



# MAKING WAVES

**FUN AND ADVENTURE AS A YOUNG DJ ON BRITAIN'S  
OFFSHORE PIRATE RADIO STATIONS IN THE MID-60s**

**DAVID SINCLAIR**

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ISBN: 978-1-4834-2419-4 (e)

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Lulu Publishing Services rev. date: 01/08/2015

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# FOREWORD

The mid-sixties was a great time to be a teenager. I entered my teens on Monday 25<sup>th</sup> May 1964. History relates that this was the same day that pop singer Screaming Lord Sutch launched Britain's third offshore radio station, immodestly named after himself. To be honest I wasn't really aware of Radio Sutch at the time but I was a massive fan of the first two stations – Radio Caroline and Radio Atlanta – which had both begun broadcasting from the North Sea earlier that year.

At that time Britain was in the strange position of allowing commercial television but not commercial radio. Audio broadcasting was solely in the hands of the BBC. Then, at Easter 1964, Radio Caroline had dropped anchor. Listeners to recordings of its early shows may be baffled as to what was so enthralling about it. To modern ears it really doesn't sound very good. But it was playing records all day, every day, and, even if sometimes the DJs were learning their craft on air, they sounded a lot more spontaneous than the scripted announcers at the BBC. And the fact that they were stuck on a ship, battling with the elements, made it all the more exciting. It was like a real-time soap opera. And, over the following weeks and months, the programmes improved too.

At the time of writing this, back issues of the Radio Times have just been published on the internet so I can see exactly what the BBC Light Programme was offering the day I turned 13. There was a good deal of easy-listening music played by various orchestras but, despite the British beat boom then in full swing, spearheaded by The Beatles, precious few hit records: 6.30 Bright And Early 7.00 Morning Music (both featuring in-house recordings of light music) 9.00 Housewives' Choice (a request show - at last, the possibility of

hearing a pop record) 9.55 Five To Ten (religion) 10.00 Clinton's Cakewalk (more BBC recorded MOR music) 10.30 Music While You Work (yet more) 11.00 The Morning Story 11.15 The Dales (daily serial) 11:30 Edmundo Ros and his Latin-American Orchestra 12.00 Twelve O'clock Spin with Peter Murray (a whole half-hour of records, what luxury!) 12.30 Music-Hall 13.45 Listen With Mother (a children's story) 14.00 Woman's Hour (magazine programme) 15.00 Music For Dancing played by Victor Silvester and his Ballroom Orchestra 15.31 Music While You Work .... you get the idea. It is not hard to see why the offshore stations were such an immediate success.

Broadcasting from outside UK territorial waters, they weren't bound by British laws or the 'needle time' restrictions which limited the amount of commercially available music the BBC could play. Following the impact of Radios Caroline and Atlanta, a number of entrepreneurs jumped on the bandwagon. After Radio Sutch, there was Radio Invicta; Sutch was then re-launched as the rather more professional Radio City; Radio Invicta was replaced by King Radio, and then by Radio 390; there was Radio London, Tower Radio, Radio Essex, Radio Scotland and more. At one time there were ten stations operating from ships and marine structures dotted round the coast. Every day there seemed to be a story in the papers about some new development: either the launch of another "pirate" (as the imaginative gentlemen of the press named them), a dispute between rival operators or a government minister making threats to close them down. It was all very exciting.

During the sixties I lived in East Sussex and – luckily for me – many of the offshore stations were clustered round the south-east corner of Britain. I could hear most of them. Although I was aware that some were more polished than others, and some played more of the music that I personally enjoyed, I found all of them endlessly fascinating. I remember an old school report which read something along the lines of "if Jon would only stop listening to the radio so much, he might

make something of his life.” I have enormous respect for the school-master who wrote that but, on this occasion, he was totally wrong. I have never stopped listening to the radio and have been lucky enough to have enjoyed a forty year career in broadcasting. That might never have happened if the offshore stations hadn’t so totally captured my imagination.

In March 2000 I launched my website, The Pirate Radio Hall of Fame, to pay tribute to the maritime broadcasters who had given me so much pleasure. It is reassuring to know that I am not alone in my interest in the subject. This year the site will attract around 230,000 visitors.

Much has been written about Radio Caroline, the first and best-remembered of the “pirates”; and because so many of the DJs from Radio London went on to be part of the launch team for the BBC’s pop service Radio One, we know quite a lot about that station too. But, until now, no one has revealed what it was like to work on some of the others. I can remember listening – and enjoying – the stations David so vividly describes in this book and I am thrilled to – at last – find out what was going on at sea while I sat in my room, tuning up and down the dial. David and his colleagues risked life and limb to provide me with hours of enjoyment. Their programmes were the soundtrack to my teenage years. Half a century later, I am very grateful for this opportunity to say thank you.

Jon Myer

November 2014



# PREFACE

The decade of the 1960s was an exciting time. Britain was starting to 'Swing' and a whole new world was opening wide for the generation coming up. New music and fashions were appearing and attitudes were changing- fast. We were coming into our own.

In the middle of the decade, I was suddenly catapulted into the world of offshore pirate radio, the enterprising answer to the old-fashioned BBC which had enjoyed a monopoly of broadcasting since its inception in 1922. The government of the day detested us, but the public loved us – what could be more satisfying?

Making Waves is the story of my involvement in the scene as a disk jockey on three of those offshore radio stations. Forget the movie, 'The Boat That Rocked', it wasn't *quite* like that. From dangling on a rope from an iron structure over the waves way below, to taking tea on the terrace of the House of Commons while dressed like a refugee from an abandoned landfill, I did it all – and enjoyed every moment. I hope you enjoy the journey with me.



David Sinclair. Publicity headshot May, 1966

# CHAPTER ONE

The North Sea was having one of its comparatively rare good days. From the deck of the old fort I looked out across a relatively placid body of water, gently undulating and looking totally innocent. It was shortly after nine o'clock in the morning and still slightly misty, although the sun was making a final effort to break through. I couldn't see any land yet, but the occasional small yacht and fishing boat passing close by let me know that the world was still out there, somewhere.

I reflected complacently on my good fortune. It was sheer dumb luck that had brought me to this place, at this time, and to a career that was all I could ever ask. I loved this business and I loved this place. I reflectively took another swig of coffee and contemplated the curious, and indeed bizarre, circumstances which had led me here. Only a few months previously, I had been in a deep rut. The future had looked bleak and without particular interest - a working life ahead of boredom, devoid of zest or excitement of any kind. Never had I dreamed that one day soon, I would find myself dangling from a rope 40 feet above the sea, my life in the hands of strangers, wondering what would come next.

I thought about Mr. Humphries in the accounts department of the shipping office. He had been there for over thirty years and was pulling in an annual salary of about fifteen hundred pounds, a goodly sum at the time. His was boring work, and he got his off-duty jollies as a stipendiary magistrate. A worthy service to the community, but it had turned him into a dry old stick whose credo was the preservation of the status quo. "You establish it, and I will follow it", was his oft-repeated remark. What a wonderful epitaph!

I took another swig of coffee, lit a cigarette, and looked around me with a feeling of contentment. This was the kind of life dear old Mr. Humphries would never have considered. Not only was I not in a well-established profession in the City, I was lounging around in an old sweater and jeans, perched precariously on a rusting iron edifice in the middle of the sea, and even more horrendous, I was doing something which the British government regarded as being highly illegal! More to my shame, I absolutely loved every minute of it!



Coffee time, while busy tech Mike Brereton strides past

Above, the seagulls with their carping cries circled and watched for the next bucket of scraps to be slung over the side by the cook du jour, meanwhile venting their displeasure at the delay by dropping pointed messages with magnificent abandon all over the deck.

Behind me, I could hear the muted sound of the jock on the air, pumping out the matinee show to the assembled multitudes on shore. At least, we hoped it was assembled multitudes, for I was part of a fairly new phenomenon in Britain that hot and sunny summer of 1966 - pirate radio - and this old fort was in fact, Radio Essex - "Serving the County Of Essex, 24 hours a day!"

Idly gazing out over the water, I wondered what mouth-watering repast would be served for luncheon that day. Would it be corned beef again, or, and I salivated at the very thought - spam sandwiches? John Knight was on duty today in the kitchen, and John had a way of making even camel dung appear fairly appetising.

At last, with a practised flick of the wrist, I sent the remains of my coffee, together with an expiring cigarette butt over the side into the sea. As I wandered back toward the studios I saw the seagulls gather into dive-bombing formation, and then hurtle towards the surface of the water. Squawks of frustration followed me as I went inside.

A couple of hours or so earlier, Radio Essex owner Roy Bates and a couple of jocks returning from shore leave had boarded the station tender - a small fishing boat - at Southend, and were gallantly making their way to the fort with fresh supplies, including mail, commercial copy, program logs, diesel oil, half of a lamb and sundry other necessities to keep us going for another week or so. They too, were enjoying the day, for this trip was in stark contrast to those undertaken in bad weather. Such days could be sheer hell for most of us urban landlubbers, who spent most of the duration of such journeys, tossing our biscuits over the side and over each other.

Lunch-time finally arrived and the gang gathered together in the 'mess' and tucked in to slightly 'off' corned beef, brittle bread with little holes where the fascinating green bits had been carefully chopped out, and mugs of hot, weak tea - weak because we were even then into recycling - to wit, the used tea leaves from over the last few days. That supply boat was going to be very welcome indeed.

Having been minimally fed and watered, we each contemplated the imminent arrival of the supply tender. Two of the guys were due to go on leave, but this would depend on two fresh bodies arriving to

replace them. One never really knew when shore leave would actually materialise until the boat was close enough for binoculars to determine the situation. If it looked good at that point, optimistically half-packed bags would be speedily finished off and the others staying on duty would pass messages, instructions and errands to be dealt with by the home-going heroes. Kindly meant wishes, mostly of an obscene nature, for a “good time in London” would be bestowed.

I wouldn't be going this time as I had only returned from leave the week before, and in any case, I would be due to go on air at 3 o'clock. According to one of the fellows who knew about tides and stuff, the boat would be arriving about 2.30, and everyone not actually needed on the air, would be helping to haul up the supplies and personnel. Therefore, it was obviously time to take a nap, and the decision firmly made, I scuttled down the stairs into the 'sleeping leg'. Picking up a paperback, I lay down on my bunk and began to read.

Only minutes later it seemed, yells and thumping on the door woke me and as I groggily staggered out on to the deck I had to close my eyes against the bright sun. “Tender on the port bow!” cackled John, who was in high good spirits. This nautical phrase was lost on me though, as I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. “The boat's here” he clarified, somewhat condescendingly, I felt. Anyway, I had more pressing matters on my mind. The two mugs of recycled tea I had quaffed at lunch were now demanding to be let out, and soon.

I mumbled something along the lines of “yeah, just a minute” .., and wandered off towards the loo. The loo, or 'squat box' as somebody had painted on the door, was simply a small converted storeroom with a hole in the floor and an old lavatory plonked down directly over it. The hole of course, opened directly over the sea, and

therefore such normal conveniences as a flushing system were totally superfluous. For the next minute and a half I luxuriated in the relief of a thorough pee, and then, good humour fully restored, quickly made my way back out on deck to help with the arrival of the boat, half hoping that the other lads had finished all the work.

Unfortunately, most of the other lads were still engaged in hauling up bags of supplies and as I came up beside them, I cheerily urged them to get a move on - a suggestion greeted with less than total warmth. As I looked over the side of the deck, I could see that the unloading had only just got under way. I could also see that there was something slightly amiss. Station owner Roy Bates was shaking his donkey jacket, and looking less than pleased, while the boatman was shuffling some old sacking material around the deck of the boat with his feet. There was considerable muttering and grumbling from below.

Later, when the boat had left, and the supplies had been investigated, sampled, and the remains put into store, one of the newly arrived jocks explained that as they had been coming up to the fort and manoeuvring to tie up, some clown had chosen that moment to toss something down, probably emptying a teapot, he guessed. I nodded wisely, opining the view that it was very irresponsible of the miscreant not to have checked first, as their arrival was expected.

Inside, however, I was filled with a sense of awe and wonder. I had accomplished something that millions of people all over the world, for many generations, had only dreamed of doing. I had pissed on the boss!

## CHAPTER TWO

The nineteen-sixties were a watershed in the social history of Britain. The long years of austerity following the war had faded into a new prosperity. Harold MacMillan had coined his “winds of change” and “You’ve never had it so good” remarks. For many, it was like coming out of a long, dark tunnel into the sunlight. For the very first time, a lot of working people actually had disposable income. New business flourished everywhere, and never more flamboyantly than in London. The new, ‘Swinging Britain’ had arrived! For those of us born during the war, these were the years of our teens and twenties. We had grown up with ration books, shortages, and a built-in attitude of ‘make-do’. The sixties were something else.

In the fifties a working man’s pay would be about 8 to 11 pounds a week and he usually had to keep a family and home on that wage. Suddenly though, a young lad straight out of school and into a humdrum job could make up to 14 pounds a week and get to spend most of it on himself! No wonder our parents were annoyed. They were even more annoyed when they realised that ‘fun’ meant spending freely on records, girls, clothes, cars, etc., and not a penny on haircuts!

With this new prosperity came the simultaneous release of another emotion - pride. No longer were young people content with Dad’s outlook and attitudes. We were a new generation with goals and aspirations of our own, and we certainly weren’t going to accept any kind of entrenched status quo. Our parents had always accepted and obeyed established authority, but what kind of life had it given them? No, respect for moribund authority was definitely out. Particularly an old-fashioned, hidebound authority that had no idea what we were all about, and more importantly, didn’t *want* to know.



The arrogance of youth however, would take no account of the fact that our parents had felt much the same as they grew up in the years between the wars. The difference was simply that the prosperity of the sixties meant that our generation had the economic power to do what our parents would have loved to do.

In this euphoric atmosphere, our generation blossomed, though not always pleasantly. Crime statistics began to increase for starters, and the new prosperity did not reach everyone. For most young people though, it was a fabulous time. As always in modern societies, it was in the field of entertainment that the first changes were seen. New artists appeared on the scene, in the cinema, on records, and significantly, on the airwaves.

Ever since the inception of broadcasting, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC, under the initial direction of a dour, Presbyterian Scot named John Reith, had enjoyed total monopoly of the British airwaves. In 1922, when the BBC received its charter, it was given a monopoly to guard against the possibility of an influx of American influence, a horror of dreadful proportions according to our betters. Well, it is true that the crasser type of American broadcasting did leave a lot to be desired, but this was one case where the baby was thrown out with the bath water. For the next 40 years, Britons were treated to an unremitting diet of uplifting and mind-improving programs, many of appalling dullness, and with few exceptions, providing a positive paucity of actual enjoyment!

Somewhere in the nineteen-thirties comedy began to appear and after a decade, became rather good, and in time, quite sophisticated. Then eventually, it would even be allowed on the air on Sundays! It was the war though, that gave the BBC its present stature, and gave it the maturity to be adventurous once in a while. In the early nineteen-fifties, anarchy appeared on the air, in the shape of a new kind of comedy called the Goon Show, pioneered by three young

performers fresh from the army, who would become part of show business history - Harry Secombe, Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers. This 'new wave' would pave the way for Monty Python and beyond.

On television, the sixties gave the country satire. David Frost anchored 'That Was the Week That Was' (TW3) - an irreverent look at current events which entertained the entire country and mortally offended the establishment. Apoplexy in those circles was rampant. Therefore, I along with my friends became addicts in no time.

By the nineteen-sixties the BBC was handling 2 television channels and three radio channels, and at last, private commercial television had appeared on the scene. When it first went on the air in the mid-fifties, it was as an 'experiment'. The experiment soon grew into a popular alternative which forced the BBC to compete, and although the BBC hated having to do this, 'Auntie Beeb' later admitted that the arrival of commercial TV had spurred it to new heights of excellence.

Over the years, there had been many calls for private commercial radio broadcasting to be introduced, but the calls fell on deaf ears. The appearance of independent television should have been the trigger, but nothing happened. The BBC, we were told, was doing an excellent job, serving a variety of tastes, why would you need anything else?

The only competition for sound radio was from Radio Luxembourg, a powerful station situated in the Grand Duchy, which broadcast pop music programs in English in the evenings. The signal however, was far from satisfactory, and tended to fade in and out with monotonous regularity.

As kids, most of us would be packed off to bed at a reasonable hour, but once parents had departed the scene, clandestine transistor radios hidden under the bedclothes would be switched on and tuned to Luxembourg. Millions of parents must have wondered why

children who went to bed at a 'respectable' hour often appeared pale and washed-out when they came down the following morning. It was great fun to lie in bed listening to the latest hits - something we rarely got from the BBC!

This situation, which existed up until the early nineteen-sixties must seem very strange to people in Canada, the US, Australia and other countries where a variety of broadcasting services had already existed as a matter of course for several decades.

In addition to the BBC's fierce protection of its monopoly, there has always been the factor of paternalism on the part of British authorities. The official view has always been that the airwaves are public, i.e. government property, and could in no way be demeaned by vulgar popular music, or the crass advertising of commercial products.

This view seemed to be further complicated by the elitist attitudes of the Conservative administrations, (who had not yet quite realised that you could make money with radio, and if you did, it would be too much like 'going in to trade' - an appalling concept for 'gentlemen'), and on the other side, an ideological hatred of anything done even remotely for profit, by the Labour administration.

This tangled web of views and prejudices had effectively blocked the prospects for commercial radio in Britain for a couple of generations, but with the advent of the 'swinging sixties', it was obvious to some very astute people that the time was ripe for change in many areas of British life, broadcasting being only one of them.

The concept of broadcasting from outside territorial waters had first surfaced in Sweden in the late fifties, and later, in Holland. Ships off each coast had been broadcasting to these countries for some time.

A meeting in London between an adventurous young Irish entrepreneur, Ronan O'Rahilly, and an Australian businessman,

Allan Crawford, would eventually result in the birth of the first of the British radio 'pirates', Radio Atlanta and the most famous and durable of them all, Radio Caroline.

## CHAPTER THREE

On the morning of Easter Sunday, 1964, British pirate radio was born. Radio Caroline went on the air. Word spread like wildfire throughout the south in the space of a few days. I quickly became an avid listener.

Although the British public had been able to listen to Radio Luxembourg from 1938, (with a minor interruption during the war) it only broadcast in English during the evenings, and reception of the signal was erratic, to say the least. Also, the record companies only allowed a portion of any song to be played in order to protect sales. Ronan O'Rahilly's Radio Caroline was an instant breath of fresh air, and would soon be followed by other stations with varying degrees of success.

The station was first set up on a ship called 'm.v Frederica' which was anchored off the coast of Essex. Later, when Caroline and Altanta merged, the former took over the vessel 'Mi Amigo'. At first, it was on the air only a few hours each day, but eventually ran from 6 am to 2 am. The programming in early days was a mix of current pop material and standards. It not unnaturally, immediately attracted a vast audience in the south of England.

In 1964 I was, like thousands upon thousands of others, going through the daily routine of a job I didn't like, had no prospects, and was only marginally less boring than listening to an eternal Party Political Broadcast. It was, however, *respectable*, and in those days respectable meant that you didn't get your hands dirty, wore a dull suit to work (Burton's, fifteen quid!) and ate your lunch in a restaurant (luncheon vouchers provided by the company) instead of 'brown-bagging' it.

The fact that I was bored out of my skull and could only look forward to another 40 years of this, with the dim and tantalising prospect of ending up as chief clerk in the accounts department, with maybe, my own private desk, did not seem to bother anyone else. Was I being selfish, fickle, and ungrateful even, for hoping that there might be something else I could do, and have a slightly more interesting life?

With the appearance of Radio Caroline on the “Swinging Britain” scene, something deep within, stirred. I thought it was indigestion at first, or maybe a second go at puberty, but slowly, I realised that what I really wanted, most of all, was to be *on the air!* What a strange feeling it was, to know absolutely and with complete certainty, precisely what I wanted to do for a living.

Suffering from a severe case of timidity, I did absolutely nothing about it, figuring that without any experience or knowledge whatsoever, I stood about as much chance of getting on the air as being elected prime minister of Ghana. I knew nothing about how a broadcast studio operated, how they managed to start the records at exactly the moment that the announcer stopped speaking, or even how sound was transmitted over the air. I had only a nodding acquaintance with what a tape recorder looked like, and had never actually used a microphone before. Today’s kids who are practically born with an mp3 player in their ear and a ‘smart’ phone on their belt, will no doubt, be highly amused at my ignorance.

Caroline was a magnificent breath of fresh air, and was soon followed by other offshore stations, some like Caroline, on ships and others on old abandoned wartime gun-forts a few miles off the coast. There were two kinds of these forts, those designed and built for the army, and those created for the navy. The army forts were a collection of several towers, each one looking rather like a square box on a tripod, and each linked together by catwalks, forming a partial circle with a ‘nub’ tower in the middle. Each ‘box’ was the size

of an average two-storey house, the lower floor being the 'working' part, and the upper floor the dormitories.

The naval forts however, were single structures which looked, not unnaturally, like a ship on stilts. They consisted of a large platform, upon which was placed an area of 'cabins', leaving a space at each end for an anti-aircraft gun. On top of the 'cabin' block, was a tower-like structure, which was probably used for spotting enemy aircraft coming in. The massive edifice was supported by two large round concrete legs, on concrete-filled barges, sunk firmly into position on the sea bed. Each leg was hollow, and was eight floors high, all but the top two or three floors being below sea level at high tide. Each floor was quite large, accommodating about twelve two-tier bunk beds around the wall.

By 1965 I had decided that 'enough was enough', and had junked my dead-end job in the city and exchanged it for an equally dead-end existence with a building society and real estate office in Orpington. Building societies are a kind of bank used by people to save specifically for their mortgages, and are usually set up in the same premises as a real estate agency. I was now just as cheesed off and bored as before, but at least I did not have to travel by train up to London every day on the 8.23 commuter special. I was even making a little more money, and saving a bundle on train fares!

After a few months I couldn't stand the building society anymore and for some reason moved down the street to work in the office of a security company resulting in even more boredom of course, but a little more money to compensate. Obviously, my life was going nowhere and unless I did something about it, I was well and truly doomed. When I became sufficiently depressed about all this, I would wearily envision my epitaph - "Beneath this Auld Sod lays another". In somewhat more optimistic moments, there would be the hope that somehow, I could get my foot in the door of this exciting

new broadcasting field. After all, I could hear guys on the air who sounded like real people - a far cry from the ultra-refined, bleating tones of the usual BBC announcer of the day. To be fair, before the decade was over, the BBC airwaves would feature all sorts of regional accents and styles - a direct result of the influence of the 'pirates'.

My general dissatisfaction with my lot was perhaps, not untypical of my generation, who mostly felt that the new freedoms should be exploited to the full. In the latter half of the sixties, such feelings would culminate in the 'turn-on, drop-out, flower-power' syndrome that so typifies that decade. Happily, I was to miss all of that rubbish, being a tad too orientated toward fun and profit by then, to waste time in wearing beads, beard and sandals and taking part in sit-ins.

As more pirate stations came on the air, I felt more and more that there might be an opportunity for me. Caroline was becoming well established and was soon joined by shipboard Radio Atlanta and on an army fort, was Radio City, the successor to Radio Sutch, which had been a very strange operation founded by the colourful and extremely wacky pop singer, 'Screaming Lord Sutch'. In a later decade, the good 'lord' was to enter the political arena as leader and candidate for the Monster Raving Loony Party. I believe that in the early nineties the party, which by then had added the word 'green' to its title, actually elected a council candidate in municipal elections!

They say you make your own luck. It was a pity I didn't know the manufacturing process. I was not getting anywhere, simply because I didn't know how to go about it, and didn't have the contacts to help and advise me. It looked like all this pirate stuff was going to pass me by. I needn't have worried though; salvation was lurking just around the corner.



## CHAPTER FOUR

One evening I arrived home from work and picked up that day's edition of the Orpington & Kentish Times and hoping dinner wouldn't be long, started to skim through it. Suddenly, my attention was riveted by a full page spread on Radio Essex, a pirate radio station that had established itself a few months before on one of the old forts off the coast at Southend. I hadn't exactly heard of it, but what the hell, it looked exciting. The article was the result of the paper interviewing a local guy who was working on the station, and was full of glowing reports of life on board. The article spoke warmly of a superbly-run professional radio station, with excellent living conditions for the staff. There was mention of exquisitely prepared meals by a master chef purloined from a famous London Hotel. There was also discreet mention of high salaries and other first-class working conditions.

It seemed that the story originated with the Fort Captain, one Dick Palmer, who I found, lived less than a mile from me. What to do? How do I find this guy? How do I get a piece of this action? Help!!

Sanity finally prevailed and I scoured the phone book for Palmers, finally working out which one it must be. By the time the article had appeared in the paper, he had returned to the station and I spent the next couple of weeks in an agony of frustration, wondering if I would ever get a reply to the letter I had sent to his address.

One Saturday morning a couple of weeks later, Dick Palmer turned up at my door. There before me was a big fellow, with tangled hair and a Manfred Mann type beard which gave him the look of a fearsome prophet. He also carried with him an air of relaxed confidence. He had an engineering background, and as a

consequence, was a vital part of the station's operation. He had played a significant part in the re-building of the wartime generator that supplied all power to the station. He was also the senior announcer. The guy exuded competence.

This initial impact was softened however as he relaxed and cheerfully answered my first stumbling question - "How can I get a job as an announcer?" He was used to this, of course. How many times had the poor devil had to cope with sundry adenoidal twits begging for a crack at being a disc-jockey? Dick was patient. "Well, the first thing you have to do," he said, "is to make a tape of yourself introducing some records, and send it along to the station.

"Naturally," I said, trying to look wise. I made a mental note to find a friend with a tape recorder, and who knew how to use it. "It sounds as though it's a pretty good life out there on the fort" I said, "top grade chefs and everything!"

On Dick's face appeared a sad and pitying smile. He kindly and gently sat me down, and proceeded to explain, in the manner of a father disabusing a child of the magic of Santa Claus, that newspaper articles do not always convey an absolutely accurate picture. It was at that point, I started to get an education and acquire some minimal street-smarts.

There were usually about half a dozen guys out on the fort at one time, and in addition to on-air duties, everyone did their part in helping to keep the place going. Cooking, cleaning, and fuelling the generator, peeling spuds, repelling boarders (how do you repel boarders- stop changing the bed linen!) and doing running repairs around the place on both equipment and the structure itself. He went on to speak with what appeared to be warm nostalgia, of week-long storms, antennas collapsing, intermittent starvation, dehydration, and the possibilities of fairly severe electrocution.

I at last twigged that I was being tested. Could I handle adversity under primeval conditions? Would I go stir-crazy in a closed environment for several weeks on end? How would I fit in with the other guys? Was I likely to run amok upon discovering that there was not enough Beef Wellington to go around? This was a far cry from the luxurious existence I had fondly imagined, but it sure fired my imagination. Nothing was going to stop me now.

I guess he must have figured that that out, so he told me to have a tape ready for him to take back with him when his leave was over in just a few days. Babbling thanks and assorted blessings, I showed him out and then rushed to the phone and called around some friends to find a tape recorder.

Two of them turned up later that day with a machine that must have cost at least twenty quid, and between them they coached me into doing some spoken introductions. Hi-tech, it wasn't. I tend to cringe now when I recall how we put that tape together. A small plastic microphone was held up to my mouth while I spoke, and then quickly moved to the front of the tape recorder's built-in speaker to pick up the music. Meanwhile, another friend had started the record moving and stood poised, ready to drop the needle on to the beginning of the song at approximately the same time as I finished speaking. After several attempts, we finally got some kind of material on tape, consisting of long-winded, rambling introductions to a bunch of scratchy forty-fives - about 15 minutes worth, actually. Of course, none of us had the knowledge to 'telescope' the music with a razor blade and sticky tape!

In our defence, it must be remembered that home record players and tape recorders were little more than toys in those days. Plastic and hardboard were the principal components of manufacture and the quality of sound reproduction was, to be charitable, laughable.

Even for a contemporary professional broadcaster, an audition tape is something that has to be taken seriously. At least they now have access to superb digital equipment of all kinds at very reasonable cost - and you would be surprised what a good engineer and producer can accomplish with even a mediocre voice talent!

However, all of this was well into the future and I at least knew that I had done the best I could under the circumstances.

A few days later, Dick Palmer dropped around on his way back to the fort, and picked up the tape. As he left, he assured me that it would receive due consideration, and that he would be in touch either way. It must have been around this time, that I took up nail-biting. Had I screwed up and ruined my chances? I knew it was an awful tape, but maybe, just maybe, they would be desperate, and take a chance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I had almost forgotten about the tape when, one evening a couple of weeks later, the phone rang. "This is Roy Bates of Radio Essex speaking", it blared. I went pale, and my stomach started to feel very peculiar. "I've been listening to your tape. It's not too bad, and we might be able to do something with you - though you'll have to smarten up a bit, you sound a bit sloppy." I cringed.

"Er, thank you," I croaked. "We're very particular here at Essex", Roy barked, "and we don't want anybody who's going to mess about. No frills here, you'll have to work bloody hard. We pay twelve pounds a week and all your food and you'll have to fend for yourself. Well, do you want to come out?"

I had finally recovered from the shock and was feeling light-headed with a rosy glow. "Oh, yes please", I burbled, "I'd love to, and I won't let you down and..."

"Very well then, the boat will be leaving from here in Southend on Saturday morning if the weather's fine, make sure you're here at 6.30."

"But surely", I said, panic-stricken, "surely I must give notice to my present employers?" (It was a Wednesday evening). "Look", said Roy, sounding as though I had accused him of necrophilia, "either you want this job or you don't. Which is it?"

In a millionth of a second, the tedium of my career to date passed before my eyes, together with the alternatives I now had to consider. The wage he was offering was four pounds a week less than I was currently making, and the job Roy was offering sounded like some

kind of endurance test. I had to make up my mind on my future right then and there.

“I’ll see you on Saturday Mr. Bates”, I said, and in so doing, changed my life forever.

Fortunately, my current employers were understanding and seemed to guess what this opportunity meant to me. The boss told me later that as I stood in front of him and explained the situation, he thought I was either going to have a seizure, or wet my pants.

Saturday morning dawned cloudy, but with the promise of a typical brisk March day ahead. My parents had their misgivings, but were supportive in every way, avoiding by a hair’s breadth, actually pushing me out the door. I climbed into my ageing Ford Anglia, and with a merry wave, headed for deepest Essex. Skirting Sidcup and heading down the Swanley by-pass, I turned off for the Dartford Tunnel. Once through there, I was in the county of Essex, and on to the Southend Road. Within the hour, I arrived at 33 Avenue Road, Southend, the headquarters of Radio Essex and the home of Roy Bates.

Roy was a throwback. He should have been born in the time of the first Elizabeth and sailed with Drake. If ever there was a true buccaneer, it was him. He was a tall burly man, with a ruddy face and the kind of high, hectoring voice which afflicted so many of his generation who had been to private schools. He had been at one time, the youngest major in the British Army, and he ran his household and his business along more or less, army lines. In addition, as I was to find out later, he was the kind of man who had creditors everywhere, but it never seemed to bother him.

I was the first arrival for that day’s boat and gratefully accepted a large mug of coffee and a cheese sandwich. Soon, there was another arrival. Chris Stewart was returning from leave, and came

armed with a fresh supply of records scrounged from the various record companies in London. Chris was a different type altogether. About 23, quite tall and gangly, and with a permanent look of anxiety, he struck me as an artistic type who took his work very seriously, but was never sure if his work was fully appreciated.

Soon, the boatman arrived, and everybody was put to work moving supplies and equipment down to Roy's car for the trip to the boat. On arrival at the dock, we transferred our kit and everything else on board the small fishing boat and Roy told us that the journey out to the fort would take about three hours.

It was in fact, a marvellous run. The sea was fairly calm and the boat just seemed to putter along at a steady pace as we all chatted, drank coffee, and in my case, tried to look nonchalant. Inside, I was both elated and worried. Did I really know what I was doing? Could I do the job? What were the other jocks like?



Approaching the fort on the tender. . Photo courtesy of Guy Hamilton.

It seemed like only a half hour later that Roy turned and said, "There you are, that's where we're going!" He pointed ahead, and there in

the distance was a black blob which, as we got nearer, became this strange structure standing square and black in the middle of the sea. As we drew closer, it grew enormously, until finally, as we approached it close up, it blotted everything else from sight. Two enormous great towers coated in a tasteful green slime, surmounted by a vast platform of rust upon which was some kind of gigantic superstructure, and what looked like a piece of string running above from one end to the other. Later on, I realised that it was the antenna, and was highly lethal.



Knockjohn Fort as seen from the air

As the boat moved round to the outside of one of the great legs, I could see what looked like a ruined network of rotting planks reaching from the sea, about a third of the way up the leg. It moved and creaked and groaned with the action of the waves. This was, in fact, the landing stage, and it looked highly unsafe. Not only did it move constantly with the action of the water, but many of the rotting



wooden planks were missing, and the top, far from being a safe, level, refuge, was sloped upwards at an angle of about forty-five degrees.

As the boatman skilfully prevented his craft from smashing against the concrete leg of the fort, Roy's cheery cry came: "Right lads, jump for it!" I immediately shrunk into a little tiny ball and attempted to hide between the cracks in the planking of the boat's deck. "Come along there, we haven't got all bloody day!" Roy's jovial bellow rolled across the North Sea, and I was convinced that everybody on the fort, on the boat, and half the population of southern England, paused and waited to see what came next. What could I do?

Chris Stewart took my arm and moved me firmly to the front of the boat. "As the next wave carries us to the ladder, just step forward and grasp the ladder firmly, and then start climbing", he laughed. It was all right for him, he had probably been born with barnacles on his bum. However, I knew I had to do it! Closing my eyes, I waited for his signal. "Off you go", muttered Chris, and in a moment, I was hugging that rusty ladder with all the fervency of a politician kissing a baby at election time.

"OK, climb up out of the way, and wait on the top, the others will get you up from there", called Roy, who was enjoying the whole procedure.

So, I waited on the sloping deck, feeling like an abandoned mountain goat, while Chris nonchalantly stepped off the boat and joined me in a trice, hardly bothering to hang on to anything. It was infuriating. The deck of the fort was still several thousand feet above us, and hearing human voices, I looked up to see a row of heads. There above me was a collection of the ugliest bunch of ruffians ever to walk the plank. They would have given Blackbeard nightmares. All were grinning broadly, and making ribald comments to the arriving party below.

“Now for the fun bit”, chuckled the sadistic Chris. “Right, you lot, let’s get this bloke up!” On his command, a tatty rope snaked down, and Chris proceeded to tie it around me, nobly resisting the natural impulse to use my neck as the anchor point.

In a matter of moments, I found myself dangling helplessly in mid-air, occasionally being pulled up a few feet, and then stopping for re-grouping by the band of cut-throats above. I learned later, that with more experienced victims, the gang would haul them halfway up, then anchor the rope, and retire for their afternoon tea - sometimes for up to twenty minutes!

At last, my head peeked over the edge, and willing hands hauled me up and over, to land in a quivering heap on the deck of the fort. After several thousand years, I arose and looked around me with a sense of wonderment and befuddlement. Here I was, on a pirate radio station, slap-bang in the middle of the sea. The deck and superstructure were a lovely shade of rust, mainly due to the fact that it *was* rust. The end of the deck where I was standing was quite spacious, and in the centre area was the superstructure, against which, were some old ammunition containers, tastefully rusting away next to the large and equally rusting anti-aircraft gun.

A call for assistance found me taking a place with the rope-hauling party, and soon Roy and the supplies, luggage and fuel drums were all safely on deck. At that point, Roy introduced me around and I met the people that I would be living and working with for some time to come. I had arrived and like it or not, there was no going back. This was it!

# CHAPTER SIX

When I joined, Radio Essex had been on the air for just a few months. In the late summer of 1965, Roy Bates had decided to follow the growing trend and start up a radio station. As owner of a small fishing fleet, he was familiar with the existence of the old forts around the southern coast of England, and realised their potential. He decided to set up on the Knock John Tower. (They had all been given names when positioned during the war, after the sand banks on which they stood).

When he arrived out there, he found that somebody else had entertained a similar idea and had left some broadcasting equipment on board. It was later realised that the equipment belonged to Radio City, which was already in business on a neighbouring fort, Shivering Sands, and was obviously thinking of expanding.

Shenanigans commenced with each side boarding each other's fort, kidnapping personnel and leaving them either on shore, or holding them captive on their own fort. These piratical goings-on finally ceased a couple of months later when both sides realised that there was room for both to exist. Reg Calvert and his Radio City men retired to Shivering Sands, and Roy Bates started broadcasting as Radio Essex on 222 metres. Later, tragedy would strike and in skirmishes of a graver kind, the owner of Radio City, Reg Calvert, would be shot dead.

This is what happened. After Calvert founded the pirate station Radio City, which broadcast from a Second World War army fort off the Kent coast, seven miles from Margate, Radio Caroline embarked in June 1966 on a joint venture with Radio City. One of the directors of Caroline, Major Oliver Smedley, agreed to pay for a new transmitter

to relay Caroline's programmes from the fort, while Calvert, the owner of Radio City, was to continue to run the operation but this time on behalf of Radio Caroline.

Radio Caroline withdrew from the deal when it heard that the British government intended to prosecute those occupying the forts, which were still, in their view, Crown property. The transmitter turned out not to work properly and Calvert refused to pay Smedley for it.

Smedley's response was to hire a group of riggers who boarded Radio City on 20 June and put the station's transmitter out of action. On 21 June Calvert visited Smedley's home to demand the removal of the raiders and the return of vital transmitter crystals. A violent struggle developed, during which Smedley shot Calvert dead with a shotgun.

During the subsequent trial Smedley claimed that he feared Calvert was there to kill him and was acquitted on grounds of self-defence.

Partly in response to the sensational death of Reg Calvert and lurid tales of real swashbuckling piracy the British government hastened to scuttle the pirates, and started on the road that would lead to the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act which eventually made offshore broadcasting a criminal offence as of 15 August 1967.

The fort captain Dick Palmer was one of the early arrivals on Radio Essex and from his point of view it was a very interesting set-up indeed.

Dick had been an apprentice at the Dunstonian Garage in Petts Wood, and was like us, obsessed with the pirate radio scene. The day he got the results of his engineering degree he handed in his notice and set about finding a berth with one of the pirates.

A reporter called Sue Baker wrote an article on the pirates in the Kentish Times, which included the fact that at that time, Radio City

was to be starting a second station on the Knock John fort. Noting this, Dick then made contact with her. She helped him make demo tapes to send to various stations including Radio City. The answer was 'thanks, but no thanks.'

Just a few days after Dick read this reply, he heard that Roy Bates had been out to the fort, done battle with them, removed the Radio City people, and intended to start his own station. Such rascally behaviour must have appealed to Dick Palmer because he immediately decided to try his luck with the Bates operation and phoned Bates at his office, intending to spin the story that he had experience abroad as a DJ. Twice he phoned, and twice they said they would let him know.

The day after the second call, Dick got the shock of his life, they called back! Essentially, what they said to him was, "Can you be down here at five o'clock tomorrow morning? - oh, and bring your toothbrush!"

The following morning he presented himself at 33 Avenue Road Southend, where he was met by Joan Bates with extreme graciousness and the offer of a pilchard sandwich. He and the broadcasting transmitter would be going out to the fort that morning on the thirty foot fishing boat which was already the station's official tender.

Dick, like most of us, had never been on a boat before and was terrified of making a fool of himself, whether by being seasick or referring to the 'heads' as the 'loo'. He was regaled with all the usual horror stories about getting on to the fort - "you have just one chance to jump on to the rusty ladder and get your legs up and out of the way as quickly as possible before the boat chops them off". Of course, if you were nimble, it was just a quick grab and up you went to the trap-door. Later on, ladders, however rusty were removed, and

a rope was the only way up - a security measure to discourage marauders and possibly government officials or even troops.

Dick was met at the top by the ferocious glare of a six-foot-six ex-military type, whose merry greeting was, "what the fucking hell do you want?" Dick said "I've come to be a disk jockey ... sir!" This was the soon-to-be-legendary Roy Bates. Roy asked if he had taken a voice test, Dick said no, and Roy said, "Well, you'll have to be the dogsbody around here for the next few days, until the boat comes again to take you off".

Arriving with Dick was a technician called Brian Roberts, who quickly persuaded Bates that he was the best thing since sliced bread, and before you could say 'Harold Wilson', Bates was promising to finance the guy in all sorts of businesses. Dick became the tea-boy, washer-upper and latrine orderly.

Going through the fort, Dick, fresh out of college, ingeniously asked Bates whether he would like to see the original generators running, and Roy said, with only a slightly raised eyebrow, that it was fine by him. Dick admits that it was a pity he didn't have the slightest idea how to go about it, his forte being fuel injection systems. Since the war, most of the removable parts *had* been, and all that was left in each case was a cylinder block with alternator casings on the back. Some spares had been brought out however, and within a few days, mainly by trial and error, he managed to get one of the diesels running. From that point, it appeared that his future was assured. He was now the golden wonder boy, and was immediately dispatched ashore to procure more parts for the other generators. From tea-boy to hero in the twinkling of an eye!

Disc Jockeys Mark West and Vince Allen had already joined, even though the station was not yet on the air. With this small crew of technical types and radio-personalities-in-waiting, the nucleus of the

future Essex gang was born. The next task was to get some semblance of a radio station put together, and on the air.

All of the other pirate stations then on the air, Caroline, London, City, etc., were essentially almost national stations - or at the very least, regional ones. Roy Bates was of the opinion that it was time for a local radio station. In this, he was quite clever.

For a start, with the extremely limited resources at his disposal, the chances of being one of the 'big boys' were very small. On the other hand, the local county scene was manageable, particularly as the transmitter he had acquired would be lucky to push a signal to Southend, let alone the entire county of Essex. He also probably hoped that eventually, if the government could be persuaded to grant licences to commercial radio stations, he would be in a good position to carve out a nice little niche for himself on the local scene. Who knows - if events had unfolded differently, he might well have succeeded.



Wondering whether it is worth bothering to shave today

# CHAPTER SEVEN

The dizzying experience of actually getting on board the Knock John fort was only the first shock to the system that I would undergo that first day. Once the supply boat had departed on its journey back to Southend, I was able to properly meet my new colleagues for the first time. Dick Palmer, who had got me into this in the first place, became something of a sheet anchor in those first few hours, along with Chris Stewart who had arrived on board with me. I had to forcibly restrain myself from hanging on to his sleeve as he showed me around.

I speedily made the acquaintance of the rest of this cut-throat crew. There was Dick Dickson, one of the technical engineers, a pleasant lad who helped me to feel 'at home' in these strange new surroundings. He, like most good technicians, was a past master at affecting all sorts of repairs and improvements with next to nothing - a sort of latter-day loaves and fishes routine. The other tech, Keith Robinson, was either not with us yet, or on shore leave at that time.

Two other people stand out in my mind from that first meeting. Roger Scott was probably the youngest jock on board, being barely seventeen. He possessed a diabolical sense of humour, and was a splendid mimic and inventor of weird characters. He was a natural for the business, largely because, as he admitted, he was virtually incompetent at everything else he had ever tried. He was young, insecure, and absolutely brilliant on the air. He also had great difficulty getting a haircut that really worked - maybe he did it himself.

The other remarkable character was Mark West. Mark was only slightly older, about eighteen, and was a tall wiry character with a cheery disposition, a keen intellect, and an amazing competence



when it came to anything of a creative nature. He was also a bundle of nervous energy, always bouncing around and trying something new. Mark was probably our greatest weapon in the ongoing fight to sound professional. For a start, he was the only one of the jocks who knew how to splice tape properly!



Some of the gang in the elegant lounge; Clockwise, Dick Palmer, Van Stirling, Keith Robinson, Dick Dickson, Roger Scott

These and others I would meet later, such as Guy Hamilton, Tony Mandell, Michael Cane and technician Mike Brereton would become valued colleagues and friends and would help me develop my skills as a broadcaster.

That first afternoon though, I was still in something of a daze. For, not only was I now in a completely new environment, but I still had no idea what I was supposed to do, or when. Chris quickly put me in the picture. "I think", he said, "We will put you on the air this evening, OK?" I nodded. "Don't worry", he continued blithely, "I'll be there to show you the equipment and the format".

I briefly wondered what a format was, but gave up and resigned myself to a fretful afternoon, which actually turned out to be quite enjoyable, as I chatted with the others and got to know something of the routine of the place. As this was my first day, I was excused potato peeling duties. Dinner consisted of Spam fritters, boiled potatoes and baked beans, a novel repast which would eventually, after interminable repetition, become a staple of my daily diet. As the 'new kid on the block', I was excused washing up duties and settled down to listen to hair-raising stories of raiding parties, piracy on the high seas and scathing opinions of jocks on other stations.

Soon, seven forty-five rolled around and Chris conducted me to the studio where Mark was finishing up his early evening shift. I watched his easy manipulation of the controls and started to sweat. The program which I would be hosting at eight o'clock was called, 'R & B And All That Jazz', and was, as the title suggests, a mixture of Rhythm and Blues, and Jazz both traditional and modern - a peculiar mix of styles that I suspect, pleased no one, least of all me, as I knew nothing about the first one.

Mark started the program theme going right on the dot of eight, and stood up while I slipped into the chair. Chris explained how to open the mike and bring the pot down so that I could do a 'talk-over' and introduce the show. From what they told me much later, a raspy squeak emerged from my mouth, and I more or less croaked out the intro - in the process completely forgetting my new on-air name, then brought the pot back up and switched off the mike.

Curiously, from that point on, I got it together, and with Chris' help, I stumbled my way through an hour of mangled chatter and miss-cues, all the time improving to the point that when it came time to sign off, I remembered my name. This was no mean feat as, while waiting in Roy's office to leave for the boat, he had given me a new name. The purpose, as Roy explained, was to confuse the

authorities and to avoid potential arrest when on shore. I had accepted this comforting proposal, but had balked at the name I was assigned, David Sinclair. I didn't like it, but Roy was adamant. It turned out that he had chosen the names for all the others too, but I never did get around to asking them what they thought of their 'on-air' appellations.

When I left the studio at the end of that first shift, I was shaking with a combination of anxiety and fatigue. Shambling into the main living room, I fully expected a chorus of criticism and ridicule. After all, these were all experienced people and they must have been killing themselves laughing at my attempts to run a show. Strangely, no one paid any attention. Some were watching TV, others busying themselves with various tasks.

Accepting a cup of hot cocoa from Dick Palmer, I tentatively asked him how he thought it went. "Dunno", he replied, "I was down in the engine room." Shortly after, I posed the same question to one of the others. "I wasn't listening", was the offhand answer. Surely, I thought, *someone* must have heard my awful cock-ups?

A little later on Chris, who was on the air then, wandered out with his mug for a refill. I put the question to him. "Oh, I don't think any of them would have heard you", he said. Then he went on, "neither, I should imagine, did any of our listeners". "What do you mean", I cried, the artist scorned, "I'm sure that at least my mum was listening!" Chris smiled evilly. "No she wasn't", he murmured. "You see, from the time darkness falls, until eleven p.m., our signal is drowned out by the French National Network. Nobody at all can hear us". I stood there, crushed. He went on, "Don't you think it was a good idea to get you familiar with the studio, and to get your first-time nervousness out of the way, without making the station sound bad? I had to agree, he was dead on. But, I still felt cheated that my 'maiden' performance, appalling that it was, had gone unnoticed.

Later in the year, when darkness did not come until about ten o'clock, the period of being 'blacked-out' was much shorter. It was always a psychologically satisfying moment when, at eleven o'clock British Summer time, we could hear the strains of the Marseillaise signalling the end of the French broadcasting day.

From that moment until dawn, our meagre signal would beam over most of Western Europe as letters and postcards would prove. Heady stuff! In fact, after a time, we managed to put together a variety of greetings and announcements in several languages, and we would rotate these throughout the night hours, much to the amusement of our continental listeners.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

The early days of Radio Essex as experienced by Dick Palmer and 'the few' were full of wonderful discoveries about survival.

At first, fresh water wasn't a problem, there was lots left over from the nineteen-forties, about a hundred tons or so, contained in a large fresh water tank which had been serviced until the 1950s fairly regularly by the navy.

However, there were no taps, no basins, no showers, or for that matter, any other reasonably civilised amenities. They had, like the generator parts, and all copper and lead plumbing fixtures, gradually disappeared over the years. The casual observer would have noticed a plethora of well fitted-out fishing boats in the Southend area. Eventually, when the fresh water ran out, everyone would be reduced to using sea water for virtually everything except drinking, and it was impossible to get Roy Bates to provide the necessary fittings which would have made life so much more comfortable. It was amazing how the most wonderful fittings and appliances were always going to be there on the next boat, but somehow, they never did materialise.

There was not even a working fridge out on the fort. An old fridge had in fact, come out on the same boat as Dick Palmer, but as the journey was undertaken in force six weather, and the fridge was strapped to the bow of the boat, it got a thorough soaking and never did work. This useless appendage was the only fridge we ever saw out there.



The tender arriving with supplies, including more much-loved Spam

Conditions were, to put it bluntly, fairly squalid. To put it even more bluntly, the standard of squalidness was marginally superior to that enjoyed by the residents of the Black Hole of Calcutta. But in Dick's view, the state of squalidness could be alleviated with the right attitude and some basic cleaning materials. There were some old white pine tables that, with a vigorous application of Vim and elbow grease, were brought up to a fairly decent condition. (On reflection, those lovely old pine tables would now be worth a great deal of money). The stove was an ancient two-burner gas cooker with a tiny oven compartment. It might well have proved useful for Mrs. Dickens when she had to get Charlie a quick snack between chapters. A well-abused electric kettle and an old toaster completed the galley department.

We were to observe over time, that when the toaster or the kettle was in use, the power of the station's signal would drop by about forty per cent. Keen listeners, had they wished, could have constructed fairly accurate charts of meal times on Radio Essex! Some old dilapidated furniture, of probable Edwardian vintage, and

rejected by charitable organisations, together with a few Red Cross blankets completed the living accommodations.

Hard work with broom and shovel enabled the crew to make a few areas fairly liveable. Space was not a problem as the fort had been originally designed for a complement of 120 men. The fort in fact consisted of two hollow concrete towers each about 30 feet in diameter, and each having eight levels. Each tower, or leg, had a lift shaft for moving ammunition up to the guns on top, and a stairway for the occupants. The sleeping accommodations consisted of double bunks around the walls of each leg. The top floor in each leg was for the generators, followed by the sleeping quarters. The bottom floors were for ammunition storage in one leg, and food storage in the other. To everyone's amazement, the bottom floors on the sea bed were stone dry and dusty. The forts had been extremely well built.

The two towers or 'legs', were surmounted by a steel platform, on top of which was the area reserved for studios and living areas. There must have once been all sorts of drainage pipes and other engineering marvels, but all that was left was a varied selection of large holes in the platform. These were ideal for the instant disposal of waste of all kinds.

The surface of the platform always seemed very sticky outside the structure. Dick explained that the surface was like a ship, steel plates, overlaid with tarmac, oil and several generation's worth of what is politely referred to as guano. Over the years this intriguing mixture of rusty steel, guano, oil and tarmac had deteriorated into a kind of cosmic soup!

Diesel fuel was brought out on the tender in five gallon drums and manually hauled up on ropes. The drums were then emptied into the feeder tanks which were simply old aircraft wing tanks. The empty drums were then sent back on the tender. Inevitably, fuel was spilled

all over, thus adding to the problem of the slippery deck surface. Dick delighted in giving people a right bollocking when they spilled fuel on the deck and often the job became more of a chore than it needed to be. The constant spillage of diesel fuel helped to dissolve the tarmac at a higher speed than nature's efforts. There were no fire hoses or anything like that to help keep the deck in good condition after spillage. A crew hauling up a couple of hundred gallons of fuel and the same of fresh water, in 5 gallon cans, soon became a tired and potentially mutinous crew.

It was not long before some new faces appeared on the scene. Engineer Brian Roberts had persuaded Bates that the original transmitter, which had come out on the boat was a load of rubbish and that he knew a man who could produce something that would work. That man was a Canadian, John Thompson, late of Invicta Radio. Thompson took the transmitter, cannibalised it and sold it back to Bates, along with all sorts of bits of varnished plywood to avoid large masses of metal "to reduce the dynamic weight of it" or some such drivel. It would have worked better in its original form. Thompson then vanished over the horizon.

The next engineer on the scene was Dick Dickson, ex engineer and jock from Radio City. By this time the station was on the air, using Radio City's old transmitter, an RCA army unit, converted to work on the medium wave. Then, along came Keith Robinson to join Dickson. Keith was older than the rest of us, and exuded an air of raffish competence. Dick Palmer's opinion is that he was capable of very fine work but was lazy by nature.

Keith, it seemed, was one of those individuals who always seem to survive, albeit on a hand-to-mouth basis. I always felt that he had the brains, the knowledge, and the capability to succeed, but was subject to a distinct lack of drive. He was also very mischievous. Engagingly amusing most of the time, and good company, he



nevertheless managed to disrupt to some extent the harmony that had preceded his arrival. Dick Dickson on the other hand, was a capable and quiet fellow who was well liked, did his best, and struggled on with what must have been a difficult job. He was also able to go on air.

Lots of talk, but little productivity, was Keith's contribution. He got paid to the last, and quite well at that. We had heard that the pirates based on ships had transmitters putting out power of up to 50 kW. He assured everyone that it was technically impossible for a ship to be running 50 kW and that the transmitter he was building would blast the competition out of the water. That was all bullshit, of course.

Keith eventually decided that in order to get his new transmitter up and running, he needed an assistant, so he found and brought on board, Mike Brereton. Mike was, and is, an engaging character with an off-beat sense of humour - a necessary attribute for anyone in this kind of situation. I distinctly remember one occasion when there seemed to be a lot of weekend yachting types out among the fishermen and passing liners, and Mike was positioned up on the very highest part of the fort, cheerfully directing traffic with the appropriate hand-signals just like a veteran policeman at a major city intersection. He was a good chap and knew his stuff but was unable to get past Keith's lethargy.



Keith Robinson relaxing as usual, by the ammunition lockers

The transmitter, when it was finally ready, was to herald the birth, and short life, of 'Britain's Better Music Station' - BBMS. It was only 2 kW and only slightly more powerful than what we had been using up till then.

The technicians had wanted to put up a "T" type antenna which would require the purchase or hire of six industrial scaffold poles and a quantity of nylon rope to hold them up. Roy Bates, knowing better, went out and spent a lot of money on second-hand fishing boat masts, each about 30 feet long and weighing around three tons. These were simply too much for anyone to move. In the end, Dave Belasco, more of whom later, went out with his own money and bought or hired the scaffold poles, but by that time it was all too late.

# CHAPTER NINE

Roy Bates' plans to set up Radio Essex as a local station were simplistic to say the least - especially as far as a regular format was concerned. For the uninitiated, it must be explained that any radio station that is in a competitive situation needs to have an identity - it must know the audience it wants to reach, and concentrate on attracting that audience.

To be fair, neither Roy Bates nor hardly anyone else involved in the pirate broadcasting scene at that time, was in any way an expert on the subject, and efforts in this direction were all rather hit and miss.

Roy's concept was to gear all of the announcer's efforts toward talking of nothing but events pertaining to the county of Essex, and to this end he sent out dozens of old Essex Life magazines and copies of local newspapers which announcers were expected to read, digest, and then create scripted material for use on air during their shifts.

Unfortunately, his concept of how a station should be run, included twenty four, one hour programs each day, each hosted on a rotation basis by the six announcers! Simple mathematics should have told him that the idea was a non-starter for a variety of reasons, most of which are patently obvious. In fact, it was actually tried for a while, resulting in the dramatic on-air collapse of announcer Vince Allen after only two days!

However, it took Dick Palmer several furious arguments to convince Roy that his ideas were impractical, and when it did sink home, Roy immediately told Dick to come up with something workable. Fortunately, Dick was able to patch together some ideas, and although the results may seem a little quaint by today's standards, it

must be remembered that everyone was new to the broadcasting business, and were still heavily under the influence of a lifetime of listening to the then, quite antiquated BBC.

The first Radio Essex program schedule looked something like this:

6 - 9 am	The Get Up and Go Show
9 - 12 noon	The Good Morning Show
12 - 3 pm	The Good Afternoon show
3 - 6 pm	The Sound of Music
6 - 7 pm	Essex Goes Pop
7 - 8 pm	Instrumental Hour
8 - 11 pm	R & B and All that Jazz
11 - 3 am	Essex Beat Club
3 - 6 am	The Night Owl Show

Imaginative stuff, eh? The standard of three hour shows was already well established in North America and Australia, but it was new to British listeners who had never experienced so much music all at once before. In one stroke, the pirates had changed the face of British broadcasting presentation.

The general idea was to provide fairly breezy, up-tempo music for the traditional 'drive' times (morning and afternoon 'rush hours') and relaxing sounds during the rest of the day. The night time was for the younger set which tended to be less television-tamed than their parents. Overall, it was able to develop as a good 'sound' as time went on, and refinements were made. It was Dick's idea to go for a couple of one hour programs around the early evening, so as to

provide a time for most of the staff to get together over the evening meal.

Apart from complaining about the food, it was possible to discuss other areas of concern, and to learn from each other. We also spent some time listening to the other pirates. In this fashion, most of us were able to develop our techniques and styles of presentation, eventually producing a more or less professional approach to our work.



Messing around on the defunct ant-aircraft gun

Along with everything else, Dick Palmer found himself in charge of building and maintaining the record library. He was also a keen fan

of the current music scene, and while on leave would visit London's jazz and blues clubs and become familiar with such rising stars as Eric Clapton and Georgie Fame. He also took opportunities to visit the record companies and scrounge new product for the station. It is interesting to recall that although the record companies and musicians unions were officially complaining about the pirates, both made damn sure that all the stations had their latest releases, and were pleased to arrange interviews for any of us that wanted them.

One of the Essex lads, Van Stirling (a.k.a. 'lavatory legs') was very much the trendy type who always seemed to know about the latest fads and 'in' stuff of the music scene. He knew, for instance, all about a new group from California called the Mamas & Papas, long before it burst upon the general scene. He also saw the whole "flower power" thing before it took off.

Looking back, I am very surprised that Roy Bates never took full advantage of one very fortuitous situation. One day, not long after the station started up, he answered a knock on the door and was forcibly greeted by a manic young American called Harry Putnam. Harry had just arrived in the country, armed with solid experience in the business, and a trunk full of funky R & B, pop, and black records by artists such as John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Della Reese, etc.

That kind of music had never been featured on the BBC and it all came as a breath of fresh air to the jocks and listeners alike. Among the many hits in Harry's collection were some strange items that could only have come out of smaller studios in the States, but even these were played so much that we came to enjoy them and look upon them as "Essex" hits!" One such gem which Roger Scott remembers to this very day, as he wipes away a reminiscent tear, was a thing called "West of The Wall" by Toni Fisher. I have a feeling

that it was on the flipside of "The Big Hurt" a genuine hit of the period.

Bates used Mr. Putnam as a salesman for a while, and most of Harry's records were used on the air, much to the delight of the staff, but rumour has it that Harry was not treated with much respect by Roy, and eventually disappeared from the scene - a great pity for all of us. If only we had been able to take advantage of the talent and experience that Harry had to offer, Essex might have survived for much longer than it did. One of Harry's most useful legacies was a selection of generic station jingles on disc - products of the nineteen fifties, but new to Britain, for the public had never heard identification jingles before. The one I remember most, because we played it to death was, "The Swinging'est Station in Town". After all, these were the Swinging Sixties!

Soon, following Dick Palmer's system, the schedule had evolved to this:

6- 9am	Daybreak
9 - 12 noon	Morning Melody
12 - 3 pm	Music Magazine
3 - 6 pm	Music Till Six
6 - 7 pm	Swing Session
7 - 9 pm	Evening Inn
9 - 12 mdt	Formula 66 - Part One
12 - 3 am	Formula 66 - Part Two
3 - 6 am	Formula 66 - Part Three

I have to take credit for the Swing Session program myself. Even by the age of thirteen my taste in music was fairly wide, running from Frankie Laine to Bill Haley and then eventually to the emerging Liverpool sound of the sixties. However, I had also become keenly interested in the music of an earlier era - Big Band Swing. I had

developed a considerable collection and learnt as much as I could about the music and the performers, and this off-beat expertise led me to offer to do the show. Happily, it proved to be very popular.

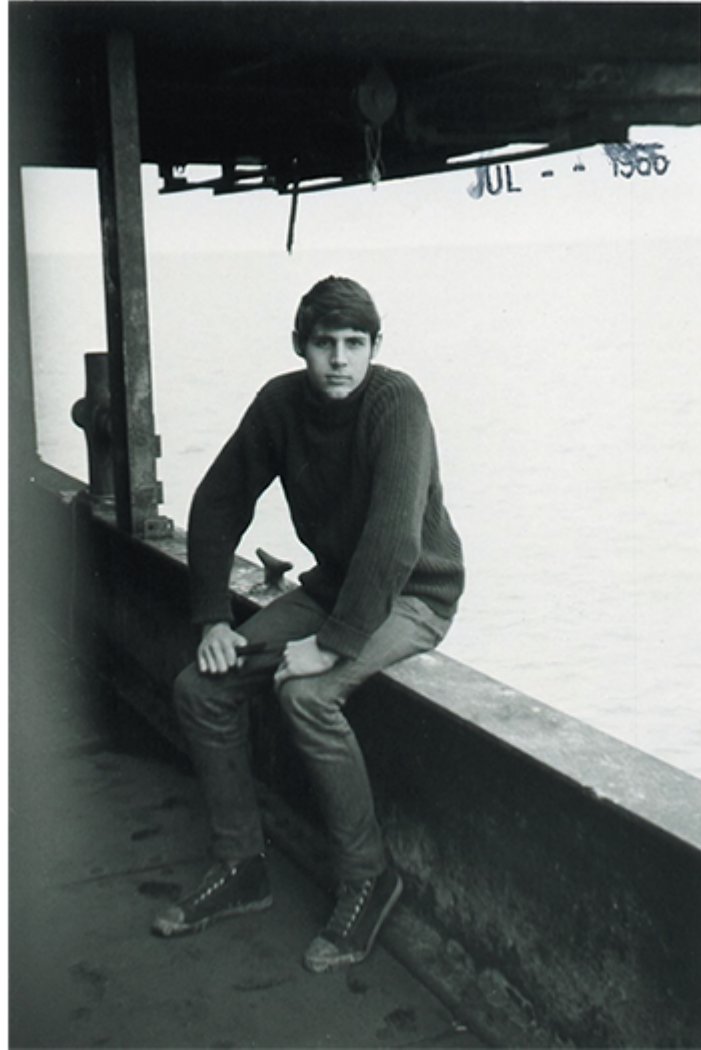
Well, the schedule still doesn't look that innovative right now, but it certainly had a sleeker feel about it at the time, so much so, that this was the run-down we went with when Radio Essex blossomed forth into BBMS - Britain's Better Music Station!



# CHAPTER TEN

It was always a great event when the tender came out to the fort, bringing fresh supplies and personnel. Once we were out there for our tour of duty, we were completely cut off from events on shore. True, we could listen to the radio, but that was regarded as too much of a busman's holiday. Roy was too mean, or too crafty to supply us with a television set - after all, we might have sat down to watch it rather than work at something useful, like scrubbing the deck. Eventually, we did get one - a splendid 1949 model I think it was. Three or four weeks at a time on board, was the usual stretch, with no direct contact with the office, and as a consequence one was constantly scanning the horizon for the tender.

Mark West was the best spotter. He could see the boat coming from miles away long before any of the rest of us. He was even better when using binoculars. False alarms were very disappointing - we would get very excited at the appearance of a dot on the horizon, until it dawned on us that it was just a passing fishing boat.



Mark West taking a break

The main reason for this sudden lightening of the spirit when positive identification of the tender was made was the thought that there would be a change-over of a couple of staff, and fresh food supplies would be arriving. The fact that it was likely to be more lamb, or Spam, was mentally suppressed for the grand occasion.

As the boat approached, all hands, except for the guy on the air, would leap into action, lowering the rope, and in true British fashion, putting the kettle on (assuming there was any tea left). As the boat hove to, and we could see who was on board, we would prepare to haul them, and the supplies, on board. At this point, the on-air

announcer would go into 'boat-mode'. This always meant putting on an album kept for the purpose, "Sinatra at The Sands". This was a double-album, recorded live at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas, and each of the four sides was a continuous track. This in turn meant that the announcer could participate in the festivities, nipping back into the studio every 20 minutes or so, to change sides on the record. I recall that Mark was very deft at this little routine which must have puzzled a lot of listeners on shore. After all, the boat was coming out virtually every two or three weeks with supplies of one kind or another, and this album playing in its entirety so often, must have given cause to much speculation. I found out later, when visiting the record company, that the sales on that album had been pretty good.

For those of us not going on shore leave, the new supplies of food were highly cheering, at least for the first couple of hours. Then the realisation would set in that it was mostly Spam fritters or tinned steak and kidney pie again that evening. As a consequence, every meal was an event in itself - even though the food was generally not of the best quality. The Bates' had a classic and unanswerable riposte when the mutinous mutterings grew too loud. "Yes, it's the cheapest, but by God, it's the best!"

Bates had obsessions with food purchasing. When he was on a corned beef kick, (you can bake it, fry it, toast it, etc.) we would virtually live on it for 2 months. He would respond to pressure for a varied diet by switching over to lamb, thus 2 months of whole sheep arriving on board. He would get the point when the gang would greet him with cries of Baa, Baa. Remember, we had to keep this stuff without a fridge. Lamb chops, stuffed lamb, lamb soup, lamb sandwiches, lamb surprise etc., all played their part in the gastronomic arena.

On one memorable occasion, the side of lamb had not been consumed quickly enough and had gone 'off'. The pong started to

become apparent even down in the dormitory leg. Instead of just chucking it over the side, someone decided that it would be appropriate to hold a formal burial at sea, complete with salutes and slightly off-colour reminiscences of meals past. I think we must have been going slightly mad.

As to the cooking, most of the gang developed their own 'specialities'. Mine, for example, was eggs and chips. Somebody else was very good with Spam and chips, and yet another had a way with lamb and chips. This culinary versatility culminated in the fondly remembered 'Chief Engineer's Stewp' - Keith Robinson's brainchild - a cross between stew and soup, created with much love and the opening of several cans of unidentifiable stuff from the larder. (In the damp, the labels tended to fall off). Funny, but whatever it was, it always seemed to taste of lamb.

It was at Dick Palmer's insistence that we had regular meals of any kind at all. He also made sure that some sort of vegetable was included, no matter how ancient, in a kindly endeavour to ward off the possibilities of scurvy.

Dick found this sort of duty thrust upon him. True, he was first captain, but he knew that most of the guys would live on lamb sandwiches rather than take the trouble to cook anything, so he made it part of his job to oversee such matters. Some of the lads were only 17 or 18, and had never been away from home before. The temptation to permanently party on junk food could have been irresistible. He even found himself ensuring that people got sufficient sleep by regulating bedtimes! At the time, many regarded him as being a pain in this respect, but today, we can thank him for keeping the gang healthy.

We had it good though. Down in the bottom of one leg, shells had been stored for the 4.5 inch guns along with fuel. The other leg was a huge 'cold room' for storing food supplies.

Some food still remained from the war. Bates never knew or he would have insisted that we ate it. We know this full well, for on one occasion, Roy once left some eggs and butter on the neighbouring Tongue Sands fort. When they went back a year later and found it, Roy's opinion was that it was perfectly good.

It was to be expected that, with this collection of pirates, all cooped up together and suffering pent-up energy, a certain imaginative, if reprehensible creativity would insert itself into the general scheme of things. With a bunch of lads running around without the normal restraints of genteel civilised behaviour, it was inevitable that outlandish manifestations of warped humour would occur from time to time. One such manifestation was what Dr. Watson might have described as "The Curious Incident of The Pornographic Pastries."

It is generally felt that Dick Palmer was the arch-fiend responsible, with his culinary masterpiece which he dubbed, "Widgie Pie". Suffice to say that post-adolescent imagination can work wonders with pastry and jam! The whole plot came to fruition one boring afternoon following Dick's discovery that Chris Stewart was of a slightly squeamish disposition. The 'piece de resistance' for tea that day was a selection of phallic-shaped pastries filled with an inferior brand of jam, and with the ends chopped off to convey just the right touch of macabre horror. Chris' reaction was to stare dazedly at the repast set before him, turn slightly green, then run to the side of the deck and toss his cookies. Unfortunately, he did not realise that it is never recommended to throw up into the wind....



On deck in the sun with Guy Hamilton

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Working in the studios of Radio Essex was rather like being let loose into the middle of a Heath Robinson or Rube Goldberg creation. The microphone was a “Reslo”, and was accompanied by two Garrard 401 turntables that weren’t too bad, and a pair of ‘war-surplus’ earphones. These ‘cans’ as we called them were so heavy and uncomfortable that somebody ventured the opinion that Britain had supplied them to the Germans and that was why they lost the war.

The commercials, some of them actually paid for, rather than ‘contra’d’, (which means, exchanged for goods or services) were all spliced on to a seven inch reel and played directly from a rather battered Vortexion reel-to-reel tape recorder. Cueing the damn things was literally hell. For example, the first one on the tape might be a spot for Channel Airways, to be followed on the program log by one for a Southend paint store - which was the last commercial on the tape. The constant running backwards and forwards of the commercial tape was both nerve-wracking and damaging to the tape.

We quickly found out that Mark West had a great aptitude for the finicky art of splicing and it fell to him to keep the tape updated and in reasonable condition. Most of the commercials were made on shore. To be perfectly accurate, they were made in Roy’s house, usually by Roy, and were, to put it mildly, bloody awful.

The youngest of our merry band was Roger Scott who was only sixteen when he joined in February of 1966. He arrived on the fort with another new inductee, Michael Cane, and Dick Palmer who was returning from leave. Roger was not only very young, but also very impressionable and tended to regard every edict of Roy’s as being

only slightly less important than Moses doing his number with a selection of commandments.

Young he may have been, but he was undoubtedly very talented and was probably the best voice on the station. At least he was until Roy told him to put a 'bubble' in his voice. This meant the poor lad sounded offensively cheerful at all times, even when reading one of the infrequent Radio Essex newscasts. However, Roger soon realised that 'bubbling' hysterically all the time was ruining his throat and normality returned.

Like the rest of us, Roger was totally obsessed with the prospect of getting on the air. He admits that he would cheerfully have worked from a rowing boat in the North Atlantic if it could have accommodated a studio on board. He had only recently left school, which he had hated with a total passion - it represented 'authority' and if there was one thing guaranteed to annoy Roger, it was the thought of being constrained by any kind of authority. It was also the kind of school that encouraged the development of those dreadfully hearty 'sporty' types - future fodder for the realms of accountancy and management and pillars of the establishment. As Roger now recalls, "Can you imagine the response of the headmaster who, on enquiring what your choice of career was to be, received the reply that you had every intention of becoming a pirate?" Choleric non-comprehension, I would imagine.

This is not to say that he was a rebel in the obvious sense. He looked quite respectable in fact, and was quite familiar with soap and water, and even had a nodding acquaintance with a knife and fork. Not for him the loud protestations of the flower-power types, and I don't think he ever went out and demonstrated against anything. No, with Roger, his anarchism was cerebral and he loved to take the piss out of anything and everything. This, to my mind, gave him a refreshingly different perspective on events of the day.



One of the real attractions of pirate radio for Roger was the splendid opportunity to cock a snook at authority - getting revenge, as it were. On arrival at the fort in February of 1966, Roger vowed a lifelong debt of gratitude to Vince Allen, who tied the knot in the rope that was to haul Roger to the top of the structure in safety, and thus start him on a career of some stature, not to mention revenge.

Like most of us, Roger was so interested in the job that he didn't really notice the appalling living conditions. The hole in the floor of the mess room, or 'drawing room' as he likes to refer to it, obviated the necessity for such things as ashtrays, or waste receptacles of any kind. He also shared the general antipathy towards washing up the dishes and utensils. Sea water is not highly recommended for this purpose, neither is trying to dry dishes with cloths that have themselves been cleaned in sea water - they develop stiffness only slightly lower than that of tungsten steel.

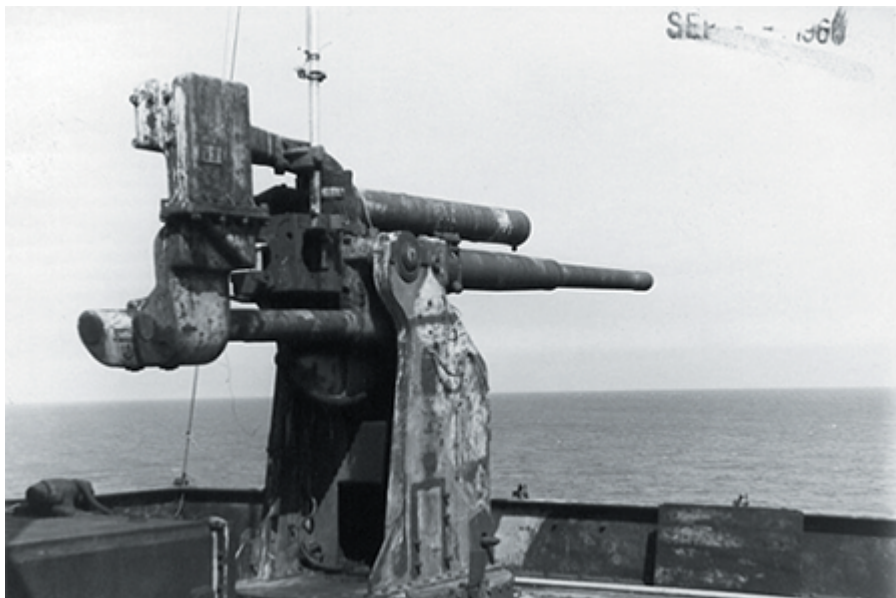
As the youngest member, Roger suffered particularly from the well-meant protectiveness of Dick Palmer. After doing the all night shift, he would hie off on sunny days to a quiet part of the upper deck and stretch out in the sun for a nap, only to be rudely awakened by Dick who would insist that he go below for a proper sleep. Roger was not particularly pleased at this treatment that reminded him of when he was seven!

At least in the early days, the sleeping area was simply a matter of using all the existing two-tier bunks in the second room down the non-generator (and therefore less noisy) leg of the fort. The first floor down was the technician's workshop for a while, but eventually these gentlemen moved up into the 'crow's nest'. Fortunately, the sea, even when it was stormy, did not intrude on the relative peace and quiet. It must be noted however, that certain personnel made up for this. Roger would be sleeping peacefully, and then suddenly, someone would crash through the door, gallop across the room, and

literally, LEAP up into a bunk with an almighty thud! Roger recalls that Mark West usually took the gold medal for this particular feat.

Although it was the 'swinging sixties' and half the country was experimenting with strange substances, nobody on Essex did anything of the kind. We were it is strange to relate, an unusually respectable bunch - at least as far as that sort of activity was concerned. On the other hand, Roger Scott did suffer terrible cravings - for tea! He would drink the stuff all day, every day, and if the boat was late with supplies and we ran out, there was hell to pay. He would mope around the place looking utterly bereft, and was practically impossible to live with. As soon as the boat did arrive, he would be first on the 'hauling up' rope, rip open a package of Typhoo Tips, and soon the merry whistle of the kettle could be heard, and we knew that all would be well again.

In retrospect, we can only be grateful that his addiction was only to ordinary tea, and not to the Senna pod variety!



One of the anti-aircraft guns. Sadly, not operational

## CHAPTER TWELVE

It would be natural, if not inevitable, that the old abandoned forts that the pirate radio stations had appropriated would give rise to stories of strange goings-on and ghostly happenings. Apart from scavengers, these forts had been abandoned since the early nineteen fifties.

During the Second World War they had been hastily though sturdily constructed, floated out to sea on barges, and then sunk into position on the sea bed where they could use their guns to attack the German aircraft coming in to bomb London and the south coast ports.

The forts had served their purpose and had finally been abandoned by the navy and army crews who had manned them, sometime in the 1950s. When fully occupied, they had been home to about one hundred and fifty men at a time. It would be reasonable to conclude that events had occurred during those years that would better be forgotten.

Even during the radio pirate days of the sixties, the forts had been the direct cause of murderous events, such as the shooting of Radio City owner Reg Calvert, and the mysterious disappearance of three people from Radio Invicta. There were also the less lethal shenanigans of competing outfits removing each other's crews from the forts in on-going territorial disputes.

In any case, a curious event took place on Radio Essex back in its early days. It started one foggy winter's day at about 5 in the afternoon. It was heavily overcast and getting dark. Dick Palmer had, after much work, got the main generator going, and the standby generator was on the deck, in the room next to the Mess.

The standby had been running reliably for a few weeks while Dick worked hard getting the main one up and running. This refurbished and largely rebuilt generator had been humming along smoothly and providing power to the station. Suddenly, the main generator started to play up. The lights were flickering on and off throughout the fort and gradually diminished to a faint glimmer. The turntables started to slow down, and eventually ground to a halt. Dick couldn't understand why this should be happening.

He went down to the generator and saw a most peculiar thing. The governor arm was moving in and out on its own. It seemed at first as though there was a terrific power load going on and off it that was slowing the generator down. He checked all the obvious things like the patched up wiring - but could find nothing - nor did there seem to be anything wrong with the engine. The fuel supply was fine. So, scratching his head in puzzlement, he switched back to the standby generator.

The standby had been totally reliable. But now, it started to do the same thing. Dick checked it carefully, but found that he now had two previously reliable generators, suddenly behaving very oddly. It was very still and quiet on the fort. Everyone was fully accounted for and they were all in the Mess room. Then, something was heard banging about on the roof of the mess. Dick went upstairs and checked it out, but there was nothing to be seen - not even a seagull.

While he had been in the engine room watching the governor moving in and out on the malfunctioning generators, he had experienced a definite 'feeling' of something around him. He admits that in those circumstances, with everything quiet, and no reasonable explanation for the generator trouble, it is possible he was spooking himself.

That night, everyone went to bed, feeling a little uneasy. The standby generator had finally decided to work again and whatever had

been the problem, seemed to have cleared up, and he left it running during the night.

Next morning, the duty announcer came to wake Dick up with the news that the generator had stopped and he could not start it again. Dick immediately went to inspect it, found it still quite hot, and again, there was no apparent reason why it was not running. Try as he might, he could not start it again. Everyone still had that very strange feeling of being in some way overlooked. Again, he figured that they were spooking each other out, the only other reasonable alternative being that somehow Radio City had managed to sneak someone aboard, and they were playing mind games, hoping that the Essex team would take fright and abandon the fort.

Mark West got out the walkie-talkies and he and Dick decided to make a thorough search of the fort from top to bottom. They each gathered a couple of others and, starting at the very top of the fort, commenced their search for some sort of explanation.

Slowly and with a certain amount of trepidation, the two parties covered the deck and superstructure of the fort and all the rooms, and then each took a leg and worked their way down, keeping in full contact all the while with the walkie-talkies. The thinking was that by staying level with each other in their respective legs as they moved ever downwards, they would be driving anyone there into a corner at the very bottom. Every cupboard, every space, every duct, layer by layer, was thoroughly examined, with not a trace of any living soul being found.

Suddenly, as they neared the bottom, the main generator suddenly started up - all by itself - and proceeded to run sweetly and smoothly.

The matter never was explained, and Dick indicated that anytime he was in the generator room, and he often worked there alone, he would sometimes feel that somebody was watching him. This feeling

occurred only in the generator leg however, not in any other part of the fort. Eventually though, this spooky feeling went away, as though whatever it was, had decided that all was well, and that the radio people could be left in peace. The end of the story came some years later when, for some idle reason, a friend of Dick's found himself at a seance and being aware of the story attempted to discover an answer.

It turned out that somebody had been killed in a fight in that generator room sometime in 1948 while the navy was still manning the place. War office records were examined and the facts were verified.

The only other occurrence of a 'spooky' kind, took place one night when Keith Robinson dashed into the mess room excitedly claiming to have seen somebody in a seaman's jersey and boots on the deck of the fort. But could he have been having a little fun at Dick's expense?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

During the summer of 1966, Roy Bates was in an expansive mood. Radio Essex had been running a reasonable number of commercials, the authorities were spluttering incoherently while doing nothing, (a general election was in the air) and Roy felt that it was a good time to go a-hunting.

As a consequence of this euphoric state of mind, he decided that it was a good time to take over the Tongue Sands Fort a few miles off the coastal resort of Margate. At one time, about 20 years before, it had partially collapsed during a terrible storm. Later, it had been hit by a passing ship, producing a hole in one of the legs. Because of its condition, the fort had escaped attention over the years and Roy felt that there would be a lot of spare parts on board, and the lead and copper from the cabling could be valuable too.

The general idea was to take a party across, leave them to get on with the job, and then return to pick them up after a suitable interval. I don't suppose it ever occurred to Roy that what he was actually doing was 'totting' - a Londoner's word for going into the retail scrap metal business. The task was to strip all this valuable material and this was most simply done by burning off the insulation. Burning and stripping commenced.

Somebody on shore must have seen the flames because a helicopter appeared on the scene soon after. They were highly displeased to discover it was a false alarm and retired after many harsh words, leaving the party in peace. Later that night however, the lifeboat turned up, and they were even more upset at the false alarm. They demanded to know what was going on, and Dick Palmer, who was leading the party, thought very quickly and replied

that they were a radio station. On being asked which one, Dick prevaricated by informing the lifeboat crew that they were Radio Albatross.

Fortunately, the Tongue Fort Strippers had a 2 way radio link with the gang back on Radio Essex, and a couple of days later, Dick clearly remembered Guy Hamilton saying on the air, "Here's a record for our friends over the water and for Mr. Albert Ross".

Dick thought, "My God - how the hell do they know - what's happened?" Roy Bates came out two or three days later in an entrepreneurial panic and said, "What the bloody hell's all this about Radio Albatross?" Dick told him the story, and Roy's response was typical, - "OK - we'll do it then!" The irony of them all being so broke that they were out salvaging lead and copper, seems to have escaped him.

One dark and windy night shortly thereafter, a Saturday, a big storm blew up. At the same time, out on the Tongue fort, somebody, no one will ever know who, messed about with one of the flooding valves, and water poured into the hitherto dry leg of the fort. The one responsible probably couldn't turn it off and vamoosed in a blue funk, hoping that no one would notice. Somebody did notice however, and thinking that the storm had caused the walls of the leg to breach, panicked, and sounded the alarm.

They called on the 2-way radio to tell the Essex people that they were gradually being flooded out, and the whole structure seemed to be moving. The shut-off valve was at the bottom of the leg in the ammunition store, and it would have needed a diver to go down 60 feet to shut it off. That, plus the sea breaking over the top of the fort must have been terrifying.

Pinned up next to the studio microphone in the Radio Essex studios was a special code list. Although the details are sketchy now, I do



remember that the codes were simply alpha-numerical ones. For example F-4 might mean that there was only four days food supply left. E-0 might mean Emergency - come out in the boat right now!

It was the latter that came into play on that awful Saturday night. Imagine if you will, our few friends and colleagues all alone on a twisted, bent, holed fort, with the seas crashing over the top, and the legs rapidly filling up with water.

The jocks back on Essex, me included, immediately instituted the emergency procedures, and put out codes throughout the evening and most of the night. This consisted of all announcer chat being accompanied by the code. "That was a new one (E-0) from the Beatles and is from (E-0) their new album release". These subtleties did not have the desired effect. Sod's Amendment was in operation. (Murphy's Law = If anything can go wrong, it will. Sod's Amendment = Murphy was an optimist).

Roy was out for the evening and did not hear the radio, and it took a neighbour of his who must have known something of Roy's methodology to finally figure out that something was up, and let Roy know. Eventually, the boat went out in the small hours of the following morning, and in totally foul weather and dangerously high seas, finally reached and rescued the hapless crew.

By the time the cold and hungry 'totters' arrived back on Radio Essex, it had been established that they had been in no actual danger. But, I can't say I blamed them for fearing the worst under those grim conditions. It is not recorded what Roy had to say to them when the facts were established.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After most of us had been on the air for a couple of months, we started to develop a sure sense of professionalism. We listened to the other pirates, and to the BBC, and virtually by this method and by learning from each other we started to sound almost quite good.

We worked hard on the station. The hours were long, and there was much to do in addition to our on-air shifts. At one time, trying to clear the deck area of unwanted debris, it was decided to get rid of the wartime ammunition boxes. These weighed about a couple of tons each. Actually, it was engineer Keith Robinson who asked, not only for the deck to be cleared, but also for the top superstructure of the fort to be cut away. He felt that the mass of metal so close to the antenna was causing problems for the station's signal.

He was talking bollocks of course. What the station actually needed was a decent transmitter and a decent antenna. Unfortunately, there was no cutting equipment available, so the whole job had to be done by hand - with hacksaw blades! The result of all this work was about as useful as an ashtray on a motorbike.



Mike Brereton and Mark West clowning around

Filling the fuel tanks, helping (or hindering) the engineers, and for bravado, shinning up and down the rope over the side, helped to work off some of the pent-up energy that naturally accumulates in a group of young people who are completely cut off from the normal outlets available on dry land.

Another way to work off surplus energy was with occasional food fights. The Bates' perennial cry of "It's the cheapest, but the best" did rather tend to sour the lads on their somewhat limited diet, and now and again frustration would lead to all sorts of harmless mayhem. One day, Dick Palmer strolled into the mess room and found out the hard way that somebody had put a container of water on top of the door and he copped the lot. All the others, except for the guy on the air, were relaxing in the Edwardian armchairs and waiting happily for the first luckless arrival through the door.

Dick's immediate response was to reach for the nearest weapon, which in this instance happened to be a pan of cold, rapidly congealing gravy. To obtain maximum coverage, he threw the

contents up at the ceiling and naturally it all cascaded down over the assembled company. It all exploded from there.

The one area that was sacred however, was the studio. Even with ridiculous shenanigans like this, everyone instinctively knew that the broadcast studio section was off-limits. However, Dick was willing to make an exception on this occasion, as he had figured out that it was Mark West who had planted the booby-trap and bugged off back to the studio, no doubt feeling perfectly secure because of the aforementioned sense of responsibility.

One of the Bates' standard gastronomic treats was the much-loved Spam, and there was a quantity of the stuff all nicely sliced and ready for sandwiches in the larder area. Dick swept into the studio and stood like an avenging, though wet angel in the doorway, waving fistfuls of Spam. Mark was screeching "no, don't, not in the studio", while the listeners in their innocence were enjoying selections from "The Sound of Music".

Dick, giggling all the while, was not to be denied and he hurled the stuff straight at Mark, who received it full in the face. It then proceeded to fall down his nose and straight on to the record he was playing, where it stuck, and the stylus was approaching fast. Mark was yelling "What the fuck do I do?" and trying desperately to get it off the record before the needle reached it. He was unsuccessful. God knows what the listeners thought, but we could be thankful it wasn't television.

The festivities then rapidly deteriorated and everybody split up into two teams. Somebody found some bags of flour, while somebody else gathered up a quantity of eggs. Into the fray went water, custard powder, beer, and any other comestibles that weren't actually nailed down. Mark remembered that by putting on an album with a continuous track, he could leave the studio, and advance down the corridor clutching an ex-Red Cross bedstead, while the bags of flour

bounced off it. However, eggs went straight through and made a satisfying mess of Mark and his team. Eventually, the fight ran its course, or the teams ran out of food, and everyone wound up back in the mess laughing and drinking tea.

Suddenly, the door opens, and in walks Roy Bates. In spite of the built-in security system of battening down any hatches and pulling up any ropes, etc., he had somehow managed to get on to the fort.

Now, Roy was no fool. Being an ex-army type, he immediately took in the situation and in a burst of solid common sense, pretended not to have noticed a thing. Though how he could not have noticed walls dripping with egg, custard, gravy, and the interminable Spam, is beyond comprehension. He pulled it off though, (the feat, not the Spam) and it was Dick who had the jolly task of adopting a mask of angelic innocence, and conducting Roy around the place on the usual tour of inspection. The two of them were followed around by the rest of us, furtively trying to scrape the walls clean.

Of course, Roy must have realised that a bunch of lads would let off steam now and then and providing no actual damage was done to broadcast equipment and no one was hurt, it would be sensible to overlook it. In view of the fact that we had all been bitching about the awful grub, he would have been justified in being annoyed about all the waste and firing the lot of us. However, in spite of his faults, he knew when to be discreet. We learned later that the same thing would happen now and again over on Radio Caroline, the only difference being the quality of the food. I think they threw caviar and pheasant.



Hard at work on the air

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hi-jinks surfaced on another occasion at a time when relations between the fort captain, Dick Palmer, and the Program Director, Chris Stewart had deteriorated to an all-time low. To be fair, it wouldn't have happened on shore, but stuck out on the fort, the tiniest irritations tended to be blown out of all proportion. Chris had recently been made Program Director and the whole thing had rather gone to his head.

Chris was a long tall streak of a guy who towered above the rest and was quite refined in his ways. He was also quite talented. If he had a fault, it was that he took everything just a little too seriously, which left him open to a certain amount of ribbing from the others. When he found himself appointed Program Director, he immediately went into what he thought was the appropriate mode. This made him seem to be artistically and intellectually on a kind of 'cloud nine' which did not endear him to the rest of the gang.

In actual fact, a Program Director's job is a tough one, requiring a well-developed sense of corporate balance. This means keeping the troops happy and productive, while ensuring that the operation runs smoothly and profitably. It also involves interpretative skills such as divining what the boss really wants and turning those wants into a well-articulated policy, which in turn, has to be developed into a finely crafted and workable format for the station. In short, it is certainly no cakewalk!

Chris though, went straight into some kind of artistic nirvana where every piece of music that came on to the station was listened to, evaluated, and cogitated over, for an unconscionably long time. Understandably, he drove everybody nuts!

As a consequence, debates over the music would often degenerate into name-calling sessions, falling only slightly short of fisticuffs. For his part, Dick Palmer had the job of keeping things running from a practical point of view, and Chris' dithering drove him up the wall. Chris was doing his best as he saw it, but at that time, did not really have any real conception of what the job entailed.

On reflection after all these years, it would have made more sense to have given the task to Mark West. He was a musician, had a good ear for a pop hit, and would have attacked the task with gusto. He may well have made a balls-up of it too, but in a different way. At the time, Mark was probably the second youngest member of the team, and likely would not have been able to impose his authority on the others. In any case, it is all academic at this point.

Matters between Chris and Dick came to a somewhat humorous climax one time when Chris was preparing to go on leave. Since the early days of Radio Essex, the rusty remains of the top part of the ladder had been removed for security reasons, so anyone coming on or going off had to be pulled up or down all the way on a rope by hand from the top deck. This time it was Chris Stewart's turn, and the boat was waiting below.

Unbeknownst to him, the fiendish Palmer had hatched a little plot.

Chris tied the end of the rope around himself in the approved fashion, and amid tearful farewells and cries of "be back soon", and "keep your knickers on back there", he was let gently over the side. Halfway down, somebody shouted "tea's up" and the rope came to a dead stop, the top end now securely fastened to the old anti-aircraft gun. The lads disappeared for their tea, and Chris found himself dangling in the wind thirty feet above the sea. The lads, officially deaf, could hear the screams of rage from below perfectly well and were killing themselves laughing.



After a suitable interval, concerned faces appeared over the top of the deck and politely enquired if anything was amiss. The expected response from below resulted in a barrage of stale bread, Spam, etc. being flung down to the undoubted amusement of Roy Bates who was patiently circling in the boat, shoulders heaving, but suffering from a temporary case of selective blindness.

They let Chris down as far as the landing stage and he untied the rope, at which point, he was pelted with carefully aimed (to miss) milk bottles. The vision of the illustrious Program Director hopping around like a demented dervish, shaking his fist and screaming obscenities was a sight that should have been captured on video.

Chris was eventually allowed to depart, no doubt in high dudgeon. Curiously, he did not return and went on to much better things.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

One of the highlights of the summer of 1966 at Radio Essex was the visit of a crew from Independent Television News, or ITN as it was known. This was and is a news gathering operation which provided national newscasts for all of the independent commercial television stations in Britain.

During one of his trips to the fort, Roy Bates informed us that a visit was imminent and that we should conduct a massive clean-up so that the place would look half decent when they came out, which would likely be a few days hence.

By this time, there were about a dozen pirate stations around the coast of Britain, some like us, operating from the old forts and others on ships of various kinds. The Labour government under the premiership of Harold Wilson, through the Postmasters-General of the day, had been making hysterical noises about the 'illegality' of the pirates, and how they were screwing up vital SOS messages from ships, etc. It was all unadulterated crap of course, for what the government really hated was the fact that the populace was listening to what it wanted, rather than what the government wanted – and more importantly from their point of view, was out of their control. Edward Short, Roy Jenkins, and the braying, pop-eyed Anthony Wedgewood Benn, all took their turn in this unenviable ministry, indulging in bouts of 'testicular verbosity', which simply means, 'talking bollocks', and it would not be until the following summer that most of the pirates would be scuttled.

With the pirates being in the news so much, ITN decided to come out to Essex to do a story and a follow-up feature on our station.

As the event approached we spent several days scrubbing and polishing. Vigorous applications of Vim and sea water all over the place and each other, culminated in a fairly respectable looking bunch of desperadoes - some of us even bothered to shave.

The day chosen for the visit dawned sunny and warm, and the sea was like the proverbial mill pond. As the tender approached us, we could see Roy, ever the genial host, dressed in a superb light grey suit, standing militarily at ease - every inch the romantic buccaneer.

First, the ITN crew were hauled aboard, most of them looking quite stunned and relieved as they tumbled over on to the deck. Then came their equipment, the producer looking a little white around the gills as he watched his expensive film cameras (videotape was not being used on location in those days) being hauled gaily upwards. Last to come aboard were Joan and Roy Bates, and naturally, the cameras were already in focus and shooting away.

Arriving with this mob was a number of mysterious looking wicker baskets that proved to contain the most magnificent feast we had ever seen out there. There was salmon (the cheapest, but the best), salads, roast beef, fresh bread and just about anything one could ask for. The idea was to impress the ITN crew with the sort of life we had out there on the fort - a life of constant luxury.

Now, the ITN crew had not just come in off the farm, they set up their equipment while some of them came with us on a tour of the place. It did not take them long to realise that this was a special set-up, and that life on Essex was not all strawberries and cream. I remember the producer saying quietly, "leave this to us".

The next stage was for the crew to take Roy out on deck to be interviewed on-camera. In the interview he expressed a firm conviction that not only would Radio Essex and the other pirates outlast the government, but he saw a time when those who had

proved themselves capable of providing a good broadcasting service from offshore, would be invited to 'come home' and set up licensed stations on land. The only laugh came from us, when we heard him saying that he had spent a million pounds on the place. A thousand pounds max., we thought.

I have to hand it to him; it was a magnificent piece of material. I have since seen it re-run on television and it can be found today on YouTube. In particular, a large chunk was used for a Channel Four program called, I think, "The Black And White Pirates". This show compared our pirate stations of the sixties with the more modern urban pirate stations of the eighties and nineties which were mostly operated in attics all over London by predominately black citizens craving a diet of Reggae and Rap.

Roy was actually not far off the mark. Although he and the other owners of pirate stations were never invited, by the early seventies commercial stations did start to spring up all over Britain, and many former colleagues were able to continue their careers as 'legit' broadcasters. Some even went to the BBC!

Following the interview, Roy's idea was then to have the ITN crew sit down and enjoy the excellent repast he had provided to further cement the burgeoning relationship. Our friendly producer on the other hand, had a better idea. "Why don't we get some footage of the lads enjoying their daily meal", he said, innocently. "Why, er, of course, what a lovely thought", croaked Roy, while almost bursting into tears.

Needing no prompting, we at once complied, and tucked in heartily. Roy and Joan tried hard to look graciously pleased at this display, and almost succeeded. There was tons of grub on hand, so after we finished, we got up and left the table, merrily belching to express our appreciation as we passed Roy. The ITN people then set to and polished off a fair amount themselves.

A little later there was general conviviality out on deck. Some strange impulse made me volunteer to provide some sort of cabaret. This took the form of showing off to our visitors by clambering over the side and sliding down the rope in the approved manner, using both hands and feet, and sliding gently on to the rickety landing stage below. To compound the felony, I then showed how easy it was to climb UP the rope, something I, nor anyone else, as far as I knew, had done. God knows how I did it, but eventually I slid over the top and back on to the deck, trying desperately not to fall down and panting like a stranded fish. My efforts were rewarded with a round of desultory applause. I never did that again.

When it was time for the camera team to go, Joan made signs to start packing up the remaining grub. Dick Palmer immediately got somebody to manoeuvre her out of the room, while he managed to nick a few good things for later. There had never been cucumber out there before - maybe they were afraid of what we might do with it!

Finally, everything was over and the ITN crew, accompanied by the still sweetly smiling Roy and Joan, departed in an enveloping cloud of fervent thanks and goodbyes. For the next couple of days, we dined very royally, indeed.



Some of the Essex gang on deck; Keith Robinson, Mark West, Guy Hamilton, Dave Belasco, Roger Scott and Mike Brereton. Photo courtesy of Guy Hamilton.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In the fall of the year, it began to dawn on me that all was not well. One of the guys, I can't remember who it was now, had returned from shore leave and mentioned that he had not received his usual cheque on arrival at the office.

At the same time, I had been noticing that there had not been as many commercials on the air that there had once been. Supplies had not been as plentiful as before, and I am sure that I am not the only one who felt there was something wrong. Other stations still seemed to have plenty of business, and no one was taking too much notice of threats by the government to close us all down. The authorities did manage to prosecute a couple of stations, but only on a temporary basis.

I had also started to feel that maybe it was time to move on to another station. Frankly, I was wondering how I could get to work with Radio 390 which had a marvellous signal, a very successful format, and an extremely large audience. Well, I *would* work for 390, but not yet.

There was somebody however, who knew for certain that something was wrong. Dick Palmer was probably the key member of our little band. Without fully realising it, we were highly dependent on his abilities on a day to day basis. It should not be surprising then, if he was the one who saw the gathering clouds.

Dick was the next one not to get paid. On a trip ashore, everything had been normal. Bates had met the tender, Dick had gone back to the house, had a bath in Joan's personal pink bathroom, had a meal (scrambled egg or pilchards - he can't remember - although as usual it was the cheapest, but the best), then there was to be the usual

chat, followed by the cheque, less deductions for tax and insurance - neither of which were ever forwarded to the government. Then, happily off to the railway station to catch a train back to home in St. Mary Cray.

Now time was getting on, and Bates had not produced a cheque. So Dick said to Roy, "I must be getting along, my train is due soon, may I have my cheque?" "Oh, I'll send it on old chap", was Roy's bright response. Dick went home, but the cheque never did arrive.

When Dick came back from leave, Roy said he had sent the cheque in the mail, and it would probably be back there waiting for him. At this point, Dick was not too disturbed. After all, it did not seem such a big deal - he could bank it next time around.

The next time Dick went ashore which was a few weeks later, the scenario was a repeat of the first time. Dick was a little pissed off, but still not unduly worried. And, for the sake of general morale and harmony, decided not to tell any of the others about this. Others in the meantime, had come off the fort and had either been not paid, or partially paid. On Dick's next leave, when he insisted that Bates cough up his salary due, Roy told him a story that the government had for some reason unknown, frozen his bank accounts, and please not to let anybody else know about this minor and obviously purely temporary problem..

Since shortly before Dick's first experience with no cheque, we had two new announcers join us - Van Stirling and Tony Mandell. They had spent five or six weeks on the fort and then had gone on leave. When they arrived at the office for the time-honoured ritual, Bates handed them each about ten pounds. Naturally, the two new boys asked why they were only getting this paltry sum, and not the regular salary.



They were told by Bates that even though they had been out there for 5 or 6 weeks, he had already told them that they would only be paid from the day that they could hold a show together on their own, and that they had only been able to do that during the last week. Needless to say, it was a blatant lie. The two lads, while complete newcomers to broadcasting, were not hired under any such conditions.

This was a disgraceful business and these two novices were being boldly and unkindly cheated. As soon as he heard about it, that episode warned Dick that all was indeed not well. He found that other people came off and weren't paid, and it became patently obvious that the whole set-up had all started to fall apart.

Roy was a man who had ambitious plans. He wanted to start an FM station for London to be called Radio Eros and another local one for the county of Kent. The ideas were there but not the wherewithal. He had always been stony broke and had bluffed his way past creditors galore. Perhaps if the government had not started to crack down on the forts by commencing prosecutions and forcing Radio City and Radio 390 (for the first time) off the air, he might have stood a chance. It was all a great shame because for a while, it looked as though Radio Essex might make it.

Back in the early summer, advertising had started to increase with clients like Channel Airways, and various department stores. The food was poor, but there was plenty of it. But then, Roy's chickens came home to roost in ever-increasing numbers. It all started to go downhill.

At one point, it did get to the stage where there was almost rebellion. Dick still felt a great sense of loyalty to the station and that he should defend Bates, by sticking to his promise not to say anything. Unsurprisingly the others, who were not getting paid, blamed Dick for their troubles. In addition, Keith Robinson resented the fort captain's

position, and felt that he, an older man, should have been in charge. He did a good job of stirring up unrest. Poor Dick became the focus of all the hate. It reached its apogee when people went off on leave, and told Bates that if something was not done about Dick Palmer, then they would not return.

Bates cleverly came out and de-fused the situation with an old military tactic. First demoting Dick, he would run operations directly from shore, and put everybody else in charge of a specific function. He also doubled everybody's non-existent salary. Dick was going off on leave too, so that helped. This con job bought Bates another month of devoted service from the gang.

Dick went off on his leave and in due course, came back. Bates was very cool to him. The next bunch came off on their leave, and the 3 or 4 people left on board were so psyched out that they did not want to cooperate with Dick. In order to accomplish anything at all, he had to resort to playing the heavy.

Finally, in desperation, Dick wrote a letter of resignation intending it to go off on the next boat. When the boat turned up, Bates arrived on his own late one afternoon during a force six gale, with a desperately small amount of food. He had the news that several of us had gone off to join Radio 270.

Dick felt terrible. His resignation had been put in the 'diplomatic bag' which had already been lowered onto the boat. He called down and said gently, "There's a letter in the bag Roy, tear it up, will you?"

Roy looked up and asked what it was, and Dick told him. There was no further comment and they unloaded the boat. Even now, he looks back to that time and says, "There he was, on his own, doing his best". Dick remembers Mark saying, "Christ, he *is* doing his best, and everybody has deserted him".

All the few that were left felt the same way. Mark, Dick, Tony Mandell and one other. Dick felt that he really had no choice - he had to stay. He was still in a limbo state as far as his status was concerned, but in practical terms, he had to take charge of the situation.

As for those of us who had left, we felt we had done the sensible thing. It was not until many years later that I learned the full story of what took place, and now I for one, feel a little bit guilty at leaving the other lads there to cope.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The end was drawing near for Radio Essex. There was a prosecution at Southend Court, during which it was 'found' that the Knock John Tower, home of Radio Essex, was actually within territorial waters, thus making the station illegal under British Law.

It was a farce of course. The prosecution was a political device by the authorities who feared and loathed the potential power of the pirates to influence public opinion against the Labour government of Harold Wilson. Tame Naval 'experts' were produced to demonstrate that on a full moon, if you killed a chicken while facing east, the moon's influence on the tides would cause various sand banks to appear and extend the mainland, and that the square of the hypotenuse, multiplied by Harold Wilson's affairs with his secretary, produced the effect of drawing the tower nearer to Southend. It was all a demonstration of official obfuscation – total bollocks'.

In a word, nobody was fooled. Roy Bates, ever the entrepreneurial optimist, decided that by moving the entire station over to the Roughts Tower, which was still well outside territorial waters by any stretch of governmental imagination, a new station could get under way.

By Christmas, Roy had no choice but to discontinue operation of Radio Essex, or BBMS as it had become. On Christmas day at about 4.30 pm Roy came out again to tell them that they were going over to the Roughts fort a few miles away. They took apart the transmitter and the studios - a monster task to dismantle in an hour or two, what had taken months to put together. It was getting dark, the weather was getting rough and several items of equipment were lost overboard. You could not anchor by the fort in that kind of weather,

just make passes underneath and hope that you could lower stuff on board as the tender passed. At last the generators were switched off, and they set sail for the Roughs Tower.

It was a seven hour voyage in poor conditions, but eventually, they arrived. Several trips were undertaken, during the course of which, several Radio Caroline men had been forcibly removed from the Roughs, and a lot of equipment was irretrievably lost.

On Christmas Day, 1966, when Radio Essex went off the air, it would never return.

The remaining troops, Dick Palmer, Mark West, Van Stirling and Tony Mandell, set out with Roy on an unmarked boat to drop off the captured Radio Caroline men at Harwich, and then set off again. They dropped in to the Radio London ship to wish everyone there a 'merry Christmas', then to the Radio England ship where they had lunch on board, and then sailed past the Radio Caroline ship.

By then, Radio Caroline had heard what had happened to their men. The Bates team had somehow acquired this fearsome reputation for skulduggery and were becoming known as "the hard bastards of the North Sea" - mainly due to their well-developed quaint habit of going out at weekends and liberating bits and bobs from other unoccupied forts. These commando-like tactics had the effect of making most of the other stations thoroughly frightened of the Essex lads, Roy Bates in particular. Dick Palmer recalls the amusing sight of the Caroline people seeing them come past and immediately hauling up ladders, battening down hatches, and closing up the ship as tight as a drum.

They finally got back to Southend, and it was decided to go out once more to guard the Roughs Tower. Roy needed to put a party out there to protect the place against other aggressors. When they arrived, it was realised that there were only three day's-worth of food supplies left by then, and that had been left behind by the departed

Caroline people. Roy left the four of them on guard duty and departed. No one was actually in charge, as Dick had been 'reduced to the ranks' earlier, but once again, he found himself having to manage a situation. Mark, he remembers, was entirely sensible and understood the situation perfectly. Tony however, did not see the necessity for conservation and control.

Dick divided up the remaining food into four precisely equal portions, with the aid of a pair of scales. He told the others that they could gobble it up right away, or eke it out, as it could be up to seven days before Roy and the boat would return. Tony scoffed the lot immediately, the others conserved their shares. It was seventeen days before the boat came back, and they could all have died if it had not been for a quantity of coffee powder and an old jar of mayonnaise.

After several days, the lads realised that some decisions had to be made. Bates had gone off knowing the food situation, and by this time, the lads were getting a tad pissed off. They had made the food last for seven days, but after that they faced coffee powder and mayonnaise. They wondered what had happened to Bates. The weather was fine, and he had never let them down to this extent before.

At last, a decision was made - democratically. They decided that they would flash a light to the Trinity House boat which passed nearby several times each twenty-four hours, and ask them to relay a message to Bates. Unfortunately, the Trinity House boat must have thought that the lads were just being neighbourly. They acknowledged the signals, and just 'waved' back with theirs.

There they sat, day after day, with no heat or light, just a few candles - and no means of contacting anybody. Then one night, a shout was heard from outside - it was the Walton-On-Naze lifeboat!

The situation was quickly made clear. The lifeboat wouldn't take any messages, or take just one of the lads off. It was all or nothing. In view of the conditions and the circumstances everyone decided, they would go off on the lifeboat. They enjoyed the first meal in seven days and the first hot meal in seventeen days, from the self-heating cans in the lifeboat's stores. Oxtail soup never tasted so good.

Dick noticed that the skin of his hands was hanging off. It wasn't from work or anything; he was experiencing the first stages of scurvy.

They were met by the press, and the story Dick told, still protecting Roy Bates, was that their extensive food supplies had been washed away during a storm, but that everything was great, Roy Bates was Number One, and so on.

They spent the night in a hotel, and Bates arrived the next morning to pick them up. He arrived, all gushing with concern and apologies, promised to send the hotel a cheque, ("Sorry old boy, no cash on me at the moment"), leaving the hotelier less than happy, but mollified by all the publicity and these well-known personalities staying at his hotel. When they got into the car, Bates immediately rounded on Dick, and accused him of abandoning the fort. Dick was less than pleased.

Bates, like most con-men, was himself, very easy to con. He would believe whoever talked to him last. He needed a stable environment in order to extricate himself from a very difficult situation and decided to come to terms with Radio Caroline. He came to an accommodation with the Caroline people in which they would 'share' the Roughs Tower. This arrangement, like others before it, would come to naught.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

While he was out again on the Roughs Tower, Dick Palmer got a surprise one day. Roy turned up with two Caroline people, explaining the deal that had been made with Caroline chief Ronan O'Rahilly and that they would be co-operating from then on. With them was a ton of useful equipment and supplies, including a number of oxygen cylinders. So now on the new tower, were Roy Bates, Dick Palmer and others including the two Caroline men.

Dick Palmer had, a month or so earlier, come up with a rather remarkable idea. "Why don't we", he said to Bates, "Run up a flag and call ourselves a country? Just think of the possibilities!" Bates thought it was a good idea, but put it aside for the moment.

During the hauling up of the oxygen cylinders, one of the Caroline guys went down on to the boat to assist from that end. The other one was on the rope with the rest of the team, pulling up the cylinders via a pulley arrangement which had been hastily put into place.

It is not certain as to who engineered the scenario. Somebody let go of the heavily-laden rope, and the Caroline man was pulled forward, the pulley wheel almost severing his fingers. He had to be taken ashore immediately for medical attention. The injured man was lowered to the boat to join his colleague, and from that moment the Bates party had the fort.

Dick couldn't at first, understand what he had seen. "It happened so fast, I couldn't believe what had happened. It was such a dreadful thing to do to somebody". He also knew that this was the final act. He left on that boat with the injured man, and intended never to return. He later found that Roy Bates had not forgotten the concept of an independent 'country' and had in fact, already been working on



the possibilities. The implications went far beyond just a radio station. Flags of convenience, passports, stamps, - the list was endless.

Although his idea had been stolen, Dick figured that maybe he could do something about it, and got together a small consortium of wealthy types to pursue matters. In the meantime, he went back home and made some hook ladders which would make access to the Roughts Tower possible.

Now, he and Ronan O'Rahilly found themselves with a common foe - Bates. Dick got in touch with Ronan and the two of them arranged to meet at the Hilton in London. At the meeting, each skirted around the other, testing the waters, and trying to discover why the other wanted the fort. As it turned out, Ronan O'Rahilly had been working on the independent country idea long before Dick had thought of it. He had got along so far as to have brought in people like Mick Jagger and John Lennon, and then Roy Bates had jumped in and stolen both the idea and the intended country - the Roughts Tower. Several attempts were made by Ronan O'Rahilly to re-take the fort, even using some heavily dubious characters from IRA circles.

By this time, the fort was occupied by the Bates people. One morning, Dick got a call from Ronan who suggested he come up to London immediately, and refused to talk further on the phone. Dick went, and Ronan's first words were, "They've abandoned".

Dick's response was, "It's a trap!" He knew the way Bates & Co. would think, and he also knew perfectly well that Roy would never abandon the fort. Although Ronan's boat had been out several times around the fort, it was a beautiful day, and the ropes were hanging free, and there was absolutely no sign of life, Dick had a gut feel that things were not as they seemed - it was all too good to be true.

Ronan was not convinced, and issued the order - take the fort! Later that day, the phone jumped off the hook. Calls were flooding in from all the media, all with the same question - what the hell was going on?

Dick had been right all along, it was a trap. A crew had been hiding and waiting for just such an attempt. Just as one man was halfway up the ladder, and the other starting up, they had let rip. Oxygen cylinders, gasoline bombs, and other debris rained down from above, and bullets were fired. The Caroline tender was set on fire, and rammed the fort. Their agent, an ex-policeman, found his coat on fire. The guy at the bottom of the ladder fell into the sea, but managed to swim away far enough to be safe. The other, who was actually almost halfway up the rope, was in greater trouble -they would let him go neither up nor down.

The boat eventually stood off out of range and the poor sod was left hanging on the rope for hours. In true British style however, they sent him down some tea at intervals! In the early hours of the following morning, they finally let the poor devil go off on the lifeboat which had been standing by.

Dick's preference would have been to do the job properly and wait a few weeks until the security had slackened, but Ronan had been too impatient.

That virtually ended Dick's involvement with the scene, and he would soon turn to other things, though some years later, he would meet with Bates again to discuss the new satellite technology. But that, as they say, is another story...

# CHAPTER TWENTY

When I left Radio Essex in the latter part of 1966, it was with the sure knowledge that I and the others could kiss our unpaid salaries goodbye. Roger Scott joined me in talking to a lawyer about the possibilities but it soon became obvious that we were on a losing wicket.

On the positive side I had gained a great deal of useful experience and could now bill myself as a professional broadcaster. I had also met and worked with a fascinating variety of people most of whom, had a great deal in common.

Mark West and Roger Scott were much further ahead in terms of competence than me, and Dick Palmer had demonstrated over and over again that he had an abundance of inner resources that he could call upon at will.

Tony Mandell at that time seemed to lack the breadth of worldliness and education to progress very quickly, though he later did well in other fields.

The surprise in the pack was Guy Hamilton. Guy arrived at the same time as Tony, and brought with him one of the most engaging personalities that were on the air at Essex. He gave the surface impression of being a studious type but we soon found that he possessed a wicked sense of humour and a rapier-like wit. He would also go on to much greater things and has remained a good friend over the years.

We also had the occasional 'weirdo' and one such was a character whom I shall simply call Mike. Mike was a diabetic, which should not have made any difference, except that he exacted a strange

pleasure from making an overly public performance of giving himself injections. This in itself would not have been too bad, but he rather tended to compound the felony by 'shooting up' on insulin at the table, in the middle of meals.

Although the strict order of events are now a trifle hazy, I suspect that it was entirely due to engineer Keith Robinson that I landed up with Radio 270. Broadcast engineers are a close-knit and somewhat subterranean breed, all in a special world of their own. But what is important is that they communicate. And they do it with frequency! Keith had got wind of the fact that 270 was in need of a technician, and in the course of conversation it transpired that they also needed several new on-air staff. It would seem there had been a mutiny of sorts....



Heading toward the Radio 270 ship, Ocean 7. Photo courtesy of Guy Hamilton.

Keith passed on the good news to me and Roger Scott, for whom this opportunity was right, exactly right. I don't think we even discussed money or anything else. We simply knew that Radio 270 was on a ship, and was broadcasting up north off the coast between

Scarborough and Bridlington in the county of Yorkshire. Keith simply asked if we fancied the gig, we said yes, and off we went.

For the Great Journey North we prepared with extreme care, deciding only after serious consideration against the hiring of native guides and porters, and the speedy renewal of passports. Scarborough it seemed, would be a straightforward journey involving getting on to London's North Circular Road, then heading due north on the relatively new M1 motorway, and then peeling off to the right when we got to York.

Being the only one with a car in reasonable working order, I was designated as the mode of transport. Keith was to be navigator, and Roger Scott to provide play-by-play commentary from the rear seats. The crafty sod had never bothered to learn to drive, and he still doesn't - as a Londoner all his life, he figures there's no point, he can reach anywhere in the world he wants to go by train, plane or Underground!

We decided to make the trip at night, so that we would be fairly free of traffic - a dumb idea, as we arrived in Scarborough mid-morning, looking like hell on wheels. We were met by the program director, an Australian character called Noel Miller, who in turn introduced us to the manager, a loud and bombastic fellow called Wilf Proudfoot.

Now Wilf was a casting agent's dream - a Yorkshireman through and through, he could have made a fortune in any BBC-TV drama produced north of the Thames. Wilf not only managed Radio 270 from an office in his home, but he was also at one time Member of Parliament for the area, and owned a supermarket which had as its advertising slogan, "The Doors Open by Themselves!" - a new and exciting technology in the sixties.

Wilf was a marvellous character, and I suspect he played it for all it was worth, the ultimate Yorkshireman to the hilt! I can imagine how

well this bluff, homespun characterisation would have gone over in the House of Commons - they would probably have underestimated him - to their cost! He was an honest man, and I am sure that he would have been the first to admit that he knew 'dick' about radio - most of these entrepreneurs didn't. They saw the business potential, but they really had no idea of how this, or any other branch of show business worked, and even less about how to cope with the people in it.

We were, to be brutally frank, a weird bunch. We may indeed have been new to broadcasting, but already we were steeped in the lore of the business. We had egos, without them you are dead. We saw things from a very different perspective, and while we understood the financial side of things, the owners and managers could not understand how our minds worked. As a consequence, there was often friction between the two sides. And even more often, total misunderstanding. We needed success from an artistic point of view, recognition and acclaim from the public, and appreciation from management. All they seemed to want was an even bigger bottom line, and worse, they thought on-air performers were two a penny.

Wilf Proudfoot's larger than life personality was nicely counterbalanced by the chairman of the board of directors at 270, Leonard Dale. He was another type of Yorkshireman, gentle, quietly spoken, but with a strong personality and an impish sense of humour. He controlled a well-known electrical engineering outfit in the area, and I think that he got quite a kick out of dabbling in the pirate radio game. At one meeting, I recall him saying, after we had expressed surprise at the extent of industry in the county, "It's not all cabbages up here, you know"!

Then there was Roland Hill, the farmer. A rotund fellow, dressed in tweeds and rubber boots and driving an expensive but filthy Mercedes car over muddy fields with a couple of dead chickens in

the back. I remember his kindness on the morning of our arrival when after meeting with Noel, Wilf and the staff; he drove us to his home for a splendid breakfast with his family.

We would not be leaving for the ship until the following day, so that night, Noel put us in a local B&B – for which I will never forgive him. The second part of B&B was fine, the usual massive fry-up. However, the first part was awful. Would you believe - damp sheets? Incredible! Perhaps it was a quaint Yorkshire custom of the time to welcome southerners to the county in this manner to ensure they would never return.



Wondering whether to climb the 150 foot mast - or not ....

# CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Radio 270 went on the air in June 1966 and ceased operations on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1967. The station was set up by promoter Don Robinson. He interested a local fisherman, Bill Pashby, and farmer Roland Hill. Together they spread the word and eventually around fifty or sixty local people chipped in to invest in the project. They appointed supermarket magnate Wilf Proudfoot as Managing Director. The company chairman was Leonard Dale who owned a generator manufacturing company. A Dale generator provided the ship's power.

An old Dutch fishing boat, the Ocean 7, was bought to house the station. The smallest of all the pirate ships, she was 139 feet long, weighed 160 tons and was refitted for her new role in the North Sea. Compared to other radio ships, 270 was set up remarkably cheaply. The total cost of converting the vessel and installing the equipment came to around 75,000 pounds, a great deal of money at the time.

The station was originally to be called Radio Yorkshire and a certain amount of pre-launch publicity was issued using that name. Then the management team heard from a Leeds-based company who had already registered the Radio Yorkshire trade name. A new identity was required. The station became Radio 270, named after its wavelength. A letter was sent to potential advertisers informing them of the change.

The ship was positioned about three or four miles off the coast of eastern England, floating around between Scarborough and Bridlington, depending on weather conditions and the captain's predilections for deep sea fishing.





Approaching from the rear and getting ready to board. Photo courtesy of Guy Hamilton.

The vessel was outfitted with an excellent 10 KW RCA Transmitter and 150 foot aerial mast, giving the boat a somewhat ungainly look and a bad habit of rolling in heavy seas. According to an informal polling of listener habits in the region, it seems that 270 could boast a potential audience of over four and a half million people!

As I found when I joined the station, the ambience of fish, both ancient and modern, still permeated the ship to a considerable degree, in spite of thorough cleaning and refurbishing. After the sense of space we had enjoyed on the Radio Essex fort, the narrow confines of life on the Ocean 7 could easily drive one demented. What had once been the main hold, in the centre of the ship, became the dining and sleeping area for the inhabitants. At least, it was the sleeping area for the jocks, and the dining area for the jocks and the crew.

Picture if you will, the main living room in an average suburban single family home. Then picture a large square dining table and benches in the middle, and then a series of curtained bunk beds down the two sides, leaving the front and back ends of the room for

people to manoeuvre in and out of the room, or congregate for spirited discussions on the merits of various football teams. To put things in a nutshell, you could enjoy breakfast in bed simply by putting your hand through the drapes fronting your bunk, and remove someone's plate of food from the table. Yes, it was that close! And, in poor weather, you could simply lie back and wait for the plate to arrive in your bed without any help from anyone.

At our first meal on board, I voiced surprise that the tablecloth was soaking wet. It turned out that this was normal practice as the regular movement of the ship would have your meal resting comfortably in your lap if the tablecloth lacked friction.

**Jon Myer of the 'Pirate Radio Hall of Fame' website provides some background:**

*Radio 270 did not attract many big national advertising campaigns but, with plenty of local advertisers and the ubiquitous World Tomorrow religious programme, it had a healthy income.*

*During its short life it had earned some £100,000 in advertising revenue, paid off its initial start-up costs and broken even on its running expenses. Most radio stations take around three years to achieve this. Radio 270 had done it in one, but it had not made any profit, paid the shareholders any dividend or the directors any salaries. Given a few more months, it could have begun to make some real return for its investors but the law said it had to close.*

*In June 1967 National Opinion Polls had published listening figures showing that Radio 270 had an audience of four and a half million people. It might not have been in the premier league of offshore radio (similar surveys attributed audiences figures of over eight million to both Radios Caroline and London) but it was very popular. The presenters, engineers and crew had to endure difficult conditions and appalling weather during 270's short life, and they did*

*it with just one aim in mind - to entertain its listeners. And in that respect, it was a huge success.*

I remember well that it was a choppy winter's afternoon following our arrival in Scarborough that Roger and I, along with some other poor souls boarded the tender in Bridlington harbour to go out to the ship. There was the usual dicing with death routine to effect a move from the tender to the ship, not helped any by the fact that unlike Radio Essex, both the tender and the radio station were moving.

We were helped to settle in by the program director Noel Miller, and I found that once again, I would make my debut on an evening program, although this time, there was no possible interference from another station to worry about. Anyhow, I was a fully-fledged professional now, and was looking forward to the event with carefully modulated pleasure. This soon turned to carefully modulated terror, as it slowly dawned on me that I was feeling slightly unwell, and that the floor was constantly moving about.

I wondered whether I had made a mistake, and if it would be possible to call the tender back. Somehow though, in these situations one feels it incumbent upon oneself not to chicken out, and simply see how long it is possible to keep going before unconsciousness takes over.

Just before seven that evening, Noel who was on the air, popped out and indicated that I should come into the studio and take over. He said that he would hang around for a while until I became used to the board. I entered the tiny studio and sat down in front of the microphone. From the playlist, I selected a record and placed it on the turntable. It was at that point that I noticed the two turntables swinging crazily up and down and side to side and it was extremely difficult to place the record on and then manipulate the tone arm so as to cue it up ready to play.

Noel leaned over and helped, explaining as he did so that the turntables were mounted on gyroscopic gimbals which kept them relatively steady and horizontal, so that records would play without skipping. “So, what you are telling me Noel, is that these turntables are not in fact swinging in a one hundred and eighty degree arc, but are actually staying relatively still?”

“Yes,” said Noel, confirming my worst fears. “Therefore,” I continued remorselessly, “it is this ship that is rolling around like a mad thing?” “Yes,” confirmed Noel.

The ship heaved, and so did I. There wasn't that much room or I could probably have claimed some kind of record. I do know, from what the others later told me, that I left the studio on all fours and eventually made it to my bunk where I passed a miserable night with a bucket.

Curiously, after that first night, I never became seasick again, and we had some hairy storms from time to time on Radio 270. Perhaps I was just lucky and found my 'sea legs' very quickly. In any case, 'mal de mer' never bothered me again.

I imagine that Noel must have half expected something like this to happen; after all he must have shown others through their first shift on the air. I know he was prepared for something to go wrong, because as I made my way ignominiously from the studio that night, I heard the opening bars of a very familiar old standby. Frank and the Count came to the rescue once again with the full four sides of “Sinatra at The Sands”.



Some of the 270 gang; Paul Burnett, David Sinclair, Roger Scott and  
Brendan Power

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

It was not until sometime later that I discovered why getting the gig on 270 was so smooth. Apparently, the last group of jocks had resigned almost en masse! This was following particularly bad weather and heartfelt concerns for their own safety following ominous creaking and snapping sounds. (The 150 foot broadcasting mast on a 139 foot long vessel might have had something to do with that). Couple this with the kind of waves that would have had Captain Ahab cowering in the bilges and it is easy to perceive their reluctance to hang around.

The Radio Essex format had been fairly eclectic, but on 270 I encountered something along the lines of a Top 40 format. At first, I found it intriguing, but after a month or so, I was thoroughly fed-up with it. I was grateful that the shift system was one week off and one week on, alternating with another crew. This made for a pleasant change from before, when it was usually 3 weeks on and 1 week off.

The on-air gang on my shift was an interesting bunch including Dennis 'The Menace' Straney, Mike Hayes, Roger Gomez, Roger Scott, and Paul Burnett – all of whom would go on to better things. I did not get to know them all as well as I might have done, for I was with 270 only a couple of months or so.

There was one embarrassing incident which I still recall with appropriate shame. I was doing the final show of the day called, 'The Midnight Hour' which was somewhat more laid back than the rest. Its opening theme was Nelson Riddle's fantastic arrangement of 'Route 66', hard-driving mid-tempo swing just perfect for late-night listening. Many of the local commercials were 'live' copy – to be read by the announcer during the show.

Everything was going fine until I started to read the copy for a local flower shop. Good spelling is not always at the top of a copywriter's abilities and I found myself talking enthusiastically about 'golden *bowel*-shaped flowers'. Hoots of derisive laughter could be heard coming from outside the studio and I have no doubt that there were stunned looks on faces all over Yorkshire.

I have never been allowed to forget that one by any old colleagues, and today I am a demon looking for spelling errors in any copy I'm given.

Two of the boat's crew remain in my memory. The first was the 'Mate' Nick, the second in command under the captain. Thorough, efficient and always interesting to chat with, I heard a number of tales of life as a fisherman. Then there was Gordon, rotund and cheerful and who somehow never remembered to put his teeth in. Communication with Gordon was always difficult.



A view from the bridge of the Ocean 7. Photo courtesy of Guy Hamilton.

**Ex-Essex colleague Roger Scott remembers joining 270 in much the same way – well almost:**

*“Leaving Radio Essex was easy, no emotional wrench as I remember and I am pretty sure the cheques payable to me were bouncing by then. I have forgotten any details of my last stretch aboard but then as ‘66 progressed, each of us were not to know whether or not we would return after being ashore. The possibility of 270 was what clinched it for me.*

*To Scarborough! You drove up to see Noel Miller and I came along in the hope that Radio Essex escapees would be chosen to fill the gap left by the guys who had just departed 270. They had quit because of the instability of the Ocean 7 and of the likelihood of drowning should another storm arise, but that did not deter me from wanting to climb aboard. It was an exciting prospect: the Radio London of the North some called it. On air perhaps it could have been, but they obviously weren’t thinking of the living conditions. I’ll bet Big L supplied non-sterilized milk to their superstars, as well as cabins.*

*We were lucky to see Noel when we did because had he not been suffering what seemed to be a form of delirium brought on by ‘flu, coupled with sea-sickness, he might have realised that I at least had little grasp on reality myself. 270 was real commercial radio (or aspired to be) but I didn’t get the concept of it requiring a certain big-shot mentality on air; on Essex we were talking to ourselves and each other a lot of the time - including while the mic was open.*

*There in bed was an ailing ‘Neddy’ Noel trying to interview these spinners of the Harry Putnam record collection and the best of Bert Kaempfert for key positions as Hit Parade heroes and he may have*



*taken the line of least resistance in order to get us out of his sick room, there to be spoon-fed by Carol at regular intervals thereafter”.*



Grabbing some fresh air on deck

**Another old friend and colleague, Guy Hamilton joined us a few weeks later:**

*“From Essex to 270 was simpler for me. I came ashore while you were also on leave from the fort to find another bouncing cheque from Bates, tuned in to 270 on my big aerial in Woodford and heard - YOU! Right, I thought, the bugger’s jumped ship - or rather, fort - so shall I...*

*I rang up 270 and got plugged straight through to Wilf Proudfoot himself. We talked for about an hour I think - I remember worrying about the phone bill - and I was then asked up to Scarborough.*

*‘Neddy’ Noel insists it was he who gave me the job, but Wilf more or less did it on the phone. A telegram arrived saying ‘ship leaves Tuesday. Report to Scarborough Harbour’.*

*So I went up, got a lift in the chicken farmer's car - yuk - and there was the ship actually in harbour. Nobody knew I was coming so I did sweet FA for a week, and then had a very dry and choppy Christmas”.*

I do remember one winter week where, instead of going back home down south to rest up and do the rounds of scrounging from the record companies, I succumbed to the idea put up by Mike Hayes, to spend the time in a flat that he or someone had rented in the resort town of Scarborough. This was a mistake. The flat was nice enough – being new, but bloody cold. No such thing as central heating at that time, just one, lonely 2-bar electric fire for the whole place. The sheets weren't actually damp, but not far off it, and nights of shivering were the norm.

Entertainment was conspicuous by its absence. A group of us did 'appear' at a local dance hall to moderate applause and recognition, but that was about it. In fairness, Scarborough was, and is, a summer resort and sadly, we were there at the wrong time of year.

One event of note did take place however that week. I was hanging around one morning in the office on shore, unshaven and dressed in worn-out jeans, scruffy runners and a moth-eaten roll-neck sweater topped with a rancid donkey-jacket, when Wilf bustled by and said, “Fancy a ride, I need some company?”

“OK”, I said, unsuspectingly. He neglected to mention that the 'ride' would be all the way to London. We were already on the main road when he mentioned our destination and it was too late to go back while I shaved, changed and made myself presentable.

We swapped stories on the journey and I learned that Wilf had been Tory MP for the constituency for a few years. I did not mention my Liberal Party membership, and so we continued in friendly chit-chat.

I'm sure he would have been a Thatcher supporter when she came upon the scene in the years ahead.

Wilf was fun to talk to and before long, we were in London. First stop was the then new Hilton Hotel where we met up with Radio Caroline's Ronan O'Rahilly. The conversation revolved around possible cooperation, strategies to push for legitimization of the pirates and so on.

Then, it was on to a meeting at Pye Records, where I was amused to hear Wilf expounding on how the grocery business was no different from the record business, and that 'tuppence off' a can of beans was the answer to all marketing problems.

Our final stop it appeared was to be the House of Commons. We breezed in, met up with Wilf's friend and fellow Radio 270 investor, band leader Cyril Stapleton, waved to Edward Heath (for some reason, dressed in a tail-coat and looking rather like a bandleader waiting for the nineteen thirties to come back) and proceeded to go out onto the Terrace where the three of us were served tea. While enjoying the novelty of the experience, (tea on the terrace of the House of Commons was considered quite an honour) I tried to keep what they call, a low profile, considering that I looked like something that the cat had dragged in.

The drive back to Scarborough was cheerful and uneventful and we arrived back in the early hours of the following morning, Wilf to his home, and I to that bloody cold flat.



More of the 270 gang; Vince Allen, Mike Hayes, Guy Hamilton and Hal Yorke

# CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

My shift schedule meant that I spent Christmas of 1966 at home, but I was already thinking that it would be sensible to move on from 270 – but where to?

By its nature, the Top 40 format does not offer much in the way of diversity. The music repetition going on throughout the day, catching the different clusters of demographic groupings including the important 18 – 34 bracket is essential from a marketing viewpoint, but not exactly soul-enriching for those who had to dish it out.

That's why it was always exciting to receive new batches of records each week to freshen up the playlist.

Our schedule as this time looked like this;

06.00 – 09.00 am	Paul Burnett or Mike Hayes
09.00 – 12.00 mdy	David Sinclair or Rusty Allen
12.00 – 02.00 pm	Roger Scott or Guy Hamilton
02.00 – 04.00 pm	Brendan Power or Hal Yorke
04.00 – 6.30 pm	Roger Scott or Guy Hamilton
06.30 – 07.00 pm	The World Tomorrow
07.00 – 09.00 pm	Paul Burnett or Mike Hayes
09.00 – 12.00 mdt	The Midnight Hour (David Sinclair or Rusty

Allen)

Looking back, the announcer scheduling seems a bit hard on Paul or Mike having to stay alert from 6 am and be equally so for another stint at 7 pm.

As mentioned, I did not much like the Top 40 format and my rather more extensive musical knowledge was not being utilized. The people were great, but life on the boat was cramped and uncomfortable, the water, and anything made with it, was horrible and to cap it all, dear old Wilf was grumbling at the fact that the jocks were only working one week out of every two and being paid for both – unlike his supermarket staff who were paid (I presume) what the minimum wage was at the time, and worked long hours every day and every week.

**Roger Scott recalls:**

*“We met with Wilf early on and we pitched up in his place a few times during our tenure and of course it was reassuring to know the low esteem in which he held “bloody disc jockeys”. I remember - was it in his living room? - posters of bullfighters. He was an enthusiast of Spanish holidays, I believe.*

*Much later, it was his requirement that we should spend shore leave selling air time that eventually ensured my departure in late February or early March '67 after about five months. I resigned by telegram.*

*The airtime selling idea I daresay came from Noel and the Menace, who knew Aussie radio, but of course after spending a couple of weeks in the studio at very animated gimballs and trying to sleep in the mess room, the last thing you needed was to go canvassing for station income - especially when you were paid £17 a week”.*

Roger must have been doing extra shifts for some reason, but his point was well taken. I was aware by now that Radio 390 had returned to the airwaves following the court case and subsequent appeal and while back south on my week off, I would listen to it at practically every opportunity.



A visit from a passing helicopter. Photo courtesy of Guy Hamilton.

**It was shortly before Christmas that Guy went out on the boat**

...

*"I'll never forget arriving at Scarborough Harbour. We drove down there at midnight from the 270 office in a director's beat-up old Merc, complete with cracked windscreen and dead chickens on the back seat. He was a chicken farmer when he wasn't a pirate backer, it seemed...*

*And there, in all her glory, was Ocean 7 itself, tied up just like the average lugger - except for the 150 feet of mast on top. If it wasn't yet Christmas Eve 1966, it was close to it. I'd had a mysterious telegram from MD Wilf Proudfoot earlier: 'Ship leaves tonight' so I'd felt kind of obliged to try and get on it. She'd had a refit after some excitement involving a North Sea storm, not for the first time, and being Britain's first portable radio station had sailed in after*

*closedown. Most stations had a tender coming out to the ship, but 270 was a ship that sometimes came in looking tender...*

*And here I was, and loving every minute of the adventure, a gullible 18 year old having learnt my trade on an intensive do-it-yourself course down south, on HM Fort Knock John, home of the much maligned, but oh-so-good-if-only-you-could-have-heard-it, Radio Essex.*

*This then was the real thing. Swinging sixties, swinging music, swinging ship, swinging mast ... This was going to be home, for a week at a time anyway. Nobody seemed to be expecting me, so I had a great run up to starting on the air, spent mostly asleep and eating for a few days. Then, on with the show!*

*Starting on the 'Midnight Hour' programme - great late smooch with flashing headlights along Bridlington Bay etc. - my shifts soon became 'Teatime and Lunchtime, it's music for munch time, with Wise Guy Hamilton'. That's what Mike Hayes' promo said - and who else could have written such unforgettable poetry? (Mine for the Mikey Mo Breakfast Show were much worse.)*

*I actually enjoyed the wintertime rough weather, as well as the summertime good stuff later. Walking down the studio corridor with one foot on the wall, holding half a mug of tea (never more than half - it slops over) was useful experience for sailing activities in later life. Ever since then, I've been quite content to be at 45 degrees, get food and eat it while others are chucking up - you get more as well, that way.*

*There was obviously a big audience. Later on in an ad agency I found the NOP audience survey showed over 4 million listeners to 270. Goodness knows why they didn't sell more ads. Most of them seemed to be for MD Proudfoot's supermarkets, where the doors*



*opened by themselves, which benefited famously from the constant promotion.*

*I pinched the catchy tune from BBC-TV's Tomorrow's World and started a ten minute 'Schools Special' at about 4 each afternoon. First possible mailbag, we had 50-odd letters and cards - it was a great feeling, knowing there were real people somewhere out there. And sure enough, coming ashore the following Tuesday, there they were, lining Bridlington quayside. Real fans! What would you do aged 18? Well, we went right ahead and did it. All.*

Shortly after the holiday season, Radio 390 had returned to the airwaves. From that point I started to wonder again what things were like on Radio 390, in my mind, the 'Daddy' of them all and with a format that could suit me perfectly.

I would soon find out .....

# CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The Red Sands Fort off the coast of Whitstable that housed Radio 390, already had a chequered pirate history before 390 itself came into existence.

It was as early as June 1964 that Radio Invicta appeared on the fort, operated by one Tom Pepper. It was what we used to call a, 'string and chewing gum' affair that tried several frequencies before settling on 306 metres with regular programming. Sadly, Tom Pepper and two of his employees were drowned during a terrific storm when their boat capsized.

It was not until March, 1965 that King Radio started broadcasting there on 236 metres. Earlier, two of the directors of Invicta, Charlie Evans and John Thompson, found other backers and a few weeks later launched a new station from the same war-time anti-aircraft fort off the coast of Kent. It was called King Radio.

Some of the Invicta presenters, including Bruce Holland, Eddie Jerold and John Ross-Barnard, stayed with the new venture, as did the fort administrator Ed Hinkins. They were joined by some new announcers including programme controller Mike Raven, late of Radio Atlanta, Roger Gomez (later on 270) and Jeff Tice.

## KING RADIO PROGRAMME SCHEDULE 1965 weekday schedule

7.00 am	Rise and Shine
8.00 am	Mike and Mandy Breakfast Show
9.00 am	Country Style
9.30 am	South of the Border
10.00 am	Mail Beat

11.00 am	Music from the Shows
11.30 am	Our Kinda Folk
12.00 mdy	Lunch Box
2.00 pm	Melody Hour
3.00 pm	Memory Lane
3.30 pm	Lucky Numbers
4.30 pm	Stateside '65
5.00 am	Up and Coming
6.00 am	Raven Around
7.00 am	Closedown

Sadly, King Radio would not survive for very long. In spite of improvements on a number of fronts, it was no more successful than its predecessor. The power of the transmitter was insufficient to garner enough listeners to attract advertisers and inevitably, the limited income it was able to generate led inexorably to insolvency. David Lye, a Folkestone businessman and one of the directors of King, felt he knew just the man to help sort things out and brought in Ted Allbeury, an acquaintance who lived in a Kentish village close by. Allbeury had been a wartime counter-intelligence officer, then in 'civvy street' he became a chicken farmer, advertising executive and most recently had become involved in public relations. His solution was to advise that the station should be transformed by a much bigger transmitter and a new name, yet still aim predominantly at the housewife audience.

Ted Allbeury turned out to be the right man for the job. A new company was formed, new money was attracted and most of the smaller of the Radio King directors were bought out. At the core of the new thrust though was the new powerful 10 kilowatt transmitter and the choice of the good clear frequency of 390 kilocycles. These

two factors enabled the station to be heard strongly across the whole south-east of England.

New and higher standards of professionalism were required of the announcers and the fort itself experienced a makeover that included better studio facilities and living conditions. It was all an immediate success. Radio King was no more - Radio 390 had arrived with a vengeance.

When 390 first started up I was still at Radio Essex, and got to hear the station on a fairly regular basis. The format was aiming squarely at the 'easy listening' market which was very wise. The younger demographics were being more than catered for by other stations including Caroline, London, City etc. Why compete in such a saturated market?

The fort-based easy-listening music station Radio 390 was a huge success but, broadcasting from a fixed site in the Thames, it was vulnerable when the law governing the territorial limit in marine estuaries was changed – or rather, fudged. There was a long drawn-out legal battle as the two sides argued over the exact point from where the three mile limit should be measured but ultimately, in what was a political battle, the pirates lost. In March 1967 the Post Office (which for some obscure reason was the government department that was responsible for licensing broadcasting) applied for an injunction to force the station to stop broadcasting. This was granted but Estuary Radio, the operating company, was given leave to appeal. That was very good news as the station stayed on the air.

The signal was excellent and covered most of the south-east of England, including London. The standard of presentation was first-class, but was restricted to 'this is, that was' type of announcing, in which nobody stood a chance to develop a personality. The only thing that appeared to be a little odd was the old-fashioned 'block' format, which looked rather like the Invicta one.

## Radio 390 Schedule early 1967

6.30 am	Bright & Early
7.00 am	The World Tomorrow
7.30 am	Morning Melody
9.00 am	Spotlight
9.15 am	The Marie Simone Hour
10.15 am	Masters of the Organ
10.30 am	Keyboard Cavalcade
11.00 am	L.P. Special
11.15 am	Doctor Paul
11.30 am	Music from the Shows
12.00 noon	Lunch Break
01.00 pm	From Me to You
02.00 pm	Playtime
02.15 pm	Melody Fair
03.15 pm	Stateside Special
03.30 pm	Intermezzo
04.00 pm	Memory Lane
04.30 pm	Tea Time Tunes
05.00 pm	Music Express
06.00 pm	The Scene at Six
06.30 pm	The World Tomorrow
07.00 pm	Country Style
07.30 pm	From Me to You
08.00 pm	Dinner at Eight
08.30 pm	Continental Cabaret
09.00 pm	Serenade
12.0 mdt	Close-down

In spite of this line-up which looked very BBC-ish and very old-fashioned to me, I realised what they were trying to do. They were not only competing with Auntie Beeb, but were going directly for the lucrative 'housewife' audience.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

I cannot now recall who it was who gave me the advice. It must have been someone on 270. Whoever it was, I owe them at least a pint of the best. The advice was, get an agent. An agent? Yes, it turns out that we pirate types had now become such an integral part of Britain's show-biz scene, that we were now fairly 'hot' commodities. Who knew?

While back in the London area on leave, I was given the name of a Canadian, Jeanne Griffiths, who had an office in Baker Street. I duly made an appointment and a day or two later toddled along to meet her (looking vainly for 221B on the way).

Jeanne heard me out as to past and current work and understood that my prime target was to get on to Radio 390. I signed with her and within a few minutes she had made an appointment for me with the Program Director, Peter James, at the station's office, 35A Bessborough Place. This was for the following day.

Peter turned out to be a pleasant fellow from New Zealand, offering refreshment and conversation rather than the usual Roy Bates style of job interview. I filled him in with my work on Radio Essex and on 270 and then learned something of the station's history, its philosophy and potential future plans, culminating in the magical phrase, "How would you feel about joining us?"

Resisting the urge to turn cartwheels and babble incoherently, I nodded agreeably and ventured to enquire gently about the compensation. They were offering 25 pounds a week and 'all found', which was quite good for the time. "That sounds fine", I said, "but I would be very happy if I could cover my agent's fee". This said with a

politely raised eyebrow. “Hmmm, I think we could manage that”, said Peter, and we shook hands.

I was delighted, particularly as I had only thought of getting my new agent’s fee covered as I was answering his invitation. I left the office walking on air.

It turned out that after 390 was fined in court and closed down in the previous year, it had appealed and eventually decided to go back on the air while the appeal was being considered. They had done so on New Year’s Eve. Ted Allbeury had not wanted to take that approach (perhaps he was ‘advised’ by his intelligence connections) and had recently left the board and moved to the American owned ship housing two stations, Radio England and Britain Radio.

Ted took over the Britain Radio one which was an ‘easy-listening’ outlet, while Radio England was Top 40. Initially, most of the announcers on the latter were from Georgia and came over with the ship. Not a particularly successful decision as British listeners took the piss out of their impenetrable accents and overly obvious pleas for advertising, which the jocks did, by finishing weather forecasts with the phrase, “For further details, see your favourite newspaper”. Needless to say, we on Radio Essex would riposte by saying at the end of our infrequent weather checks, “For further details, look out of your favourite window!”

Ted Allbeury did quite well with Britain Radio and after everything was over, made another successful career as a novelist in the cold war spy genre. I still have many of his books.

With Ted gone from the helm of 390, another director, David Lye took over and because some of the staff had elected to go with Ted, vacancies had appeared and I was the beneficiary. Once in, I let Roger Scott know to follow up with Jeanne Griffiths. He did, and shortly afterwards joined us.



Another thing that Peter James told me was quite surprising and gratifying. Some months earlier, he had been checking out what was happening on the other pirate stations – as we all did - and was listening to me on Radio Essex. He thought I would be a good addition and tried to make contact. Unfortunately, he did not know my real name and his efforts were of course, to prove fruitless. It is a great pity that cell phones and the internet had not been invented yet as a few discreet enquiries would have hunted me down.

I already knew that Radio 390 was based on the Red Sands towers off the coast of Whitstable in Kent. Notice I said 'towers' and not 'tower'. Radio Essex back on Knockjohn had been a Navy fort, whereas Red Sands was built for the Army and of a completely different design. There were six separate towers surrounding a central one making a total of seven. Each one stood on tall, slender concrete legs and had two floors. These towers were all connected by sturdy 'catwalks' and anti-aircraft guns had been placed on some and searchlights on one of them. Sadly, by the 1960s the guns and searchlights had gone. Each tower was two-storied and originally the lower floors were for work and the upper ones for army crew dormitories.

I had been instructed by Peter to go down to Whitstable and I would be met at the railway station and ferried out to the forts. I checked that there was a good train service, packed my bag and went to bed looking forward to the following day.

Sadly, the alarm clock refused to function and I awoke to find that there was no way I could ever make that train. "Shit and corruption", was my yelled epithet as I tried to figure a way out. From my previous enquiries I knew that the next scheduled train was a couple of hours away so, there was only one thing for it. No breakfast, straight into the car and like the proverbial bat out of hell, barrelled at

illegal speeds down the road to Whitstable. No easy thing to do in a Ford Anglia!

I'm not sure how, but I arrived before the train, largely because it had to stop at every station on the way. I was met by a pleasant older guy, dressed entirely in light khaki, including a ball cap – highly unusual headgear in those days. His name was Douggie and he and his wife Kay ran the local office from their home which was only a few minutes away from the harbour. Douggie was also the general factotum for the fort, undertaking various jobs including taking supplies and personnel out from the harbour. When he learned I had come by car, he did no more than raise an eyebrow and invited me to follow him to the office.

After a snack and helping to load Douggie's car with supplies, we then went down to the harbour where he showed me a good place to leave my vehicle, and then we proceeded to load the boat and shortly thereafter we set off for the forts. Fortunately, it was a fairly nice day as I recall and the journey seemed not to take very long, certainly much quicker than the trips from Southend to Radio Essex.

As we approached the massive structures I was recalling my first time getting on to Radio Essex, the mind-numbing jump from the boat to the rusty iron ladder, the rope coming down and the slow haul upwards. However, a surprise was in store. As the boat's engine slacked off, I looked up and coming down in sedate fashion was a large square platform, suspended from a thick steel cable and powered by an electric motor.

It settled a couple of inches above the boat's deck and I stepped on and was then immediately gently floating upward – heavenly choral music in my head as I went - until, reaching the level of the entrance to the tower, I stepped off and into my new gig. I was amazed, this was bloody luxury!



On the Whitstable quayside; Paul Beresford, David Sinclair, Jonathan Hall, Peter Berkeley and chef John Wells

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

During my introductory tour of the place, I learned that not all of the towers were in use. One was reserved for all the technical stuff, the 10 Kilowatt transmitter and so forth and the 297 foot aerial mast. Because of our location in the Thames Estuary, our signal, which was strong to start with, went straight up the river and into the heart of London and the 'home counties.' This was one of the main keys to the station's success, a reliable, sturdy sound that garnered us a potential audience of several million, including even the highly built-up areas of central London. I learned later that we could be reasonably heard as far north as Scarborough and as far west as Bristol.

Our technical staff numbered three, John 'Ray' Glendenning, Alan Cambridge and chief engineer, Lawrence Bean. It was usually one of these fine gentlemen who at 5.30 in the morning would wake up the duty announcer with a cup of tea. Truly, an excellent way to start off the day, especially as it could often be extremely windy and cold out on the catwalks crossing from one tower to another.

Another tower was the home of the broadcast centre, containing the main studio, production studio and the library. I was particularly impressed with the record library, hundreds of albums, alphabetically sorted within genre and lovingly looked after by our librarians, Ross Brown, Roger Scott (doubling as an announcer) and Peter Berkeley, son of the excellent actor Ballard Berkeley who played 'the Major' in 'Fawlty Towers'.

In the main studio I was fascinated by seeing the iconic identity sound of the station, in the form of a little xylophone and hammer. In between programs and at other suitable junctures, the announcer

would physically play the familiar 'bing, bang, bong' that was so much of the station's identity. I suspected that it was a 'New Zealand' thing that Peter James had brought over with him.

The production room was a very welcome sight. On Radio 270, we had to wait until closedown each day, before being able to record commercials or hear new records and now, that could be done anytime. We were also able to record programs for future transmission. I'm not sure now, but I think the kitchens and dining area was in yet another tower.

Finally, we came to the tower where we actually lived, when not on air or in the production studio. The dormitory was on the upper floor and the lounge area on the lower. Both were quite well appointed.



At table: Clockwise, David Sinclair, Roger Scott, Paul Beresford, Jonathan Hall, chef John Wells, Peter Berkeley, Graham Gill and Duggie

My first stint on air was to be that evening and this time there would be no interference from any other signal to cover problems. I knew

the style of presentation required and there were no 'butterflies' to worry about. The Serenade program ran from nine to midnight, and was divided into two halves. Jonathan Hall was doing the first part so I wandered over a few minutes early to meet him and get instruction on the controls which were fairly straightforward.

When Jonathan's last record finished, he opened the microphone and said, "That's all for the first part of Serenade and now I'll turn things over to our new announcer, David Sinclair". I followed on with, "Thank you Jonathan for the warm welcome and now let's listen to the Melachrino Strings.

With the microphone off, he turned to me and with a straight face said, "You've done this before, haven't you?" We both burst out laughing and then chatted for a while. He'd had no idea who I was as we hadn't met earlier and I suppose he'd expected a first-timer. I knew I was in a happy place.

Over time, all of the announcers would end up hosting all of the programs and naturally, some of us developed favourite ones. Swaps would be made to accommodate these specific interests.

The close-down each day was a simple affair. Just before midnight, whoever was on duty would simply pop in a cartridge which contained a sweet little message, followed by the national anthem. Then, I would hit a switch that took us off the air, and then finally trundle back to the dormitory tower. The exception to this procedure would be on those nights that messages needed to be sent to the office on shore. The transmitter would be left on and about an hour or so later, one of the duty engineers would read out a list of needed supplies and then switch off.

Unsurprisingly, some regular listeners either suffering from insomnia or on night shifts, eventually realized this and thoroughly enjoyed waiting up to hear of pleas for more toilet rolls, Vim and potatoes.

Normally, when the transmitter was switched off, the radio set at home, or wherever, goes totally dead. But, if the transmitter is still on, there is a hiss or buzz audible. It was probably those insomniacs or night workers that caught on first, but such is human nature that word quickly spread. In mitigation of such strange public behaviour, even TV closed down by shortly after midnight in those days and video games and the internet had not yet appeared on the scene.



The Engineer's hoist – and not a petard in sight

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

My new colleagues were the usual eclectic mix of diverse personalities and on average were a couple of years older than those I had worked with before. This did not mean however, that that rebellion and mischief-making was entirely absent. It tended to be cerebral than physical.

On examining the programming schedule, one could find ample opportunity for humour. Take for example, the mid-morning program, 'Masters of the Organ'. The opportunities for fun are manifold. There was the occasion when one of our happy band, who shall remain nameless, announced; ... "and now we hear Reginald Dixon playing with his mighty organ at Blackpool Tower ...." And on another occasion when yet another individual again remaining nameless, warbled; ... "We now turn to Fritz Wunderlich who demonstrates how to get the most from his magnificent Wurlitzer ..."

It may be that head office on shore missed those little gems but strangely, reprimands had been issued from the office some months before my arrival over something rather innocuous. The title of the afternoon program, 'Tea Time Tunes' itself demands to be 'sent up' by any announcer worth his salt. The title was horribly old fashioned and the music was the blandest stuff it was possible to find in the library. Therefore, it had become an obvious target.





### Discussing music selections with Jonathan Hall

I heard that announcers of the time had been adding to the mandated, 'this is – that was' routine with ad-libs such as; ... "as we turn to the Mantovani Orchestra, why not have another cream bun as they play ...". Or ... "as we listen to the Frank Chacksfield Orchestra, and their interpretation of Roses of Picardy, do pour another cup of tea ...".

Such piss-taking was severely frowned upon. By the time I arrived on the scene though, a bit more personality was allowed and I, along with the others endeavoured to add a bit more of both personality and information to the proceedings. Also, the overall schedule had changed just a little.

Then there was The Marie Simone Hour which was a bit of a joke. It was worth it though. Marie essentially sold horoscopes. During the show, in between music selections, she would give general daily horoscopes and invite listeners to write in for personal ones, no doubt for a suitable fee. Need I say that she did very well? We carried it of course because it was a paid program and a valued addition to station revenue.

Continental Cabaret, I found to be quite good. It had nothing to do with actual cabaret in fact, but simply a program showcasing European talent, within our general format. I became quite a fan of artists such as Gilbert Beaud, Kurt Edelhagen and a rising musician from Germany, Hans Last. He soon went the international route by changing his first name to James, cashing in on the James Bond phenomenon.

Polydor Records was relatively new to the British scene. Its LP catalogue was mostly German product, personified for us by Hans Last's Chorus and Orchestra Orlando which we had been playing and was getting good response. They then sent us Polydor's latest album release, Elizabethan Serenade by the Gunter Kallman Chorus which was an immediate success on the air and made 'album of the week'. It was all in German. Polydor were delighted. They sold a shedload of albums.

The worst program we carried was the appalling, 'The World Tomorrow'. This abomination consisted of American religious rubbish in the disguise of a diatribe on current events by one Garner Ted Armstrong, who apparently recorded it daily 'off the cuff' in New York. Needless to say, the whole half hour was frequently interspersed with requests for 'donations', no doubt followed up at regular intervals with begging letters requesting more. How we all hated the bloody thing – and it ran twice a day!

I am delighted to report that a while later, Garner Ted was fired by his father Herbert after Ted's naughty goings-on were revealed. Justification for running it of course was that they paid very good money for us to carry the program. I'd like to think that if we had gone on, other more legitimate revenues would have enabled us to drop the dreadful shite!

One of the best programs for most of us to work on was Serenade, and it didn't matter which half we did. Running from 9 to midnight,

the idea was for relaxing music to wind down with or perhaps to provide suitable background for more strenuous activities. Either way, for the announcer it was a very relaxing time, accompanied by a welcome beer ration and idle chit-chat. Nobody was ever the worse for wear. The free beer rations were never abused.

I am convinced to this day that if we had continued on past the dreaded Marine Offences Act of 1967, we could have developed a really first-class and exciting Easy-Listening station like CFRB or CKFM in Toronto.

Among my new colleagues were the afore-mentioned Jonathan Hall, an amusing and knowledgeable guy, Australians Ross Brown and Graham Gill, New Zealander Lee Gilbert, a quiet fellow who was a gifted composer under his own name, and Paul Beresford, who rose to fame after being struck by lightning on the fort and survived to tell the tale. He was also the longest-serving announcer, having joined in the days of Radio Invicta.

The shifts were fairly loose, and there was some cross pollination, so later I would be able to meet and work with Jack McLaughlin, Christopher Clark and Edward Cole.



Three men in a boat. Heading for shore leave with Peter Berkeley and Jonathan Hall

Edward was an interesting guy. Trained as a lawyer, he also had an excellent memory and a keen interest in vintage music. Consequently, I learned a great deal from him. As our shifts only coincided irregularly, I made a deal with him that we would both do the Memory Lane program – he during his shift, me during mine.

I did manage an innovation while with 390. I got the go-ahead to present a Swing Session program on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, prime time for radio in those days. There were still some good big jazz and swing bands around and by mixing in the vintage material of Goodman, Basie et al, we had a quite popular program on our hands.

Edward Cole managed to get the elderly pre-war bandleader Lew Stone into doing a program with him for Memory Lane and from what I later heard, sales of vintage material such as that, now available on LPs was pouring off the shelves.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

With the paid programs such as *The World Tomorrow* and *The Marie Simone Hour*, along with a fair selection of regular commercials, Radio 390 was doing fine. It was on our station that 'Mother's Pride' made its pirate radio advertising debut with a series of amusing sixty-second vignettes promoting the product as the best thing since sliced bread – which is precisely what it was.

Kellogg's was there with their happy jingle, "Good morning, with Kellogg's", but the one I (and no doubt my fellow announcers) remember most was the ad for Sylexine Emulsion, a brand of paint which, as the commercials seemed to run every ten minutes, must have been flying off of shelves all day and every day, condemning a generation of British hubbies to a life sentence of DIY.

There were also quite a number of 'direct sell' ads for things such as make-up, nylons – yes they were still being worn at that time, and diaries, transistor radios, clocks and all sorts of stuff. They were very successful. We also had what I think must be the first ads for computerized dating.

As the weather improved with spring and early summer, weekends became particularly entertaining with the arrival of visitors. Small boats would circle the forts and requests shouted up which we did our best to fulfil. Some visits that were officially sanctioned were invited up for a tour of the place. Young ladies were always welcome. There was nothing quite like a sunny Sunday afternoon, relaxing on deck and listening to the BBC's hot comedy, 'Round the Horne'

An unexpected visitor was a submarine. It just sort of popped up one morning and parked about a hundred or so yards away. There was no insignia or even any numbers anywhere, just this large black

presence, looming. Was it the Soviets getting ready to invade? Or as one wag insisted, was it a forgotten U-Boat, wanting to have one last shot. All was well however, as it turned out to be a new Canadian sub undergoing trials in the Estuary and once our technical chaps had made contact, we received many song requests.

Another interesting event took place in May when eagle-eyed Edward Cole spotted the yacht Gipsy Moth coming up the Thames Estuary. Francis Chichester was completing his epic journey around the world and we announced on air that he was coming by. For the next few hours, programming was interrupted by 'play-by-play' inserts as we followed his progress towards the coast. Within a week or so, he deservedly became Sir Francis Chichester.

Sunny days with off-duty time spent sunbathing, reading and waving cheerily at passing boats with girls on board made time pass very pleasantly. And, we were very well fed. When I first arrived on 390 I found that there was an excellent chef, genuinely stolen from one of London's fine restaurants. He would spend the time between lunch and dinner baking superb pies for deserts and snacks. It was such a contrast to those days back on Radio Essex with Spam fritters, or on Radio 270 when your meal was in danger of landing on top of you in your bed.

Unfortunately, one day our excellent chef burned his hand and had to be transported to hospital. His replacement was very good and even tried to be innovative. One day, he suggested that we might like to have curry for dinner. There was a short silence, followed by a chorus of muttered "no thanks". We could see each other's minds working. "That's that foreign, very hot stuff isn't it?" We all agreed that the traditional British 'meat and two veg' would be perfectly fine. In matters such as our food, adventurous, we were not.

This 'summer of deep content' was a milestone in the lives of all of us on board. Enjoyable work, pleasant conditions, good grub, fresh

air, all helped to mask the political clouds that were gathering over the horizon. Those clouds originated in the House of Commons where the Labour government was determinedly pushing through the third reading of their highly unpopular bill, the Marine Offences Act (1967). As they had a majority, the outcome was entirely predictable.

Radio 390 had been fighting government forces almost since its inception in 1965. As already mentioned it had been fined at a magistrate's court in Kent and closed down for a while.

The station was such a success that during 1966 the management made plans for a northern sister station. They also hoped to add an FM outlet in the south. A two-station rate card and trade press advertisements were published. It was intended that the northern station would be based on a ship, but sadly that never happened.

At that time UK territorial waters extended three miles out around the coast. Despite being over three miles from land, Radio 390's Red Sands Fort was only one and a half miles from an 'occasional' sandbank called Middle Sands. Because this Middle Sands was inside UK waters, the prosecution argued the three miles had to be measured from it, rather than from the coastline. This conveniently made Red Sands inside British waters and therefore inside the court's jurisdiction.

The 390 board, led by David Lye since Ted Allbeury had departed for Britain Radio, were a tough minded bunch. During the time they were closed down, they had commissioned a marine survey to press the point that they were outside Britain's three mile limit. This showed that Middle Sands was normally under water and therefore, it was argued, could not be used as a base for measuring the three mile limit, thus making Red Sands outside territorial waters.

As a consequence, on New Year's Eve 1966, just before midnight, Radio 390 had returned to the air and with a cheeky grin, did so with

Frank Sinatra's 'Second Time Around'.



The Radio 390 main broadcasting studio. (Note the xylophone, lower right)

**As Jon Myer recalls;**

*The government, personified by The Post Office, then responsible for policing Britain's airwaves, was not prepared to let the matter rest. On 17<sup>th</sup> February 1967, Radio 390 was back in court. The prosecution displayed a photograph of a man, one Lieutenant Commander John Mackay, standing on the disputed Middle Sands, holding a flag and obviously above sea-level. (One cannot help but wonder how long the sandbank actually remained above the water). 390 was again found guilty and fined another £200. However the station stayed on the air and lodged an appeal. In March the Post Office sought an injunction to force Radio 390 to stop broadcasting. This was granted in May but the station was given permission to appeal and, in the meantime, it kept going.*

All of this legal jockeying was great for the listeners and of course, for us. We hoped that battle would continue on indefinitely, but such hopes were unrealistic. The government was determined to get its



way. We knew by this time that the Marine Offences Bill had passed and the cunning method by which they meant to sink us all.

You see, if they had just made it illegal to broadcast from the ships and forts, a number of us, me included, would have simply said, 'Screw You', and carried on by moving head offices abroad and personnel relocating to say, Netherlands or Belgium and travelling to and from work without landing in the UK. As you know, we all had false on-air names anyway.

The cunning part of the Bill though, was that it was to be made illegal for British companies to advertise on off-shore stations, which cut off the revenue source. Some of the ship-based pirates did actually bypass that and attempted to deal with foreign branches of British companies or foreign companies with outlets in Britain for advertising, but it was a difficult business.

In the case of 390 however, the Bill was somewhat academic. It was due to become law on August 14<sup>th</sup>, but in the meantime, other events interceded.

The appeal was heard on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1967. Unsurprisingly, and almost certainly due to political pressure, the station lost.

### **Jon Myer puts it very simply;**

*That evening at 5pm, colleague Graham Gill read a news bulletin. At the time the result of the court case had not reached the fort so was not reported. A pre-recorded edition of the station's only pop programme, On the Scene, presented by Christopher Clark, then began. Meanwhile a tender arrived bearing the bad news. After just one record the show was interrupted by senior announcer, Edward Cole who revealed the court's verdict. At 5.10pm Radio 390 closed down for the final time.*

The announcers on Red Sands had known that the end might be looming and had been working on a closedown programme. But when instructions arrived from the office on land, they were told to close the station immediately. There was to be no time for a formal final show.

So the announcement was made, engineer Laurence Bean switched off the transmitter and he and the broadcasting team got on the tender home. The tapes for the incomplete final show were left behind, abandoned, on the fort. However they were discovered some time later and copies circulated among fans of offshore radio.

# CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

**We asked Roger Scott for his memories of Radio 390's last day.**

*One of the thoughts that I had in my mind on 28 July was that, as a listener, as well as a jock, I would be deprived of 390's type of music. Never, to this day, has any UK radio station seen fit to format quality commercially recorded 'standards' and traditional easy-listening music, so the closing of 390 was particularly tragic in radio terms.*

*Ironically, in the early twenty-first century, it is young people who are discovering and enjoying that brand of output - on bar and pub music systems. No radio programmers are going to notice though! Radio 2's idea of Easy Listening, right from the day that they were supposed to be a substitute for the stations broadcasting from the seas, has always been dodgy (largely the easier listening pop and rock of the day).*

*The description of myself as a jock is, in the context of Radio 390, exclusively shorthand. Although the worst excesses of camp and treacly presentation were finished by the time I reached Red Sands and we were allowed to actually mention our names on air (only at the start and end of programmes, mind!) we were announcers and presenters and even I had to hold the waffle. Lee Gilbert had the most polished and sublime 'that-was-this-is' act going.*

*Departing the fort, I was leaving behind not just the enjoyment of live broadcasting on such a sexy, beautifully received frequency at the lower end of the medium wave band (773 kHz - although in those days I think we might still have been on kilocycles not kilohertz). I was also, with Ross Brown and Peter Barclay, a librarian. Being responsible for building programmes, we were, of course, more accurately, producers.*

*Apart from the sadness of the occasion, it was the fort itself that was about to become a sorrowful place, a shell returning to the echoes of the sea and of the towers' own history; its part in man's inhumanity to man and then in man's desire to bring a little harmless recreation and friendship to millions of others.*

*As for the unaired final programme ... we were all aware of our place in history but my prediction of personal history about to unfold was wide of the mark. I never did follow David Sinclair to Canada."*

Off the coast of Yorkshire, Radio 270 called it a day at midnight on August 14<sup>th</sup>. The original intention was that all the DJ team should be on board for the final show. Unfortunately rough weather prevented the tender getting out there, so the broadcasters who were stuck on land recorded some farewell messages. Deputy Programme Director Mike Hayes called up a friend in the RAF and persuaded him to drop the tapes onto the ship from a helicopter. Because this was strictly against the rules, a note was included in the package insisting that no mention should be made of it on air. Great plan - in theory! Except that the parcel missed the deck and ended up in the sea. So no one got the tapes and nobody could read the message. The DJs did not know they were not supposed to acknowledge the helicopter pilot who they thought had just flown by to wave goodbye. So they thanked him on air. This did not go down well back at base and questions were even asked in Parliament.

Because the tapes had ended up in the sea, the station's final hour was rather lacking in content. The last day's output also suffered from technical problems after some jellyfish were sucked into the generator's water cooling system. Although probably not one of Radio 270's finest programmes, it was an emotional farewell. Vince 'Rusty' Allen closed 270 down for the final time just before midnight.

These events were not unexpected. We had hoped that our own situation at 390 could be prolonged by further court appeals but

Harold Wilson and his miserable band of fuckwits in the House of Commons were determined to bring us all down.

They were hoping to placate the public by convincing the BBC to hold its collective nose and lurch nervously into the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by 'modernising' its radio services. Television was another matter. The dear old 'beeb' had been competing quite successfully with the commercial stations since 1955 and for any viewer with an I.Q. greater than their shoe size in the mid-sixties, the BBC were winning.

So, a date was set when a new and exciting, relevant and 'cool' BBC radio service would be launched upon the land. 30 September 1967, BBC Radio 1 is launched, as a response to the pirate radio station broadcasts of popular music. At the same time, the Light Programme, the Third Programme, and the Home Service are renamed Radios 2, 3 and 4 respectively.

We all tuned in of course, not quite trembling with excitement, but curious to hear what they had done. As it turned out, not much! Trying to get any monolithic corporate entity, whether private or public, to make major changes at short notice is rather like trying to empty a swimming pool with a spoon. In any case, it was all a bit of a joke.

Programming remained much the same, except that Radio 1 had imported a few ex-pirates who sounded rather uncomfortable in their new home and on Radio 2, nothing had changed at all except for new, trendy names for the same old programs themselves. That does not say much for imaginative, intelligent and meaningful innovation.

In addition, for some inexplicable reason, the government had also interpreted the public's desire for alternative radio as meaning *more* radio but in accordance with their daft ideology, felt that it must mean

expanding current services with BBC local regional stations pumping out the national material with maybe a couple of hours per day of 'local' content. They started out on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November with BBC Radio Leicester. We should be grateful that it was only regional and not *really* local. Visions of BBC Village Radio in 'Much Piddling in the Mire', danced in my head.

In common with most of my colleagues I had been wondering what to do next. Over the previous couple of months there had been much discussion of the subject. We knew that we were unlikely to be head-hunted by the BBC as we were associated with the 390 format. Most, it appeared wanted to stay in broadcasting, but the question was, where?

Right after our closedown, I signed on at the Labour Exchange figuring that as the bastards had deliberately put me out of a job, they could bloody well keep me until I got settled. I popped in to the BBC just to see if anything might be in the wind, went along to the Forces Broadcasting people to see if there was anything there (they make you an honorary Captain if you join them), but the market was somewhat flooded with ex-pirates. I even went to a recruitment session for a proposed 'Radio Andorra' but the project folded before it had begun.

I had never personally met 390's previous chairman Ted Allbeury, but I called him anyway to see if he might be planning something. We arranged to meet in the lobby of a London Hotel and I duly turned up at the appointed time but couldn't see him anywhere. I hung around for a bit and then suddenly spotted his profile over in a darkish corner. I went over, and we had a good chat but there was nothing in the wind. The hotel meeting all seemed a bit James Bond-ish, but after all, Ted had been in Military Intelligence during the war, so I suppose old habits die hard.

Along with two other colleagues, Roger Scott and Christopher Clark, I dropped in to New Zealand House. I had worked with Peter James and Lee Gilbert on 390, Kiwis both, and nice guys. The folks there too were very nice, but prospects at that time were not very bright. So, we left, sheepishly ...

I had thought about working overseas, as had the others. The difficulty was to find somewhere with the same language, similar way of life and not too far away. The Isle of Man came to mind. Ideal in some ways, as they had a commercial radio station, but everybody and their dog had thought of that, so no dice. South Africa I crossed off, having memories of 1960's Sharpville shootings on TV. The sight of police in uniforms similar to ours, except for jackboots and whips, killing unarmed Africans, disgusted me. The U.S. was equally unappealing as they seemed to spend most of their time in assassinating one another and starting unnecessary wars. Australia had a nice climate but was very far away.

In the end, it was clear that a trip to Trafalgar Square and the enormous Canada House was in order. I went up there and spoke to some very nice people, was given some forms, some books and newspapers and returned home to read up on things. I learned that they had a federal system of government, full health care, spoke English (mostly) and were welcoming to immigrants. Naturally, I also gathered lots of information on broadcasting there, finding out that they had an excellent national service, the CBC and tons of local and regional commercial stations across the country. Perfect.

After some nervous consideration, I filled in the forms and sent them off. Shortly afterwards I was called back for a medical examination, no doubt to be sure I was of sound mind and body and unlikely I imagine, to be a drain upon the public purse.

On the morning of October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1967 I boarded a plane bound for Toronto, and a new life. The previous couple of years had given me

a wealth of experience in a profession I thoroughly enjoyed and a determination to make the most of it. And, I did just that.



# EPILOGUE

It was not until 1973 that licensed commercial radio stations appeared on the scene in Britain. Since the pirates had been scuttled by the Labour Government under Harold Wilson, the public were left with the BBC's inadequate efforts to fill the gap. However, even following a change of Government, it took those few years before the situation changed.

Since those days, technology has changed everything. Most stations are broadcasting on the FM band and are also accessible online in various ways. Along with the multiple choices for the listener though, it would seem that there is little diversity in ownership. Everything is 'corporate' now and the days of the independence of the swashbuckling entrepreneur have been consigned to the dustbin of history – which is all rather a shame.

However, all was not lost. I am now able to report that Roy Bates did in fact, move to the 'Roughs Tower' which was definitely outside British territorial waters and establish there his independent country, the Principality of Sealand. It has been acknowledged by the UK and most other European countries, and now, fifty years later is benevolently ruled by his son, Prince Michael. How's that for a happy ending?

# AFTERWORD

I first started work on Making Waves about twenty five years ago and then other things intervened and it was put aside. A few months ago, relations of mine started showing the embryonic manuscript to a few people who expressed the view that I should finish it.

What finally decided me to get going again after much prodding was that one of the readers was a BBC guy. If *he* wanted more, who was I to argue?

I would like to acknowledge the help of a number of people who were kind enough to contribute to this memoir through its lengthy gestation.

Margaret MacPherson, Regional Writer-in-Residence 2014 at my local library, who helped me bash the manuscript into shape and give me encouragement to soldier on.

My old friends and colleagues; Dick Palmer, Roger Scott and Guy Hamilton; These guys added their reminiscences and helped to fill in a number of gaps and reminded me about things that I had almost forgotten. Guy also kindly provided some of his photographs. Any remaining errors are mine.

I'd also like to thank Jon Myer and his magnificent website, 'The Pirate Radio Hall of Fame'. If you would like to know more about the amazing British offshore pirate radio scene of the nineteen sixties, you can do no better. Just get out your trusty Google and go for it.

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January, 2015