

A VISIT TO THE VOA - THAILAND Michael S. Hardester

One of the distinct advantages of being in the U.S. Navy is the unusual selection of duty stations (locations) available. Thus, when my wife and I learned that we were being transferred to Okinawa, we made plans on places we hoped to visit. We had considered Thailand; however, we felt it was unlikely we would have an opportunity to go. Then, about a year after our arrival overseas, a tour became available with one of the places on the tour being Bangkok. The arrangements were made and we were soon to be on our way. Of course, being an avid DXer, I was well aware of the Voice of America (VoA) relay station in Thailand, and shortly after deciding to go on the tour, I sent a letter enroute to the USIA in Washington, D.C. After some corresponding between Washington and Bangkok, plans were made for a visit to the VoA facilities.

The tour arrived in Bangkok at midnight, and we were in our hotel just before the 1:00am curfew. After a busy first day, I was able to contact Mr. Hillgartner, the Manager of the VoA operations, and plans were made for a visit the next day.

Around 7:00am, I met Mr. Chrismon, Supervisor, who was my host for the day-long tour of the transmitter and receiver sites. From the hotel, we proceeded to the air-conditioned and chauffeured VoA staff car (I make mention of this for if the humidity doesn't get to you, the traffic will!). Our driver was soon guiding our car through the hectic and congested Bangkok traffic as if we were the only ones on the road. Occasionally a Buddhist monk in his saffron-colored robe would be seen along the roadside, or a farmer leading his ox. Once outside of the city, the scenery gave way to green, lush farmland with an occasional home or local Buddhist temple noted. Low mountains were noted in the distance.

Soon Mr. Chrismon and I were engaged in conversation, and it was pointed out that the VoA-Thailand presently has 42 Thai nationals and 4 Americans working at their facilities. The transmitter facilities are shared with the Thai government who produce the Voice of Free Asia programs. The transmitter plant is located approximately 67 miles/107 km north of Bangkok near the village of Ban Ra Som on 55.8 acres of land provided by the Government of Thailand. The transmitter facilities consist of a megawatt (1,000,000 watts) medium-wave transmitter (two 500,000-watt Continental transmitters) on 1580 kHz and a 3-tower directional antenna; power is provided by a commercial source.

The first part of our journey ended with our arrival at the receiver site at Ban Klang situated some 25 miles/40 km north of Bangkok. The receiver plant is situated on 25.1 acres of land, also provided by the Government of Thailand. The plant operates from commercial power and is equipped with dual diversity receiving systems, Racal and URR receivers, UHF link for feeding programs to the transmitter site, and six log periodic antennas. The station is equipped to receive, but not transmit, except as previously stated. They also receive teletype signals from the VoA communication network, and normal communications are handled through the Department of State facilities in Bangkok. After a short visit, we were once again on our way north to the transmitter site which has previously been mentioned.

The first indication we were approaching the transmitter site was the sighting of the three towers in the distance. Each tower is 97.53 meters high and they are situated on the northern side of the transmitter plant. However, before touring the facilities lunch was in order and so Mr. Chrismon, his secretary and I headed to a nearby restaurant for a Thai lunch, and if you've never eaten a true Thai meal, you're in for one fantastic experience! Now I like to eat, but the food just kept coming and coming! You have to experience it to believe it.

After lunch, we returned to the transmitter plant where the two Continental transmitters, each 25 years old, were seen along with the control facilities, tape decks, a passageway between two offices which passes through the bathroom, and a door that leads to, well, you'd never believe me if I told you. Definitely an interesting tour.

Outside, we walked up to the antenna switching control where the pattern of the antenna is switched from a north/south lobe with a lesser lobe to the east, to a beam favoring North Vietnam and Southern

China. Languages which are currently broadcast include Bengali, Cambodian, English, and Laotian; the Thai Government also produces programs in Thai. Regular programming commenced on Feb. 22, 1968.

As with the VoA-Okinawa tour, the tour of VoA-Thailand was over all too soon; however, much was learned and the hospitality of the VoA-Thailand staff was super! My sincere thanks to Messrs. Hillgartner, Bartell, and Chrismon for their most personal assistance in making my tour of their facilities a most memorable occasion. The only unfortunate thing to occur was on return to Okinawa when it was discovered, in attempting to develop some 140 prints (30 of which were VoA-Thailand prints), that for some reason none of the film shot was exposed and thus no pictures of the tour are available.

In general talks with my hosts, I learned that the present agreement with the Government of Thailand is due to expire on March 28, 1983, and at present, the Government of Thailand is working on construction of a Voice of Free Asia near Lamphun (Hilltribe transmitter). The frequency is not known; however, it will most likely be medium-wave as shortwave sets in Thailand are few, and thus the reason for the current medium-wave-only transmitter presently in use. And speaking of the VoA transmitter, it will switch frequency to 1575 kHz when the 9 kHz frequency allocation goes into effect next year.

Other items of interest include the fact that the VoA transmitter on Okinawa (which ceased operations some time ago) is to be replaced with four new transmitters at Tinang, Republic of the Philippines. Also, parts from the VoA-Okinawa transmitter are enroute to VoA-Thailand.

Approximately five years ago, there were plans to construct a VoA relay in South Korea, primarily for shortwave use, but the plans were politically defeated.

The Hue transmitter in Vietnam (medium-wave) was made with American parts, and even before the evacuation from Vietnam the staff was having trouble with the transmitter, thus it is unlikely the Vietnamese will ever get the transmitter operational again.

Presently, plans are being made for a VoA satellite feed from the USA to the Philippines and possibly to the Thailand receiver site - just wish they'd try and link Okinawa up with a satellite feed!

A final note - when a coup occurs in Thailand, the VoA Director in Thailand contacts the Thai Government Public Relations Office and at the request of the Thai Government, the VoA switches to local programming or shuts down completely until matters are once again peaceful.

AT 14-75 ON YOUR DIAL, THIS IS AMERICAN FORCES RADIO—
DIEGO GARCIA

MICHAEL S. HARDESTER

The Chagos Archipelago is a 75 square mile/195 square kilometer area in the British Indian Ocean Territory. Within the Archipelago is a small island, the main one of the group, known as Diego Garcia. Further defined the island is situated south of India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and northwest of Australia at 7° 18' south and 72° 24' east.

While the island may not be a major (or minor) tourist attraction it is home for quite a number of United States Navy personnel. In addition to a United States Naval Communication Station (NKC), U.S. Navy Broadcasting Service, Detachment Three is also there providing much needed entertainment.

The first AM station signed on in 1972 with a mighty 25 watts of power. From then until now, the facilities have continued to expand. At present, the AM station operating on 1475 kHz has a power output of 250 watts (the frequency will switch to 1485 in November of 1978). The AM station is on the air continuously except for a maintenance period from 1900 to 2400 hours GMT on Sunday.

Additionally, there is a FM outlet on 101.1 MHz with stereo, and TV Channel 8 provides island-wide programming with a power of 100 watts.

The majority of DX reports originate from New Zealand and Sri Lanka with reports from other areas including Japan. When sending a reception report, titles of music played, announcements, weather reports and similar items are helpful to confirm reception. Also, a self addressed envelope would be appreciated. Reports may be sent to USNAVBOSTSVC DET. 3, AFRIS BUX 14, USNAVCOMSTA NKC, FPO SAN FRANCISCO, CA. 96685.

Although personnel changes occur at regular intervals, the following staff assisted with information for this article: PHC Edmunds (Station Manager), IC3 Bonifas, ICFN Planck, JUSN Lawson and SN Coltrans—all U.S. Navy.