

# BOREALIS AUSTRALIS

For well over ninety-five percent of the people living in Canada, isolation is just a word. We sit huddled next to the U.S. border with our communications networks of roads, railways and telecommunications. Yet there is a vast land which stretches north, almost to the Pole; a vital part of our growing country, that most of us never see or understand. A land which depends almost wholly upon aircraft and telecommunications as a lifeline to the rest of the country. Over forty years ago, I had my opportunity to see, first hand, what those communications can mean.

Passing through a broken cloud layer, the aircraft touched down on the hard ice of the bay on the Labrador coast, close to a very small village. The single engine Beaver revved up its engine and then died. Now that we were safely down, I opened my eyes and peered out the window. Straight out of the ice covered bay the cliffs rose 700 meters to craggy peaks capped with ice and snow. Just to right, hugging the cliffs as if searching for warmth, was the village itself. Painted radio towers, dwarfed by the cliffs beyond, were set slightly to the east of the village. Not one tree in sight. "I wonder what the huskies do", I asked myself.

Just then I spotted a figure running from the village. The figure quickly became a man carrying a suitcase, dressed in a parka. He jumped up the ladder and scrambled into a seat. "Get me the .... out of here!" he shouted to the pilot. "Welcome to the Great White North," I muttered to myself.

I had been hired by the Federal Government as a radio operator a few months before and after the usual training in weather observations and circuit discipline, I was assigned to this "outpost" on the coast of Labrador. The station was comprised of a bunkhouse, a cook house, a radio shack and a diesel hut with two recently installed 25 kW diesels. The village itself consisted of some 25 or thirty buildings including a church, school, RCMP

office, Department of Northern Labrador store, private dwellings and the original church built in 1750 which was being used as a storehouse.

The radio station had two operators and a cook during the winter months as well as a local handyman.. There was no running water and the toilet was a "honey bucket" which the junior operator ended up having to empty! The station was operated as a ship/shore facility from the first of June until the first of December. During the off season we were reduced to sending and receiving commercial traffic for Canadian National Telegraph on twice a day schedule as well as making weather observations every three hours. This traffic was sent to Goose Bay via a High Frequency radio circuit. Except for an aircraft every six weeks, weather permitting, we were conveniently forgotten by the rest of the world.

The end of January saw a great white sheet of ice stretching outward from the coast for nearly 150 kilometers blocking the passage of any shipping. The Canadian icebreakers stuck to the coast of Newfoundland, the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Nova Scotia during the winter. They knew better than to test their strength against ice that had slipped from the Greenland Icecap. Even the remnants of that ice had sent many "unsinkable" ships, including the TITANIC, to a watery grave.

It was a bitterly cold, clear night with the wind straight off the pole, making drifts a couple of meters high. The aurora borealis, the beautiful Northern Lights, were playing a symphony in soft blues and greens directly overhead, and radio conditions, in the vernacular, were the "pits". My last weather message for Goose Bay was lying, unsent, on the counter in front of me. I stared at the accumulation of the other undelivered weather and commercial traffic sharing the counter-top. They stared right back, accusing memos of a job left undone. Those symphonies of colour,

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playing in the winter sky, were the result of the worst magnetic storms that “Ole Sol” had thrown our way since the advent of radio. My calls every three hours to Goose Bay had gone unanswered for the last eight schedules.

The wind was howling around the building and even though it wasn't that warm inside, it was a lot warmer than trying to get back to the bunkhouse. Hoping to hear a few friendly sounds, I decided to try to tune the receiver on the AM broadcast band. Normally, broadcast reception at night was excellent from both Europe and North America, but the “blackout” was affecting even the BC band. The only station I could hear was Julianehab in Greenland speaking Inuit with a Danish accent. So much for the world on the Broadcast Band.. I turned on another receiver and tuned to the Morse Code International Distress frequency, 500 kilohertz. The nights are indeed long, when all you have for company is the “dits” and “dahs” of distant stations.

The frequency was quiet. My eyes skipped to the clock on the operating consol. It was 15 minutes and some seconds after the hour. “The International Silence period,” I thought. (It's a three minute period twice an hour at 15-18 and 45 and 48 minutes after the hour, giving ships in a distress situations a chance to be heard). I was just reaching to turn off the receiver and wind my way through the two meter snow drifts to the bunkhouse, when weakly, but clearly I heard the Morse characters didididahdahdididit, didididahdahdididit, didididahdahdididit, SOS, SOS, SOS, the International Distress signal!

Instantly, warm bunkhouse forgotten, I was listening very intently. My pencil began following the flow of Morse characters transcribing them into English. “From Liberian tanker AIRESQUIP/5LQQ position Latitude 43.07 South Longitude 33.03 East. Struck by giant wave. Sinking in 40 foot waves. Boilers out, no power. 36 crew, require immediate aid.”

Nothing more was heard. Silence continued for another few ticks of the clock, then a strong signal from Cape Cod, Mass. began calling with a traffic list, obviously unaware of the call for help. I looked at the message again. Had I been imagining things? 43.07S 33.03E. Surely I had copied that incorrectly. I had no world map at the station, but if memory served, that would be somewhere in the eastern South Atlantic or even the Indian Ocean off South Africa. The old RCA AR88LF I was using wasn't on the TITANIC, but it was designed around 1935, and heavens only knows

where it had been in the interim! With dozens of coast facilities hundreds and even thousands of kilometers closer, someone else must have heard that Distress call. But if so, why was it “business as usual” on the frequency? I sat as if petrified, straining to hear anything further. Nothing. Absolutely nothing! Halifax called with a traffic list, and then a weak station in Venezuela was heard calling a ship. Was I the only station that had heard the call?

I was in a quandary. The high powered transmitter for my station had developed trouble, almost as soon as the technician, who had installed it, had left for warmer climes. The outage had been reported to Regional Office in Montreal. The Department was undergoing a cyclic economic “freeze”, so the cost of sending in a technician was out of the question. The reply that came back was along those lines and ended “and anyway you won't need it until June.” Even though officially, my station was not on watch, it was my duty to report this information immediately so that Search and Rescue could be notified. My options were extremely limited however. First I could call Goose Bay on the High Frequency weather circuit, with little hope of success, as the operator would not be listening for me until the next schedule in two and a half hours. Even if he were listening on the frequency, I had had no success for the past five schedules because of the magnetic storm. Second, the “back-up” transmitter for the Distress frequency. I giggled! If the receiver was considered old by the “modern” standards, then the Marconi LTT-4 could only be considered ancient. On a good day it might have generated 100 watts input with a pair of 210s. But it was the only hope I had of passing on the information to S&R. Somehow I had to trust to luck and call Belle Isle or maybe Ocean Station Delta which maintained listening watch on 500 kHz all year around. I reached over and turned on the power switch. No cloud of blue smoke! I waited for a few moments allowing the vacuum tubes to warm up and then tentatively, I tuned the transmitter and tapped out a call to Ocean Station Delta, call-sign 4YD.

“Cheepcheepcheepcheepchaw Chawcheechawchaw Chawcheecheep” (what a chirp that transmitter had!) No reply. I then called Belle Isle, VCM. No reply. Well, I didn't expect one did I? Suddenly the speaker piped in Morse “SOS VOH (my call-sign) de 5LQQ” The station in distress was calling me!

“SOS 5LQQ de VOH k”, my station replied. “Thank you VOH,” ARIESQUIP replied. “Would you please relay to Search and Rescue the following.....”

and he repeated the original distress message. My Morse key stuttered “R R R AS” (Roger, standby). If I was in a quandary before, panic was setting in now! Neither Delta nor Belle Isle had answered my call and no one else had confirmed receipt of the distress message. The officers and crew of the ARIESQUIP had little chance for any length of time in open boats with those high seas. How was I going to get the information to S&R? The American Pole-Vault relay site for the DEW line was located about 3 miles away but it was over 2000 feet straight up! We had no communications with the site as the commander of the base and the last officer-in-charge of our station had been on the “outs”. I could try and make the trip, but it would take a couple of hours in the daylight. This was the dead of night, through snow drifts two meters high and the temperature/wind combining to give a chill factor of minus 40 or either scale! This coupled with the fact that no one was expecting me, and they had automatic weapons at each of the doors. My mother didn’t bring up a complete idiot! “Thirty six men on a sinking ship,” my mind misquoted “Ho, ho, ho and a bottle of rum!” Cut it out, boy, THINK!

The frequency was completely quiet, but who would hear me if I did call? Was it just possible, I asked myself, that some coast station in the area of the ship might hear me? After all, the ship and I had exchanged communications. I called Belle Isle again with one hand while the other was searching through the International List of Coast Stations, which lists all the Marine coast stations in the world. Still no reply from VCM. No map and only a vague memory of some island or islands south and east of Cape of Good Hope. Were they French or South African? My glance fell to an unfinished letter to a girlfriend of mine. A girl’s name, something clicked. Alice?, Bertha? Deborah? Freda? Helena? No St. Helena is in the mid-Atlantic!. Jeanne? Mary? No but that’s closer Marie? Maria? Miriam? No but maybe.....I flipped the pages of ILOfCS under the Union of South Africa. There it was, Marion Island, call-sign ZSM! As poor as the chances were of my getting through to S&R, the chances of the crew of that ship if I didn’t, were much worse. The Southern Ocean with its Roaring Forties is unforgiving to anyone or anything that falls into its clutches.

“ZSM de VOH” I sent slowly on the Morse key. My weak signal was scattered to the four winds of the ether via the ice covered vertical antenna stretching up 40 meters above the radio shack. Loud and clear came the reply “VOH de ZSM QSA 5 QRK3 k” I was com-

pletely dumbfounded Marion Island had copied my signal and answered me. “Marion Island”, I replied, “the following message received from the ARIESQUIP/5LQQ.....” and relayed the distress message. “Roger VOH, your message received.” HURRAH! (I silently promised to clear out the mouse’s nest and cobwebs I knew must be in that transmitter!) “VOH de 5LQQ” sounded the speaker. “We are unable to copy Marion Island, but understand they have the message. We are closing down and taking to the lifeboats. Thanks to you all and God bless. 5LQQ OUT” I confirmed the receipt to ARIESQUIP and relayed it to Marion. “VOH de ZSM,” Marion replied, “for your information help has been dispatched. Many thanks for the relay.” I called 5LQQ with the welcome news but there was no reply.

Was there anything further that I could do? I had typed all the pertinent information into the station radio log, so I continued to listen on the frequency. The normal operation of the closer stations was continuing. They had, apparently, heard nothing. About 15 minutes later I heard ZSM calling the ARIESQUIP, but no reply from the ship. A few seconds later Marion once again, but this time barely perceptible. A very loud US East Coast station drowned out any further communications. I said a short heartfelt prayer for the crew. Now that the excitement was over I noticed that the temperature in the radio shack was on a par with a Norwegian hell.

That warm bunkhouse was beckoning and I had done what I could. I reached over and switched off the ancient transmitter, giving it a friendly pat. The green pilot light blinked a couple of times, almost as if it too was content, and went out.

Was the whole thing a hoax? There were definitely two other stations involved, not just because of the strengths of the signals, but because of the signal tones. Pretty elaborate, and although I had heard some pretty good stories and had taken part in a couple of them myself, this time it wasn’t likely.

Two days later, when blackout conditions had lifted allowing contact with Goose Bay again, I reported the incident to Montreal. I received a message from Region a couple of days later, that, not to subtly, suggested that I had been on the Coast for far too long (just over a month?!), with the attendant loss of mental capabilities.

Since no one else had heard a sound (remember all the coast stations north of Belle Isle were closed for

the winter) no one could have confirmed the incident. Officially, that was the last I heard about it. Unofficially, I was classified, more colloquially, by the operators in Goose as being “bushed”. Let them think what they would, I knew that it had happened Oh well, Sic Gloria transit mundi! Carpe diem! Ich dien!

There was no mention of the sinking of any ship in the newscasts when radio conditions resolved themselves, and since mail drops came only every six weeks, weather permitting, I never subscribed to any newspapers or periodicals. I left the bleak coast of Labrador to the Inuit some months later and was posted, to another isolated station in north central Quebec. The coast station that signed VOH was closed in the late sixties as better methods of communications developed. The station radio logs are long gone, as are most of the people who would have remember anything about the episode. I wondered from time to time over the years what had happened to those thirty-six men in the open boats after my part in the rescue was finished.

My graveyard shifts on the commercial radio circuits ceased three decades ago. Now my only radio operation is on the Amateur bands. Some fifteen years ago I made a general call on the twenty meter band and was contacted by a station in the southern United States. After the usual exchange of pleasantries, we discovered that we both had been commercial radio operators. I mentioned that I had been a ship-board operator and later a coast station operator in Labrador and Quebec in the late fifties and early sixties. “Did you operate VOH?” he inquired? I replied in the affirmative and told him the approximate dates. “Do you remember a distress incident in late January of that year involving the ARIESQUIP?” He had been the operator on the doomed ship so many years before! He had heard my chirpy signal calling VCM and was even more surprised than I had been when I replied. He thought he had copied the call incorrectly and that I was a station in India or Australia.

During the conversation I discovered that all but two of the 36 of the crew survived. Everyone had broken bones, bruises and many with serious cuts from broken glass when the 30 meter wave broke over them. One of the officers died of complications in a life boat and one of the crew was washed overboard when the wave struck. The crew was finally rescued by a cruise ship on its way to Antarctica. They spent a pleasant two weeks recuperating. When they returned to shore, a court of inquiry was held regarding the loss of the ship. The courts findings was that the size of the wave was grossly exaggerated and that the hull had been breached by one of the large cranes that had come loose from its moorings.

After the trial the radio operator had written a letter to the station giving details of the incident and asking the operator who had been on duty to contact him. Unfortunately, I never received the letter. We has a wonderful chat and I was looking forward to many more. Regretfully, some months later, I saw in one of the radio magazines a notice that he had passed away.

The winter nights are still long, the pastels of the Arctic symphony still coldly play the skies and isolation remains a way of life on much of the Labrador Coast. Living as I do now within sight of the US border, I can meet more people in one hour than I saw that whole year on the Coast. Yet I still remember that one cold early January morning over four decades ago when a lonely operator wanted some company. Happenstance? Devine intervention? What were the odds? Regardless, it is enough that the distress message could be relayed from the land of the aurora Australis to the land of the aurora Borealis and back again..

## **Addendum:**

I was reminded of this story a few days ago after I had watched a very interesting PBS program on giant waves. In the past decade a great deal of investigation has been conducted regarding these "rogue waves". It was first thought that they were the result of conflicting ocean currents found relatively close to shore. In places like the east coast of South Africa and the west coast of Norway there had been a number of such incidents. Ships were warned to take precautions and all was thought to be well, until two separate giant waves incidents were reported in the Antarctic within a few days of one another far from land where there were no conflicting currents. Satellite radar equipment was used to scour the oceans to see if any such occurrences could be found. The result of the findings were that not only do they exist, but that there were far more of them than any one had imagined.