

THE ARMED FORCES RADIO SERVICE

INTRODUCTION



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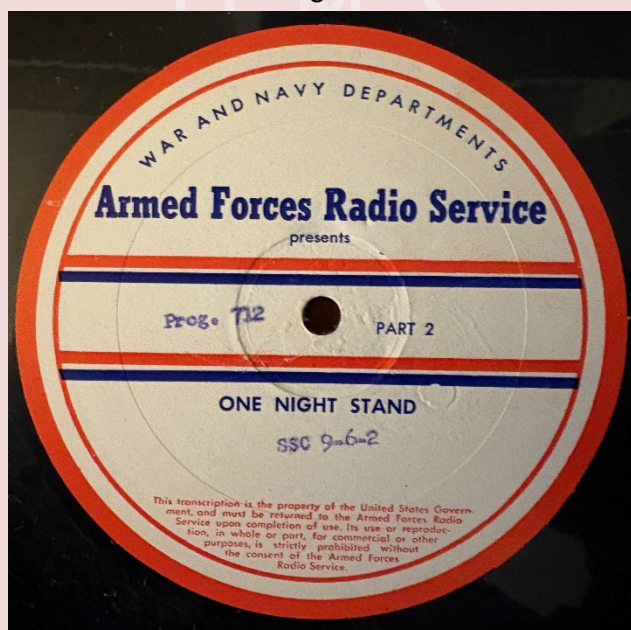
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Cover Image:

Col. Thomas H. A. (Tom) Lewis
Commanding Officer of the Armed Forces Radio Service



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An Entertainment Industry Treasure

Thousands of Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS) transcriptions were recorded from 1942 and thereafter. Many of these recordings are preserved at the GMA in the form of the original discs and first-generation reel-to-reel tapes. These recordings are in the process of being transferred to digital storage. The AFRS recordings include the full spectrum of American Popular Entertainment of the mid-20th Century. All forms of music are represented, as are comedic and dramatic performances.

Founding and Organization

The United States War Department created a Morale Service Division in 1940. This department was re-designated as the Special Service Division (SSD) on July 20, 1942. In October 1943, the SSD was split into two sections. Athletic, entertainment, and recreational activities retained the SSD name. Informational and educational activities became a new Morale Service Division. In November 1943, the SSD became the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS). As early as January 1942, several agencies started distributing entertainment programs. American service personnel overseas were, at that time, limited to receiving only shortwave radio broadcasts. The Army had only a few radio stations. The first Army radio stations airing programs at that time were limited to locations such as Alaska. During 1942, operations to record and assemble kits or packages of recordings for stations and bases were put in place, as well as overseas radio operations.

The work product of the recording, distribution, and broadcasting services is represented in the collections assembled and documented for the Glenn Miller Archives by the author. AFRS and its forerunners produced their own programs with live audiences and the assistance of the radio networks. Most live audience programs were recorded at NBC Studio D or CBS Studio A in Hollywood, California. AFRS also cooperated with the networks in dubbing (copying) original network programming and re-packaging it for distribution with the commercial content edited out. AFRS also produced a series of programs with studio hosts playing records and interviewing guests.

Programs and Personnel

Within the Morale Service Division of the War Department, a “radio section” of the Bureau of Public Relations (BPR) was formed in 1941 to make sports broadcasts available to personnel scattered outside the United States. Edward Montague Kirby, Public Relations Director for the National Association of Broadcasters, formerly an executive with WSM, Nashville, Tennessee, and his colleague, Jack Harris, joined the Army. Kirby was appointed chief of BPR, and Harris was his deputy. They realized that demand and need existed for other types of programs. Their initial ideas included disk jockey-type programs, a format eventually used for programs such as the “Yank Swing Session,” “Downbeat,” “G. I. Jive,” and so forth. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the BPR team led by Lt. Col. Kirby conceived “Command Performance,” essentially a musical-variety format. BPR produced the first program on March 1, 1942, and broadcast it by short wave. This program is preserved in our GMA collections. 11 stations were broadcasting the first program to Australia, Iceland, Ireland, and, poignantly, the Philippines, where Japanese forces besieged the American and Filipino defenders. “Command Performance” would continue and be polished into a reliable and popular vehicle by trial and error. By July 1942, over 40 stations were broadcasting the program.

Col. (then Maj.) Thomas H. A. Lewis, formerly a prominent Young and Rubicam Advertising and Audience Research, Inc. media executive, became Chief of the Radio Section, Information and Orientation Branch, Morale Services Division in May 1942. The Morale Services Division was renamed the Special Services Division (SSD) in July 1942.

The Special Services Division (SSD) was operating separately from BPR. Because of BPR's success with “Command Performance,” SSD launched a similar program on August 11, 1942, which was titled “Mail Call”. On December 15, 1942, SSD took over responsibility for “Command Performance,” and talent and support personnel resources were shared for “Command Performance” and “Mail Call.” The former was produced in cooperation with CBS, using CBS facilities. The latter was created in collaboration with NBC and used NBC facilities. Two additional live-audience variety productions were added to the schedule, “Jubilee” and “G. I. Journal.” The programs included requests from service personnel worldwide. On “Command Performance,” there was a feature including requests for “sounds from home.” One of the most famous was heard on Program #17, June 17, 1942, when host Don Ameche announced that actress Carole Landis would “sigh” for a sailor somewhere in the Pacific, which is precisely what she did. This request was later reproduced with announcer Don Wilson asking Ms. Landis to grant the same request again.



Don Wilson and Carole Landis – “The Second Sigh”



"G. I. Journal" - Jerry Colonna, Kay Kyser, Linda Darnell, Fred MacMurray, Mel Blanc and Ben Blue

Lt. Col. Kirby and his staff departed Washington, DC in 1943, transferring to London to head American Radio Operations in the European theatre, American Forces Network (AFN) Europe, and SHAEF's Allied Expeditionary Forces (AEFP) Network. SSD/AFRS was consolidated in Los Angeles. Col. Lewis was the Commanding Officer of the consolidated unit and is today considered the founder of AFRS.

About the Recordings

The SSD was staffed with experienced radio and recording industry personnel, many of whom had been receiving draft notices and found the prospect of continuing their civilian work in uniform quite appealing, as opposed to carrying a rifle. Starting from scratch, the number of stations grew from 21 in January 1943 to 306 in December 1943. This included studio operations worldwide and Army mobile stations, which operated near the front lines in theatres of operation. AFRS was based in Los Angeles. Most wartime AFRS programs were produced in Hollywood, hence the "H" designation that AFRS gave to most of its programs.

One of the things that SSD and then AFRS had to straighten out was that during 1942, there were no less than six government agencies that were in the business of releasing entertainment programming. However, distribution was limited to shortwave broadcasting. As early as 1941, the idea of shipping phonographs, needles, records, and broadcast transcriptions to service personnel had been conceived and acted upon. SSD was set up, perfected, and greatly expanded upon sending "kits" out to personnel worldwide.

The number of transcriptions pressed monthly from SSD and AFRS increased to 7,891 by January 1943 and 117,695 by October 1945. These were 16-inch discs. Twelve-inch discs were used earlier but were discontinued. For "off-network" programs, commercials were edited out before mastering. Not all commercial references could be realistically dropped, but advertising was consistently erased. Early programs picked up by BPR and SSD had disclaimers added at the program's close, and commercials remained, or wholesale edits and substitutions were made that resulted in the final products often sounding disjointed. This practice ended in 1943, as SSD brought more engineering personnel online and polished their techniques and practices. By 1944, a very efficient system seamlessly produced clean "off-network" edited programs and professionally produced original products. With many network and local radio talent now in uniform at AFRS, the quality of the AFRS work product could be considered superior in some respects to wartime commercial (civilian) radio. AFRS Programs can be classified into three categories: (a.) AFRS-produced (live audience or studio host), (b.) off-network, and (c.) libraries.



An AFRS 16-inch transcription disc - the May 1945 V-E Day "Special Program."

The live audience and studio host programs included "Command Performance," "Mail Call," "G. I. Journal," "Jubilee," "G. I. Jive," "Downbeat" et al. Popular off-network programs included "The Music Hall" (Kraft Music Hall) with Bing Crosby, "The Bob Hope Show," "The Tommy Dorsey Show," "The Harry James Show" and dozens more. Commercial program names were edited; hence, just "Music Hall" for Crosby, no mention of Pepsodent toothpaste for Hope, Raleigh, and Chesterfield cigarettes dropped for Dorsey and James. The artist assembled libraries using studio recordings and recordings of domestic and AFRS studio radio programs. The libraries allowed disc jockeys at OWI and Army radio stations worldwide to play records at their locations. The Basic Music Library (BML) would grow to include thousands of records by a broad cross-section of American musicians and singers. In addition to its mainstream popular music and jazz features, AFRS programming was targeted to specific types of music and ethnic audiences. There were programs formatted for African American service personnel (including "Jubilee") and Latin-American service personnel (including "Viva America" and "Saludos Amigos"). "Melody Round Up" was formatted for country-western (hillbilly, western swing) audiences. "Music by Kostelanetz" (The CBS "Pause that Refreshes on the Air with Andre Kostelanetz") and "NBC Symphony" (The NBC Symphony broadcasts conducted by Arturo Toscanini and Leopold Stokowski) presented serious music of the classical era.



Martha Wilkerson, the popular "G. I. Jill" and host of AFRS "G. I. Jive" with Bing Crosby
AFRS "Command Performance" – July 1945

Transmission and Distribution

Until mid-July 1943, SSD programs were broadcast exclusively (from transcriptions) by the Office of War Information (OWI). The primary OWI "Voice of America" shortwave radio stations were located on the east and west coasts of the United States. The OWI also operated operations and transmitter sites overseas. The Radio Section shipped transcriptions in bulk to the OWI. Those for shortwave stations in the United States were separated for subsequent broadcasts. The remainder was sent to the OWI stations overseas, including the American Broadcasting Station in Europe (ABSIE). There were only a few Army-operated radio stations in 1942. More had been put on the air worldwide by 1943; however, nowhere near as many as would eventually exist by 1944 and 1945. In mid-1943, the Radio Section was confident that the Army had increased their stations enough to ship transcriptions directly to them and not just to the OWI.

The SSD distributed the first set of five Basic Music Library (BML) transcriptions to overseas Army radio stations in September 1943. This was the idea of Maj: Meredith Willson, director of the AFRS orchestra. The first mention of the name change from SSD to AFRS was made in October 1943 radio scripts.



Major Meredith Willson and Nelson Eddy, AFRS "Command Performance"

Every week, cartons of AFRS program releases were sent out en masse in two boxes, A and B, including 110 discs each, 55 per box. This was done for weight considerations and to prevent loss. Each set had a mix of original programs, off-network programs, and library selections. Initially, shipments went by sea, taking considerable time and exposing the packages to risk. They often arrived with cracked and broken discs that had to be thrown away. Shipments were sent to installations that were asked to send the discs along to other installations; of course, not all the discs would be sent from place to place. Some shipments never arrived at all. This was a situation that was inefficient, intolerable, and unsustainable. Col. Lewis and his staff negotiated an agreement with the Air Transport Command of the Army Air Forces and the Naval Air Transport Service to ship the cartons by air. This would save time and limit, if not eliminate, potential damage. Shipments were accelerated and increased so packages would not be passed between units but distributed directly to each destination. Distribution circuits were established by geography. By July 1, 1943, cartons were being shipped by air from Los Angeles. The system became very efficient, and the loss rate was virtually eliminated.

All of the cartons were marked “priority,” “urgent,” “radio transcriptions,” “government property,” and “must go through.” For example, by the fall of 1944, AFN—London and AEFP could have off-network, prime-time American radio programs on the air within a week to ten days, which was a remarkable accomplishment.



AFRS Kit Shipment with Air Transport Command Priority Labels

By the end of hostilities, AFRS was operating arguably the largest and most diverse radio network in the world, with facilities located on every continent, diverse programming from its original productions and rebroadcasts from every domestic radio network, as well as a global distribution network using transcription discs express shipped by air and broadcast over dedicated AFRS transmission facilities. This was a massive undertaking that was accomplished. Most AFRS personnel had returned to the broadcasting and entertainment industry by 1946.



V-J Day, August 1945, "Command Performance," CBS, Hollywood - Lina Roday, Alvino Rey, The King Sisters, and Danny Kaye

For Further Information

<https://www.dennismspragg.com/music-research>

In This Series

Jubilee
Magic Carpet
V-Discs

In Process

AFRS Master Index
Command Performance
G. I. Journal
One Night Stand
Spotlight Bands