

U.S. RADIO IN WORLD WAR TWO

(Some very personal reminiscences of Gene Martin)

Editor's note - Our Colorado DXer, Gene Martin, spent 20 years as a news writer and news editor for KLZ 1935-39, WFAA 1939-44, WLW 1944-50, WTAM 1950-55. WTAM was the NBC O&O station in Cleveland, which later became KYW, then WKYC, and is now WWWE. Gene still makes his living in commercial radio.

During the years of World War Two, American radio stations broadcast under various kinds of government restrictions and guidelines growing out of the nation's peril. Broadcasters cooperated fully with every aspect of the war effort, accepted restrictions without quibbling, along with other elements in U.S. society.

An extraordinary degree of national unity dominated the country as it set about the great task of preparing to fight a war on two fronts. Abroad in the land was the conviction that our national survival was at stake. Over the years, I watched and reported on this massive rallying of American might and determination in my job as news editor of WFAA in Dallas. I sensed even then that I was a witness to great events, and a minor participant in the life and times that history would have to record as "America's finest hour." We Americans were a united people then, joined together by one over-riding purpose, and it was easy to take pride in being an American.

While the early years of the war were spent at WFAA, I changed jobs in July, 1944, joining the news department of WLW, Cincinnati, more than a year before the war ended.

All during the war, news was subject to military censorship, and an Office of Censorship held forth in Washington having to do with non-military varieties of censorship. Broadcasters, along with newspapers, press associations, and magazines, were extensively briefed on the kinds of news which could not be reported.

Adhering to the rules of censorship was not difficult for they specified the obvious, and I never encountered any military figure complaining about something which had been broadcast. Besides, in the news department, we were better acquainted with the rules than the average Colonel. We could not report on troop movements, of course; nor on ship movements, nor on war production information and the like. The reasons for this were obvious to all Americans, and news of that sort would have been withheld by any responsible newsmen whether or not a government agency had requested it. We had military censorship of the news, but it was almost unnecessary.

One kind of censorship during the war, keenly affected radio stations specifically. Weather information became a military secret. We could not broadcast the daily weather forecast and furthermore, could not allow one word on the air about current weather conditions. The announcer who liked to launch his morning show by noting what a "fine day" it was had to give it up for the duration.

The main reason for the ban on weather reporting was the devastating submarine warfare by German U-Boats in the Western Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. So-called wolf-packs of U-boats were prowling the shipping lanes. American ships were being torpedoed within sight of American shores, especially oil tankers making the run from Texas ports to the New York - Philadelphia area. It was necessary to deprive the German submarines of weather information. But a secondary reason for banning weather information on radio was the roadblock it put in the way of possible German or Japanese air raids on American cities. Of course, it may seem incredible nowadays but our military leaders in the early days of the war harbored genuine fears of a German air raid on East Coast targets. The general public too was most apprehensive about air raids. In fact, on December 9, 1941, two days after Pearl Harbor, the New York police put out the panicky "news" that enemy bombers were approaching Long Island, and followed it up immediately by ordering evacuation of the Brooklyn schools. These two news flashes arrived in the WFAA newsroom in the early afternoon during the time we were intensely occupied with putting news bulletins onto the air.

I looked at these two bulletins, pondered the reach of that 50,000 watts, gave thought to the panic and consternation they would create. I thought the news was probably untrue, a sample of hysteria at work, and decided to hold up the news at any rate until the bombs started falling. This decision put my job on the line. If those reports had been true, I would have been fired, and would have deserved it. But the reports were false and my station had not spread unnecessary public consternation out to the limits of its coverage.

Within half-an-hour, of course, I was in the front office, displaying my trophies, a pair of news bulletins I had refused to put on the air.

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Taking weather forecasts off the air was designed to deprive the submarines and potential bombers of information they would need in carrying out their activities. Military officials, the Weather Bureau, and Censorship brass invited broadcasters to meetings all over the country to explain the reasons for banning weather information.

Texas broadcasters were invited to Austin one Sunday in January, 1942, gathering in the Senate Chamber of the Texas State Capital. A Weather Bureau spokesman told us that any German weatherman on board a Nazi U-boat could monitor American stations and soon compile a weather map for the next day that would be of great value to the submarine commander. It would tell him where he could find good hunting off our shores, and where storms or cloudiness would hamper his operations. Furthermore, weather forecasts on the air could likewise inform a German Luftwaffe commander whether New York, Washington, or Philadelphia would be in the clear or under a cloud deck in the next few hours.

Not only were weather forecasts banned, but all mention of weather conditions on the air must be avoided too. Whether the day was hot or cold, rainy or sunny, care must be taken that no reference to the day's weather reach the air.

The man from the Weather Bureau said that if the temperature at Louisville is down to 5 or 10 degrees on a January morning, that single fact with nothing else can be translated into clear skies off the New Jersey coast in about 24 hours.

The ban on weather information was imposed nationwide on the smallest and most remote stations as well as the largest ones near the coasts. It was explained at that Austin meeting that the smallest radio station, at times, could be heard many hundreds of miles distant. And idle chatter about weather picked up from half-a-dozen interior locations could also become the basis for a workable weather forecast by the enemy weatherman.

One Texas radio editor got up at that meeting and remarked that it wouldn't be too difficult to keep people informed about the weather outlook by giving it to them in Texas terms that no German would be likely to understand. When a severe Norther is coming in the winter, he suggested, we might advise listeners that it would be a good night to bring in the brass monkey. He was referring, of course, to the old American legend about a cold wave severe enough to freeze the tail off a brass monkey. (In that sentence, the word, tail, is a euphemism, for even I tend to censor what I write).

His suggestion was good for a laugh all around the Senate Chamber and was soon forgotten, although I have remembered it for more than 30 years.

The ban on weather talk caused radio stations to cancel Man-in-the-Street broadcasts right and left. Stations could not risk airing any kind of uncontrolled conversation by out-siders, for the itch to say something about the weather is universal.

Play-by-play sports broadcasts were much affected for the man-at-the-mike could not explain how weather was influencing the game. If a summer thunderstorm stopped the play in a baseball game, he could report only that the game was interrupted, but he could not say why.

During this era of weather censorship, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt found herself reprimanded publicly one day by the Director of the Office of Censorship. In a radio broadcast, she had made a passing reference to the local weather. Mrs. Roosevelt accepted the rebuke with an apology for her carelessness.

The days when weather information became a military secret and vanished from radio began in mid-December 1941, right after Pearl Harbor, and lasted until November 1, 1943. During that time, restrictions on the mention of weather were eased step-by-step. Stations were permitted to broadcast warnings of severe weather on the way although these warnings were carefully doctored by the Weather Bureau to omit any references to wind direction and its speed and to atmospheric pressure.

Another kind of government restriction imposed on broadcasters during the war involved hours of operation. I am uncertain about the reasons for it, but for a time in 1942 to 1943, stations were required to sign-off nightly. Perhaps this policy was designed to prevent enemy planes from using a radio wave from a given city to home-in on that city with their cargo of bombs. Japanese planes on their way to the Pearl Harbor attack in the pre-dawn hours had used a radio broadcast from Honolulu to home-in on their target. Aviators, the world over, were familiar with the procedure of following radio signals to their destination.

During this period of required sign-offs, provision was made for stations to remain on the air after hours in the event of some news development of transcendent importance. The nation was divided into regions, each covering several states, and the major radio stations in each region was designated as the controlling one for the entire area.

The combination of WFAA-WBAP, dividing time on 820 with 50,000 watts, was the control station for Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and perhaps New Mexico. In the event of some major news development which kept stations on the air after hours, stations in each region could continue to broadcast so long as their control station remained on the air. When it signed-off, all other stations in the region were required to shut-down.

Saturday night, November 7, 1942, between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m. in Dallas, our United Press teletypes in the WFAA newsroom carried the Flash that Anglo-American forces had launched an invasion of North Africa. The North African shore was in the hands of the Axis powers then; Italy in Tunisia, and Germany having seized control of the former French colonies to the west of Tunisia.

The American-British assault on North Africa, coming after many months of Allied defeat and retreat on all fronts, by land, sea, and air, was the news event of transcendent importance that would keep WFAA on the air after hours.

We began rushing news bulletins onto the air, and NBC began special feeds on the invasion, and we naturally carried every scrap of information which could be gleaned from the network or our own news wires. The WFAA management told me to keep the station on the air after midnight so long as the flow of news out of North Africa seemed to justify it. We were aware that all other stations in our control area would be monitoring 820 as their guide in the after hours operation. But I know very well that this knowledge was taken as a minor thing by the WFAA people including myself. This station had enjoyed 12 years of being the biggest and the best in the Southwest, so it seemed quite reasonable to us all that WFAA would be the designated kingpin in its area on this kind of an occasion.

So WFAA stayed on the air up to 1:00 a.m., then 2:00 a.m., as the news from North Africa rolled in and was rushed onto the air scrap-by-scrap. Turning the dial on the newsroom radio showed us that stations all over our control area were also on the air with invasion coverage, although I was too busy, and too unconcerned, to make any close check into the matter.

By 2 o'clock that Sunday morning, it was becoming evident that the North African news had been wrapped-up; nothing new and different was being heard. I decided that if nothing new turned up in the next 30 minutes, that WFAA would leave the air at 2:30.

It was about this time, too, that WSB, in Atlanta, called up to inquire when WFAA was going to give it up for the night. WSB was the control station for the Southeastern States; its newsmen also had noted the dearth of new developments on the North African landing, and was thinking it was time to sign-off.

As the result of our comparing of notes, and the absence of any major developments in the next 30 minutes, both WSB and WFAA signed-off that morning at the same time -- 3:30 in Atlanta, 2:30 in Dallas. And we took with us off the air God-only-knows (for I have no idea) how many other stations between New Mexico and the Atlantic.

As I drove home that quiet Sunday morning, my Motorola radio in the old 1940 Chevy revealed to me that the Gung-ho stations on the Pacific Coast were still on the air talking about North Africa, but the rest of the country appeared to be off-the-air. I am sure I gave no thought to my role in shutting down radio broadcasting that morning in four (or was it five?) states. One of the Mexican border stations was playing Strauss waltzes, saying nothing at all about the war, and I found it very pleasant to journey home listening to these lilting tunes.

As 1943 progressed, new circumstances came to the fore to alter the manner in which U.S. stations were allowed to operate. Our military leaders, for one thing, began losing their fear of German or Japanese air raids. At the same time, war plants across the country were operating 24 hours a day which meant untold thousands of workers were up all night. Many war plants piped radio into amplifiers along the assembly lines to relieve the tedium of the job.

I do not recall chapter and verse on how and when it all happened, but by the summer of 1944, when I went to work for WLW, the Nation's Station was operating all night with the programming from midnight on designed especially for the benefit of war plant workers in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

Thus, it could be said that World War Two may have been the one major factor which got U.S. radio stations into the habit of broadcasting 24 hours a day.

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