpm records, but by WW II, a typical transcription disc was 12 or 16 inches in diameter and turned at 33.3 rpm. Shellac discs had been common, but shellac was fragile and became difficult to obtain during the war, so vinylite (and in a few cases, even glass) was used. Most production of transcription discs had been on the East Coast, so Lewis had to work hard to procure the special equipment to allow for disc production in Southern California.

personnel. After AFRS was created, stations like KODK were absorbed into it. The popularity of these pioneer military base stations gave planners confidence that AFRS would be successful.

Content for AFRS

Content for far-flung AFRS stations to use was provided in two ways: U.S.-based shortwave transmitters could broadcast information to Europe or other spots where it would be received and re-transmitted via local AFRS transmitters. Companies like Crosley, RCA, and GE owned powerful U.S.-based shortwave radio stations that the government leased for the duration of the war. (Today satellite communication provides a much better alternative to shortwave radio.)

Alternatively, transcription discs could be airlifted to AFRS stations.

Early in WWII, before AFRS was operational, the Radio Division of the War Department’s Bureau of Public Relations had been organizing shortwave radio broadcasts and producing programs for our troops. Programs such as “News from Home” and “Ringside Seats” (a sports roundup) were popular. “Command Performance” was particularly memor-



Example of an AFRS transcription disc.

able. Entertainers were usually happy to do what they could to support the troops, and based on actual requests from soldiers and sailors, popular entertainers were “commanded” to appear on the program. March 1, 1942, was the inaugural “Command Performance.” Eddie Cantor was the MC and Harry Von Zell its announcer, names very familiar to 1940s radio listeners. Transcription discs went to stations in Europe. Station KGEI beamed the show to the Pacific. The first few “Command Performance” shows were recorded in New York, but because so many Hollywood performers appeared on the show, production moved to CBS’s facilities in Los Angeles by April. NBC’s Hollywood operations prepared the transcription discs until AFRS got its own production facilities.

An especially memorable show was the August 30, 1942 “Command Performance,” called “the Big GI Broadcast of 1942.” It featured top talent such as



An AFRS processing studio in 1942. (Photo credit: Brass Button Broadcasters.)

Bing Crosby, Jimmy Cagney, Hedy Lamarr, Abbott and Costello, and Dinah Shore. "Command Performance" was intended for troops overseas, but a Christmas show with Bob Hope, Red Skelton, the Andrews Sisters, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and others, was also aired in the U.S.

One of Lewis' challenges was to consolidate activities scattered throughout the military related to his mission to produce and distribute radio content. The Radio Division of the War Department's Bureau of Public Relations had produced the first few "Command Performance" shows. In addition to producing programs for troops, the Office of War Information (OWI) controlled the powerful short-wave stations used for overseas broadcasting, and at first did not allow Lewis's AFRS to use them. Finally, in December 1942, OWI's head, Elmer Davis, agreed that AFRS should henceforth handle producing programs for troops and get shared time on OWI's stations. It was then that AFRS took over "Command Performance" production. Pat Weaver, who later headed NBC television, and whose story was told in the May 2020 *Dials and Channels*, joined AFRS in 1944. Early in 1945 he became the producer of "Command Performance." He later said, "We did 'Command Performance' radio shows that were better than any other radio shows, anywhere, no matter how popular."

It was not until early 1943 that AFRS received clear authority to begin creating and operating its own stations.

In another example of Lewis' competition, in preparing for the invasion of Africa, the Adjutant General's Office had created the First Broadcast Station Operating Detachment to follow the troops. The detachment was successfully providing radio content in North Africa before Lewis even learned of its existence. It was led by Lieutenant Andre Baruch, a well-known radio announcer. As time went on, such operations got folded into AFRS.

Between its start and today, AFN has undergone numerous changes regarding to which military department it reports. Also, each of the military services has from time to time had its own broadcasting operations. Limited space prevents documenting the details.

The Office of War Information had a policy of deleting commercials from radio shows

for the troops. When AFRS began, it maintained that policy. When one listens to WWII era radio shows on programs such as WAMU's "The Big Broadcast," it is common to hear shows without commercials. That indicates that the recording used was from AFRS. AFRS engineers had to develop the skill to cut out commercials and fill the gaps with suitable materials. For example, the Jack Benny show featured Phil Harris' orchestra. To fill a gap from a deleted Lucky Strike cigarette commercial on that show, the engineer would splice in Harris' orchestra music.

AFRS's Programs

The first weekly show produced by AFRS was "Mail Call," recorded on August 11, 1942. It starred Loretta Young, Bob Hope, and Jerry Colonna. It morphed into a musical variety show. The second was "Melody Roundup," a country/Western show initially hosted by Roy Rogers. "Jubilee" included African-American stars such as Eddie "Rochester" Anderson from the Jack Benny show, Ethel Waters, and Duke Ellington's orchestra. In an era when segregation still prevailed, AFRS boldly opted to provide content with broad appeal.

One of the most popular AFRS shows was the quarter-hour daily Allied Expeditionary Forces' "Jukebox," disc jockey program hosted by Martha Wilkerson, whose radio name was "GI Jill." A typical letter to her said "Your cheerful voice does wonders to our morale."

Because AFRS did not have to be concerned with profit or sponsor approval, it was able to be more creative than cautious commercial networks. But Lewis continually had to convince Congress and



Movie and radio stars appeared on AFRS shows without pay. Here are Mel Blanc who did voices ranging from Bugs Bunny to Jack Benny's Maxwell auto, Lucille Ball, and Alan Ladd. (Photo credit: *Brass Button Broadcasters*.)



GI Jill. (Photo credit: *Brass Button Broadcasters.*)

military officials that AFRS deserved adequate funding. Troop morale had to compete with guns and ammunition.

AFRS Gears Up

With Great Britain as our ally, the British Broadcasting Corporation was willing to provide facilities to AFRS. Even before AFRS was operational, the Office of War Information had been negotiating with the British government to plan for a U.S. military radio network. The eventual agreement allowed the BBC to censor content it found questionable. From the British point of view, these new U.S. military stations were considered an extension of the BBC.

The first broadcast to U.S. troops in Europe was on July 4, 1943, with programming from 5:45 to 11 p.m., a few hours of recorded shows (news and sports). Syl Binkin was the first AFRS broadcaster to be heard on the air. European operations became known as the Armed Forces Network (AFN), coincidentally, today's name of AFRS's successor.

Not wanting competition for its own broadcasts, the BBC required AFRS to operate *only* from U.S. bases, with transmitters limited to 50 watts, and carrying at least some BBC programming. Nevertheless, English citizens near U.S. bases often tuned into AFRS stations. By the end of the war, AFRS had 75 low-power transmitters throughout Great Britain. Because the BBC did not allow AFN to have a station in London, AFN used a wired system to provide content

to officers' clubs and barracks in and around London.

It was inevitable that civilian listeners in countries where AFRS stations could be heard outside the military bases would tune in. AFN's style of broadcasting was more brash and freewheeling than what was heard in most other countries. When polls were taken, it was not uncommon for AFN stations to poll higher than the host country's stations. In 1954 *Variety* magazine wrote: "It is no exaggeration to say that AFN stations are mostly to blame for the Germans' strong preference for American music." In the 1970s a European magazine asked its readers to name their favorite radio personality. The winner was Wolfman Jack, heard only on AFRTS

AFRS had developed plans to set up its own radio stations at new U.S. bases on the continent after D-Day as Allied troops began to march across Europe. At General Eisenhower's urging, the U.S., Canada, and Britain formed the multi-national Allied Expeditionary Forces Programme of the BBC (AEFP), with a BBC executive in charge, to provide joint radio coverage to the advancing armies. Lewis, as well as his British and Canadian counterparts, was strongly opposed, but Eisenhower's staff overruled them. Eisenhower's rep, General Barker, intervened and ordered the disgruntled parties to accept the decision, but the U.S. tended to drop off "of the BBC" when referring to the broadcasting.

AEFP's popular "Combat Diary" provided daily up-to-the-minute war news, yet American GIs continued to be highly critical of AEFP, feeling that it emphasized British Army victories and was too British oriented. Our troops had no interest in news of English soccer matches. A report from the Chief of Special and Information Services of the U.S. Forces in Europe recommended that AEFP be disbanded in favor of England providing radio to its troops and AFN providing radio to our troops. That happened in July 1945. AFN had provided mobile stations in France right after D-day, so briefly there was competition for AEFP. AFRS's more substantial Paris station became the center of operations in France.

AFRS Had Risks As Well As Rewards

Two French AFN staff members were killed in action.

Band leader Glenn Miller joined the Army after Pearl Harbor and formed a band to entertain troops. Tragically, as he was flying to Paris to do a Christmas show, his single-engine plane disappeared on December 15, 1944.

Rival Tommy Dorsey and his band often travelled to England to entertain the troops. BBC arranged a special show to be aired over AFN at BBC Broadcast House's best studio. Dorsey told the BBC engineer in charge that 22 microphones must be provided for the concert. The engineer argued that 18 microphones would be sufficient. Known to be a tyrant, Dorsey *demand*ed 22. The engineer reluctantly agreed. Following the concert, there was an "I told you so" moment when Dorsey complimented the engineer, saying the sound was perfect thanks to the 22 mics. The engineer nodded in agreement, paused, and then added, "Only 18 were turned on."

By May 1944 AFRS produced 106 shows totaling 42 hours of weekly broadcasting. Much of the daily fare was commercial radio shows with their commercials removed.

AFRS Headquarters remained in London after Allied forces recaptured Paris, but its main operations moved to Paris. As the Nazis were pushed eastward, AFRS followed. In July 1945 AFN Munich became the first AFRS station in occupied Germany. AFN Bremen came on the air shortly afterwards to cover northern Germany.

AFN stations in Austria became known as "The Blue Danube Network."

At the end of the war, as American troops returned home, AFRS began cutting back on the number of its stations. AFN London shut down at the end of 1945. By 1949 only 60 of the 300 AFRS stations that had been in operation in 1945 were still on the air. Because there were so many American military personnel stationed in Germany in the postwar era, broad AFRS coverage in Germany continued. AFRS stations played popular music, and many Europeans tuned in. Some postwar European radios even had AFRS stations listed right on their dials. Interestingly, the Soviets did not jam AFRS stations.

Announcer John Vrotsos hosted the program "Music in the Air" from AFN Frankfurt. It aired throughout the entire European network and captured a large audience.

There were about a dozen AFN stations in France in the postwar era. Listeners appreciated coverage of the auto races at Le Mans. When General de Gaulle asked American forces to leave France in 1967, AFN France shut down.



AFRS' Munich station. (Photo credit: Brass Button Broadcasters.)

When using broadcast facilities in other countries, AFRS had to negotiate agreements with the host countries. Adapting to their cultures sometimes raised issues and sometimes involved censorship. Not surprisingly, Middle East countries that hosted AFRS stations had strong opinions about appropriate coverage of women's issues.

AFRS originally was an Army operation although Navy personnel on ships often listened to AFRS broadcasts via shortwave (today, by satellite links). In June 1944, the Navy asked to be more directly involved in AFRS. Henceforth, Navy personnel were assigned to AFRS planning and operations. Navy ships got transcription discs on a more regular basis, and by October the Navy had established two radio stations that used AFRS programs. Today, an AFN station may be operated by any of the military services.

AFRS in the Pacific

Broadcasting in Europe, where the Army could commandeer existing radio stations as the front moved forward, was somewhat easier than in the South Pacific. Few suitable radio stations were available when our forces were island hopping. Some islands had no electric grid into which a transmitter could be plugged, and portable generators were in short supply. Another problem was that in the constant high humidity, fungus quickly grew and wreaked havoc with electronic equipment. Spraying waterproof coatings on radio equipment was sometimes necessary. Swarms of insects chewed on wiring, creating short circuits. Getting parts and equipment was always a problem. AFRS personnel had to improvise. Often the studio

was a hastily erected wooden shack. Hanging a used parachute in the ceiling was common to improve the acoustics. In some cases a tent housed a station.

Early in 1944 a station was established on New Caledonia, followed by a second station on Guadalcanal in March 1945. Other stations were added, e.g., at Munda, Bougainville, Espiritu Santo, Nandi, and Tutila Islands. Such stations were initially called the Pacific Ocean Network, but soon became better known as “The Mosquito Network.”

Because of the long distances between stations, it was not really a network. Each Mosquito Network station got its content from shortwave broadcasts and transcription discs and operated more or less independently. Many of the South Pacific islands had Army as well as Navy/Marine detachments. The stations served all of them. Sometimes each of the services would be invited to produce a program with local content. Special messages unique to the area had to be aired, such as reminding listeners to use insect repellent and taking atabrine to avoid malaria. On Guadalcanal, an evening program called “The Atabrine Cocktail Hour” was said to originate from “The Fungus Festooned Fern Room.” Civilians in New Zealand enjoyed listening to the AFRS station at Mangen, near Auckland, although it lasted only eight months.

There was also the Jungle Network in the Pacific, reaching from Hawaii to the Philippines. Its first station (February 1944) was in New Guinea, a joint venture between the U.S. Army and the Australian Broadcasting Company. Even more so than other AFRS networks, the goal of the Jungle Network was to cater to the enlistees. An enlisted man served as program director for each station to ensure that the



We have all seen the famous photo of the flag raising on Iwo Jima. Not far from that spot, and not long after Old Glory was flying, this AFRS team chose the site for radio station WVTX. (Photo Credit: *Brass Button Broadcasters*.)

content selected would appeal to the intended audience.

On Mindanao and some other islands, Japanese troops had been hiding in the hills, some even unaware that the war was over. AFRS airdropped radios with instructions in Japanese and the local AFRS station broadcast messages in Japanese urging the holdouts to surrender, promising that they would be treated consistent with the Geneva Conventions.

AFRS had 120 stations in December 1943. By March 1945, the number had increased to 154, with stations all around the world.

During the war AFRS provided transcriptions to military hospitals in the U.S. That was called “The Bedside Network.”

Peacetime Arrives

Once the war ended, AFRS switched its messaging to address new concerns such as “When will we be going home?” Lewis developed a plan to scale down (but not end) AFRS operations. Neither he nor those high up in the War Department knew what the role of AFRS would be in peacetime. One possible option would be to disband AFRS. Many of Lewis’ people were eager to be discharged and return to civilian life. Lewis left the Army in October 1945, to return to Young and Rubicam. AFRS began switching to a more civilian-based operation, but a scaled down peacetime AFRS seemed likely to survive. The Bedside Network would definitely continue. As AFRS funding declined, fewer programs were produced in-house.

Larry Gelbart, who later became famous for the show *M.A.S.H.*, joined AFRS as a private in 1946 and was assigned to be a “Command Performance” writer.

Many famous names in radio and television got their start in AFRS and AFRTS. AFN veterans who later went to work for U.S. commercial networks say that their AFN jobs were more demanding than what they later experienced as civilian broadcasters.

While military duty for those working for AFRS was more laid back than traditional parts of the Army, Gelbart sometimes drew guard duty, and he joked that his job was to keep people from stealing jokes. In one incident, illustrating a lack of understanding, a general not familiar with how AFRS operated was touring a facility. He observed one soldier at a desk with a typewriter. He said, “Soldier, what is your job?” “I’m an AFRS writer, Sir.” he responded.

Annoyed, the general burst out with “I’ve been watching you for five minutes and you haven’t written a word!”

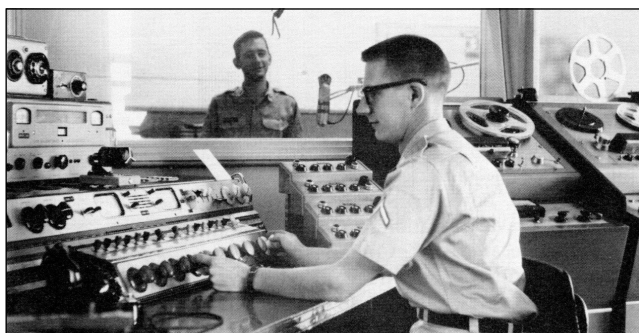
In an example from the 1960s, the overzealous Commander-in-Chief for Europe told AFN official Bob Cranston that soldiers must go to bed early so they would be ready to fight in the morning. He insisted on a curfew for all military personnel which included AFN staff, and that there should be a bed check every evening at 11. But AFN radio stations were on the air until 1 a.m. What to do? Cranston told his sergeant major Clay Brooks to do the bed check. When Brooks returned with a list of empty beds, Brooks was asked “Were all the beds there?” Brooks answered, “Yes, they were.” Cranston signed the daily logbook “Bed check completed satisfactorily.”

Reporting on the Nuremberg Trials that began in November 1945 was a major assignment for AFRS Munich, but was politically sensitive. Reporters were told to report accurately what happened. General Paul Thompson at Eisenhower’s headquarters told AFRS that if anyone tried to censor what they were saying, “Call me!” That independence enhanced AFRS’s credibility.

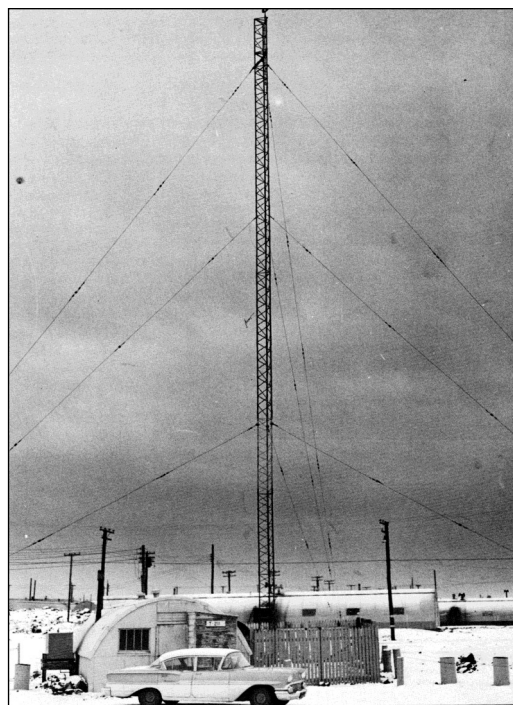
The Korean War Era

After WWII AFRS stations in Asia were called the Far Eastern Network (FEN). When American troops occupied Korea after the war, FEN launched station WVTP in Seoul as well as stations in several other Korean cities. After American troops left Korea in 1948, AFRS also pulled out. WVTP continued to operate but with Korean management.

When the United States entered the Korean War, AFRS came onshore right after the fighting forces and quickly set up stations there. As the battlefield changed, mobile stations followed the action. By 1953 the American Forces Korea Network (AFKN)



The Stuttgart studio/control room, an example of a well-equipped postwar station. (Photo credit: *Brass Button Broadcasters.*)



AFRTS radio station in Keflavik, Iceland, taken on a 22 below-zero day. The Chevy in the photo suggests it was circa 1960. (Photo credit: *Brass Button Broadcasters.*)

was in place. When the old WVTP studio was recaptured, the American crew worked around the clock to get it back on the air. Their tools had not yet arrived, so they had to use fingernail files as screwdrivers.

By this time, AFRS had a huge record library, so there was no problem filling the 21 hours/day that WVTP was broadcasting with music and news broadcasts received from AFRS Los Angeles. FEN stations in Japan provided content to AFKN by shortwave. AFRS stations had fund drives for charity, e.g., a campaign to raise money for crippled Korean children. There was one Christmas show during which listeners could hear artillery shells exploding in the background. In 1953 the first AFRS station on a Marine base was at Pohang, Korea.

Life in any war zone is dangerous. Two AFRS staffers were killed when their small plane accidentally strayed into North Korean airspace and was shot down.

The mobile stations could move with the troops and did so. AFKN was sometimes called the “Network on Wheels.” When the armistice was signed in 1953, mobile stations began to be replaced by permanent facilities. During the U.S. occupation, stations in Korea provided dependable reception for our troops there.

The Far Eastern Network settled into a regular pattern of providing quality programming in East Asia. Once the United States switched from an occupying power to a Japanese ally, FEN switched from using commandeered transmitter and studio facilities to constructing AFRS facilities of its own on U.S. bases in Japan and returning Japanese stations to the Japanese. In the summer of 1954 FEN had nine stations and ten relay transmitters. Another source said it had 20 outlets. As time went on, the number of stations decreased.

Television Gets Added

As television began to replace radios in American living rooms, our troops began to ask, "When will we get television?" AFRS recognized that it was inevitable that it would have to gear up to distribute TV, and it did so. But television is much more expensive than radio and requires a new set of skills and more funding. In 1954 AFRS changed its name to AFRTS and began planning to deploy TV around the world.

At first television shows were distributed by kinescopes (basically, just taking a sound movie of the TV set screen). Quality improved greatly when videotaping came along years later. But videotape machines were terribly expensive at first, so AFRTS continued to use kinescopes until it became increasingly difficult to get parts to keep ancient kinescope systems operating.

The first military television station was established in 1954 at Limestone Air Force Base in Maine (later Loring AFB), but not by AFRS. The base was located in a particularly remote area. Comedian Fred Allen said it was a nice place to live if you were a potato. That remoteness created continuing morale problems for those stationed there. General Curtis LeMay of the Strategic Air Command demanded that something be done. With no commercial TV stations nearby, the Federal Communications Commission agreed to let the Air Force build a station if it were limited to ten watts. LeMay called RCA's David Sarnoff who sent a crew to Maine to see what was needed and then come back to install it. Limited funds meant it was truly a bare bones operation. Also in 1954 Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines launched a TV station.

Morale at Limestone did improve with television. The AWOL rate declined from 20 per 1000 to 2.5 per 1000. AFRS realized that it was inevitable that it would have to provide television to our armed forces around the world. Unlike AFRS radio



AFKN TV headquarters in Seoul about 1960. (Photo Credit: *Brass Button Broadcasters.*)

policy, TV shows did not have their commercials edited out. AFRTS had intended to delete commercials, but at the time, video editing was difficult.

The Loring TV station lasted just until 1956 when a commercial TV station was launched in the area.

The first overseas AFRTS TV station was at Lajes in the Azores. The second was at Wheelus Field in Tripoli. When AFRS was formed in WWII, the stations were created at Army bases, but when television began to appear at military bases, it was the Air Force that did it first. It wasn't until 1972 that the Army took over European TV from the Air Force.

Television in Korea began in 1957, headquartered in Seoul. By 1965 microwave links had been erected to link all the TV stations in Korea. TV came to bases in Japan in 1960.

In 1959 an AFRTS radio station opened in Tehran, Iran, followed by TV channel 7 in 1960 that was popular with Iranian civilians. The Iranian government told AFRTS to shut down both services in 1976.

As time went on, more of the larger locations that had radio stations began to add television coverage.



Television on military bases was not just for military personnel. Their children and spouses appreciated having it. (Photo credit: *Brass Button Broadcasters*.)

At first, television in Western Europe was provided by Air Force Television at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany. That operation was folded into AFRTS in the early 1970s. The Bremerhaven station was the first (1975) to provide color TV broadcasting. In 1976 a new color studio opened in Frankfurt.

In the Pacific, TV today is provided by AFN-Korea, AFN-Japan, and AFN-Kwajalein. Analog TV was discontinued in 2012. AFN TV in Japan was discontinued in 2011.

AFRS in Viet Nam

As the Viet Nam war ramped up in the mid-1960s, AFRS rushed in to provide coverage. Armed Forces Radio Saigon was soon supplemented by other radio stations in places such as Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Pleiku, Da Nang, and Hue. The network was headquartered in Saigon and called the Armed Forces Vietnam Network (AFVN). AFVN personnel suffered casualties. When the station at Hue was overrun, its staff who were not killed suffered as POWs for five years.

Announcer/disc jockey Adrian Cronauer's program "Dawn Buster," with its sign-on "Good Morning, Vietnam!" was made famous when Robin Williams starred in the 1987 film with that title. It is on the list of the 100 funniest American movies. Set in 1965's

Saigon, it is loosely based on Cronauer's experiences. This AFRS disc jockey was loved by his audience but his irreverent attitude got him into trouble with his superiors.

A number of people who became celebrities after the war, for example, "Wheel of Fortune" host Pat Sajak, got their start on AFVN.

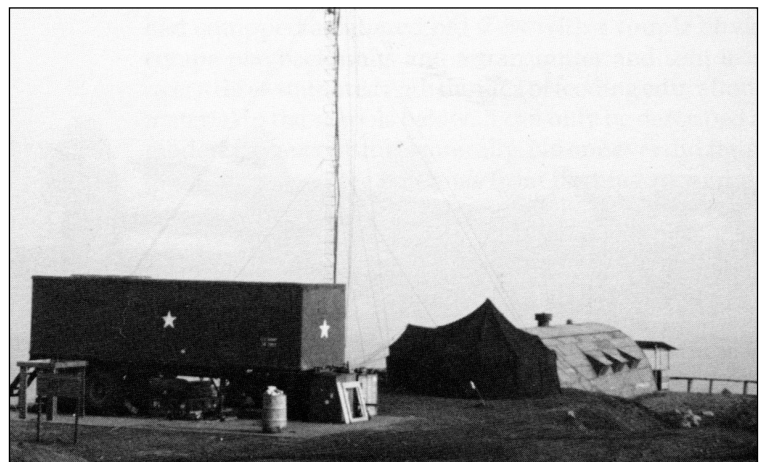
For a time, AFVN tried using airborne radio and TV transmitters in C-121 aircraft to get wider coverage areas.

AFVN stations began to close in 1971. Saigon's flagship station remained until 1973. Civilian broadcasters operated an FM service called the American Radio Service until Saigon fell in 1975.

Coverage in Asia

In 1964 the Defense Department began planning for an Armed Forces Thailand Network (AFTN) with stations launched in 1966. The worst tragedy in AFN history occurred in April 1970 when a reconnaissance aircraft crashed into the AFTN station in Udorn, killing nine AFTN personnel. AFTN was in operation until 1976 when American forces in Thailand went home.

The Armed Forces Network's Taiwan main station was near Taipei. After the U.S. withdrew troops



Mobile vans like this one at Pleiku were used in Vietnam and could be moved as the front shifted. (Photo credit: *Brass Button Broadcasters*.)



Pat Sajak, who recently retired after years hosting "Wheel of Fortune," got his start on AFVN. (Photo Credit: Oregon Public Broadcasting - OPB.org)

from Taiwan in 1979 the station was taken over by a civilian group, the American Chamber of Commerce in Taipei. Called the International Community Radio Taipei, it continues English language broadcasting today.

The Caribbean and South America

Once radio and TV stations began to appear in Puerto Rico, the system became known as the Armed Forces Caribbean Network. Stations in Panama were first known as the Caribbean Forces Network and later as the Southern Command Network (SCN).



This station in Dhahran, Saudia Arabia, is typical of AFN broadcasting during the Gulf War. (Photo credit: 80 Years in Europe.)

TV service in Panama was in place from 1959 to 1999. As noted earlier, there had been radio for American troops in the Canal Zone even before AFRS was formed. Beginning in 1987 radio broadcasts were aimed at American troops stationed in Honduras.

Other Theaters and the Modern Era

AFN was there in the Persian Gulf War. The "Desert Shield Network" or "The Armed Forces Desert Network," began in 1990, operating from portable vans. At first, troops were discouraged from bringing radios. But then the National Association of Broadcasters provided 25,000 radios to the troops and other organizations also contributed. Operating in Saudi Arabia presented challenges. Unveiled women could not appear on television and raunchy music videos were prohibited. AFN had always strived to give the troops content like that they would have had back home. Compromises had to be made.

AFN was briefly in the Balkans when troops were in Bosnia and Kosovo. In Operation Iraqi Freedom AFN-Iraq (called "Freedom Radio," a joint Army, Marines, and Air Force effort) broadcast from 2003 to 2011 on FM channels from Basra in the south to Mosul in the North.

AFN provided both radio and TV in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2014, with headquarters at Bagram Air Base. FM radio was on 94.1 MHz throughout Afghanistan and 97.1 in Manas. Like Operation Iraqi Freedom, AFN's broadcasting in Afghanistan was also called "Freedom Radio."



U.S. Air Force Staff Sergeant Rachel Herrmann (left) and Senior Airman Jarid Watson broadcasting from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan in 2009 for Freedom Radio. (Photo credit: 80 Years in Europe.)

Radio Formats Available For Use By AFN Stations

The Blend Mainstream hits and yesterday's favorites

Country/Western

Gravity (Urban)

Legacy (Deep classic rock)

Joe Radio (80s and 90s hits)

Freedom Rock

The Voice (News and talk)

Clutch (Sports from ESPN and SportsMap)

Fans (Sports from Fox Sports Radio and Sports Byline USA)

PowerTalk (both liberal and conservative talk programming)

NPR AFN (NPR public radio programs; programs like "Car Talk" have been popular)

TV Formats Available For Use By AFN Stations

Prime (Sitcoms, dramas, talk and game shows)

Spectrum (Programs like American Idol)

News (feeds from NBC, ABC, CBS, and Fox)

Family/Pulse (Kids' programs, age-appropriate programs at different times of day)

Movie

Sports (ESPN, NFL, NBA, NASCAR, etc.)

Sports 2 (WWE, auto & motorcycle racing, etc.)

Sports HD

Whenever a significant number of U.S. troops deploy to a new area, it is likely that AFN will follow quickly.

AFN, like commercial broadcasters, must constantly strive to keep up with new technology, e.g., converting analog TV operations to digital, switching to HDTV (achieved in 2017), and phasing out AM radio in favor of FM. AFN TV delivered by satellite is encrypted.

Today, DTH (Direct to Home) service employing settop decoder boxes has become more common. This is a convenient way to deliver content, and it avoids using TV broadcast frequencies needed by the host countries.

AFN provides TV programming that is popular back home, but one must remember that a critical part of the mission is to provide command information that replaces commercials. That sort of information includes messages ranging from reminders to vote to lists of what is playing at the base movie theater and trailers for those films.

In 2013 AFN introduced Internet radio streams with a service called AFN GO. There is a free app to access it in the Apple and Google app stores.

In 2021 it appeared that both AFN-Europe and AFN-Pacific were to have a partial shutdown. But a

change in management at the Defense Media Activity avoided that outcome.

Wikipedia lists AFN stations operational today. Note, however, that if you Google Armed Forces Network, you will also find websites for Britain's Armed Forces Network.

You can browse current AFN programming at:

<https://myafn/dodmedia.osd.mil>

It is clear that AFN has fulfilled its mission admirably since it began, and it has evolved as needed. Today it continues to serve our military in a manner consistent with modern times.

Sources:

AFRTS "The First 50 Years" (Ft. Meade, MD: Armed Forces Information Service, 1992).

Christman, Trent, *Brass Buton Broadcasters* (Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing, 1992).

Provan, John, *80 Years in Europe (1943-2023) Armed Forces Network* (Ft. Meade, MD: Defense Media Activity, 2023).

<https://afngo.net>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armed_Forces_Network

<https://www.armedforcesnetwork.org>

<https://www.dma.mil> ■

From the Executive Director's Desk

Happy New Year! As we take our first steps into 2025, we are reminded of how quickly time passes, yet how much can be accomplished in just a single year. As the seasons shift and the new year unfolds, it is an opportunity to reflect on the past while looking forward to all that the future holds. We are so grateful for the unwavering support of our members and community!

We were thrilled to host our Annual Gala on November 2nd, and it was truly a memorable evening. It was heartwarming to meet so many of our members and supporters in person and celebrate together. During the event, we posthumously honored broadcast historian Dr Christopher Sterling with the Ed Walker Lifetime Achievement Award in Broadcasting. His daughters, Jen and Robin, accepted the award on his behalf. The evening was a testament to the impact Chris had on the industry,



NCRTV Museum's Board Chair Laurie Baty (right) presents the Ed Walker Lifetime Achievement Award to Chris Sterling's daughters Robin and Jennifer.



On December 18th the Museum invited members and volunteers to a holiday event featuring home-made cookies and hot chocolate. Here Judy Hannon and I staff the goodies table. Judy has earned a reputation as a cookie baking artist. We all enjoyed this friendly get-together!

and it was an honor to recognize his legacy. The funds raised during this event will go towards supporting our operational costs and expanding our outreach efforts. We will begin to plan for this year's Annual Gala very soon, so stay tuned for more details in the coming months—it's sure to be another memorable event!

In December, we hosted a Cookies and Hot Chocolate event to help ring in the holiday season and wrap up the year. I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to all the members who attended and made it such a warm and cozy evening. It was

(Continued on page 16)

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Video and Audio Media Conversions

Check Out Our Members-Only Website!

Thanks to diligent work by Kathleen Foster, the quantity of useful content on our Members-Only website is steadily increasing. To view it:

- Go to ncrtv.org
- Click on Login
- Click on Member Content (upper right)

There you will find the following five categories. (Note that in each category there may be a few very recent items that have yet to be posted, but they will be added soon.)

1. Wednesday Night Lectures (Video files)

Wednesday Night Lectures have been offered for the past four years. Watch these very interesting lectures at your leisure. Lecture topics include: history of radio manufacturers, popular radio and TV shows, bios of important figures in radio/TV history, technology milestones, and more.

2. Vintage Radio Shows (Audio files)

These are local shows mostly from Baltimore stations like WBAL, WFBR, and WCBM. For example, listen to WBAL's Alan Christian's 1978 Broadcast Bloopers show.

3. Museum Newsletters (PDF Files)

Here you will find PDF back issues of the Museum's current quarterly journal, *Dials and Channels*, as well as newsletters from our predecessor organization, the Radio History Society. The first item listed in this category is a complete index to all of them to help you find things. It lists articles by subject matter and by author.

4. Artifact Showcases

The dozens of bi-weekly one-page artifact showcase items emailed to members are here to browse.

5. Historical Documents

Postings in this category are steadily increasing, with subcategories such as:

Books:

Currently, two digitized radio books from 1922-23 are posted.

Company Material (listed by Company):

Company information is provided for firms such as Federal and Philco. We recently posted many issues of *Philco News* from 1932 to 1960. The website worldradiohistory.com is terrific, with digitized literature from hundreds of radio/TV periodicals. It has many issues of *Philco News*. But the ones in our Members-Only section are *different* from the issues found on worldradiohistory.com.

General Radio & TV Information by Topic:

This section includes reports such as "Trends and Developments in Radio and Television Receivers, 1949."

Radio & TV Shows and Performers:

Here you can enjoy browsing a Howdy Doody photo album.

Radio & TV Station and Network Information:

Information is listed by station or network. For example, under Baltimore station WFBR you will find historical information from 1926 as well as a 25th anniversary booklet from 1947. Under Washington station WTOP is a scrapbook from station chief engineer Granville Klink, with historical material about that station.

There is enough fascinating information to keep you busy for a whole weekend. And we are continuously adding more digitized content. Do check it out. ■



The NCRTV Museum is a cooperative venture with the City of Bowie.

Our Generous Financial Donors

Thanks to those below for monetary donations to the Museum of \$100 or more during the period January 1 to December 31, 2024.

<u>Benefactors</u> <u>(\$2500 & up)</u>	Noel Elliott R.J. Gore Cathy Gorn Richard Greenhut E. Hewlett Kent Joe Koester John Mansell Leon Steinberg	Donna Schneider David Sproul William Steel Lee Williams	William King Paul Klein Richard Klein Stephen Kogut Jeffrey Kretsche Stephen Larrabee Gary Ledbetter Bruce Miller William T. Murphy Andrew Myrup Monica Noell James Privitera Howard Rensin Steve Rosenthal Frankie Schiefer Bahram Soroush Kenneth Sprinkle Eric Stenberg Mary Ellen Stroup Thomas Termini David Tillman Victor Vellelli Susan Walker-Scola
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Consider Helping To Produce *Dials and Channels*!

Our quarterly journal is an important member benefit as well as a critical aspect of our mission to preserve radio/TV history. Every key job needs a backup person. Might you be interested in working with me as my backup for publishing *Dials and Channels*? It is fun and rewarding. Thanks to the Internet, you need not be in the local area. We can work together via Zoom. We use Microsoft Publisher. If you are not familiar with that software,

it is easy to learn, useful for all kinds of tasks, and a valuable addition to your skill set.

Contact me if you would like to talk about it:

Brian Belanger
240-477-8906
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(From the Executive Director's Desk—Continued from page 13)

wonderful to connect with everyone, enjoy some good conversation, and share in the holiday spirit together.

In addition to these events, we've been working diligently to restart our community outreach efforts. We've already held three community outreach events with local libraries and had the privilege of being part of a Community STEM Day with the Rockville Science Center. We are excited to continue strengthening our connection to the local community and are eager to expand our presence in area schools this year.

Looking ahead to the spring, we're filled with excitement and optimism. Spring is a time of renewal and growth, and we hope it brings a season of new opportunities and inspiration for all of us.

As nature reawakens, so do we, and there's no better time to continue building on the momentum we've gathered. We look forward to fresh possibilities, new partnerships, and further enriching our community connections as the year unfolds. As always, we're looking for new volunteers to join our team! If you have any interest, please don't hesitate to reach out to us! All experience levels are welcome.

Wishing you all a wonderful spring filled with growth, joy, and new beginnings!

Mark Sledziewski



The attendees enjoyed my demonstration of radio sound effects at the Rockville Science Center's STEM day. We intend to seek more opportunities like this to reach out of the community and publicize the Museum.

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