

Tales of the Wireless Pioneers



By Henry W. Dickow

Book One
Part Four

Revolt of the Wireless Operators

By Henry W. Dickow

This is a complete documentary of the wireless Unions – and the abortive early efforts of the operators to organize. It is also a chronological history of the wireless man's labor activities.

The status symbol of the early mariner was the dollar sign. Based on rank, from captain down to the lowest stoker and cabin boy, the ship's wireless operator found himself rated with those in the lowest category, not only in prestige but also in pay.

A cabin boy often received a wage of \$30 monthly. But he was also the fortunate recipient of gratuities from those he served. The wireless operator received nothing but his base pay, and he too was required by the protocol of the sea to dispense with part of his wages at the end of each voyage to the mess steward, and also to the boy who made his bed and emptied his gaboons. This left the junior wireless operator on shipboard perhaps \$20 per month for the net receipts of his labors, while the chief operator could count on \$10 more. Only the Chinese Coolies who built the famed California wineries received less in pay than a wireless operator; they worked for 25 cents per day. And not until recent years did he attain officer status, when a newly written rule made him the equal of the ranking officers on deck or in the engine rooms below.

His way to the top was long and difficult, his unions born of strife and bloodshed, and every concession awarded him, no matter how insignificant it might have been, came only after months and even years of dickering and bargaining with the interests he so ardently served.

The task of organizing an assortment of boys in their teens, others old enough to be their fathers, and a group of handicapped men in every category into an organization which could present a solid front to the shipping magnates at first proved insurmountable. And so it continued through the long years of early wireless, until the gods of war had wrought for them the privileges so long denied them by their fellow men.

Battleground

Of all the ports in North America, San Francisco was the strongest union bailiwick. Strife along its famed Embarcadero was a long and seemingly never-ending feud between the men on ships and those who worked longshore. Jurisdictional disputes flared up in rapid succession. At times, neither the shipowners nor those who worked the waterfront knew what these bickerings were all about.

Into this cauldron walked two men from an established union of Morse telegraphers, the C.T.U.A. – Commercial Telegraphers Union of America. Its members were the wire operators who worked Western Union, Postal, the railroads, and the cables. Realizing that more and more of the skilled “wire” men were deserting their keys and sounders for the spark gaps and detectors of wireless cabins on shipboard, the C.T.U.A. saw wisdom in a plan to enroll the seagoing operators into the land-line organization. True to custom, the former Morse telegraphers proved ready and willing to join a new branch of their former union, but not so the

fledglings who had taken to the seas as wireless operators and who knew nothing about the telegraphers' union or its aims. They refused to join.

The pleas of two organizers, a local president named S.J. Konenkamp and his secretary, a burly, mush-mouthed Scandinavian who "spoke and telegraphed with a foreign accent" according to those who knew him, made up the line of command for the San Francisco Local. The secretary's name was Joseph P. Sorenson, who often used his powerful fists to drive home a point when soliciting members for his new union along the waterfront. He demanded \$6 from each new member, \$5 for an initiation fee and a dollar for the first month's dues. This represented 20 percent of a junior operator's pay. He found very few recruits among the young men of wireless, most of whom had put to sea not in quest of pay but in search of adventure – travel to foreign lands and romance at sea and ashore. They could ill afford to separate themselves from the \$6 demanded by Sorenson.

In spite of the meager ranks of the new union, a strike was planned for the late spring months of 1913. San Francisco would be the first target, and would probably suffer the most, because it was the #1 port on the Pacific in trade and commerce. What Konenkamp did not know his adversaries did. They prepared themselves for the oncoming strike by bringing a contingent of strike-breakers to San Francisco by train from a Midwestern city where a telegraph school was feverishly training wire operators in the new radio-used Continental Code. No longer would they need to know Morse, for it was not used on shipboard, although it did remain a part of every land station's operation. These newly trained men were not told they were being sent to San Francisco to break a wireless operators' strike. They were paid \$75 per

month by the wireless operating companies, principally Marconi, and they were assured free rooms and lodging in a downtown San Francisco hotel while their ships were in port.

When his informers carried this news to Konenkamp, he grew furious. The remuneration and concessions offered the unwitting strike-breakers were so greatly more liberal than those paid the men in the ships at sea that it rankled almost every man who lived by the telegraph key. When the opening gun was fired and the order issued the men to leave their ships, the union officials failed to reckon with the fact that most wireless-equipped ships were not required by law to carry even one wireless operator. Their owners had installed the apparatus aboard merely as a safety measure, or one of economics, and only those ships carrying 49 persons or more were required to have wireless at all.

The operators from the “one-man ships” were hurriedly removed and assigned to the larger passenger liners, so that no ships would be tied up to the docks for want of the lawful complement of wireless operators. There was hardly a man who did not cherish a berth in one of the luxury liners, where the food was superb, the accommodations first class, and the zest for adventure realized at last. What cared these youngsters about unions, about pay raises, and about benefits if they could travel the seas of the world in style and class?

Attempts to tie up the big passenger liners failed utterly. Violence was confined to the waterfront and the streets of San Francisco where numerous brawls occurred. Pat Hendrix, messenger boy for Marconi Wireless and later a marine operator, was chased up California Street with a lighted cigar in his mouth. In his excitement, he swallowed the cigar. Thereafter he was affectionately branded the “wireless fire-eater”, and the only man alive who could swallow and digest a lighted cigar.

Not one of the imported strike-breakers was put to sea. The hotels in which they resided were surrounded by loyal union members, and the frightened newly-made wireless men remained inside, fearful of their lives. The strike was short-lived. Operators who vainly sought assignments in the finest coastal and trans-Pacific greyhounds now found themselves at sea in a billet they had longed for since the day they first went to sea. The strike-breakers were returned to their homes, the strike broken, and no other attempts at unionization were made for long years thereafter (1920-1921).

During the years of relative calm among the wireless men of the waterfront, the number of ships to be wireless-equipped began to soar. Great numbers of new operators appeared on the scene. Many came from their amateur wireless stations at home, others from crash courses instituted in various radio schools and “colleges” which sprang up in almost every major seaport city. Even sailing ships were being wireless-equipped including twenty ships of the Alaska Packers Fleet, the old steel hulled three- and four-masters which made their annual six-month trek to the salmon grounds of Alaska. Tugboats installed wireless apparatus. And from hundreds of mastheads of ships large and small the familiar 4-wire antenna was seen suspended. But the pay of the marine wireless operator remained the same: \$25 - \$40 per month. They were numbered among the newborn crop of “millionaires” – they could earn a million dollars if they worked a million days. They received the same wage as the common laborer who built the roads for San Francisco’s new Golden Gate Park, or the men who planted the trees in soil which had once been the sandy dunes of the city.

Occasionally they could earn more by serving as a “combination man” in the ships on which they sailed. A Purser-Wireless Operator combination brought a stipend of \$75 monthly.

Or the operator might peddle newspapers to passengers at sea, at 10 cents per copy, dividing his newfound wealth with the wireless operating companies, and additionally paying a fee to the cabin boys who delivered the newspapers to the staterooms of the passengers each morning before breakfast. The news for these papers came through nightly on the west coast from station KPH at Hillcrest and could be copied clear across the Pacific under normal conditions. Press was sent to ships at sea for a 30-minute period, at a speed of 20 words per minute.

The wireless operator fared better with the entry of America into the First World War. Pay scales ranged from \$75 to \$125 per month, and in some cases where great hardships were endured as a result of wartime action a bonus was usually paid.

A depression came soon after the war's ending, as ships by the hundreds were consigned to the graveyards and put into mothballs as part of the Ghost Fleet. Thousands of mariners were put out of work. There was a surplus of wireless operators, along with others. And soon the greater portion of this highly-trained force was required to seek employment in the new electronics complex which was coming into being as a result of the wireless boom of the '20s. Music was coming through the air by wireless. People everywhere sat before their little crystal sets with headphones draped over their ears, listening with awesome fascination to the new miracle of wireless broadcasting, or what little there was of it. But regardless of the merits of the "entertainment", the mere fact that it was coming through the ether without wires was enough to thrill rich and poor alike. It was something none had ever heard before, something new. The more they heard the more they shook their heads in stark disbelief.

The coming of the wireless age gave work to great numbers of former maritime wireless operators, many of whom went on to success, fame, and fortune. Included were men such as General David Sarnoff of RCA, Admiral Ellery W. Stone of I.T.T., and others of lesser light.

These were poor times to launch another effort to unionize what remained of the once populous ranks of marine wireless telegraphers. But good times or bad, there are always some who venture where others fear to tread. So in 1920 there came to San Francisco a young and capable organizer with a background of amateur and commercial wireless experience to his credit. He was Carl C. Langevin, out of Hartford, Connecticut. He was a genial fellow, liked by all. He had gained some experience doing work for an amateur radio organization. And now he lifted his sights to the commercial level.

Opening temporary quarters at the foot of California Street where it juts into Market, he canvassed the waterfront and soon had a goodly number of operators assembled for an organization meeting. First on the agenda was a suitable name for the new union. Many were proffered. It was decided to name it "Federated American Radio Telegraphers". Stationary and printed matter was ordered. Then came a rude awakening. The contraction, or the sequence of the first letter of each of the four words, was objectionable, the printer said. A hearty laugh was enjoyed by all. Quickly a new name was chosen: United Radio Telegraphers Association, U.R.T.A. Like the original C.T.U.A., the new U.R.T.A. made little headway. But it set a new force in motion. Organizational meetings were held in every major seaport city, and before long there were Unions everywhere – without rhyme or reason.

The whole credit for eventually bringing all of the loose ends together into a semblance of a working machine goes to one man, Mervyn R. Rathborne, who happened to be at the right

place at the right time, and in the right circumstances. Earlier, on August 19, 1931, The American Radio Telegraphists' Association was organized by James J. Delaney, at 20 Irving Place, New York City. Richard J. Golden was elected vice president. In 1932, Mervyn R. Rathborne Jr. founded the Radioman's Protective Association, and in March of the same year the two were merged. The New York local claimed membership of 300, while the West Coast had 200. Mervyn then relinquished his post. He took employment with Mackay Radio at station KFS near San Francisco as a shift engineer.

The A.R.T.A. was a progressive organization, and under the leadership of Hoyt S. Haddock, who succeeded Rathborne as president, the first major strides were made. Recognition of the wireless man on an equal footing with his fellow officers on shipboard was becoming reality. In 1934, when Codes of Fair Practice were established under the Wagner Act, the A.R.T.A. was recognized as the ship operators' bargaining agency. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Radio Division, gained recognition as the spokesman for the radio broadcasting staffs of engineers, technicians, and assistants. NBC and CBS had company unions of their own.

In 1932, the Queen of the Atlantic was the ex-German liner Vaterland, seized by the U.S. before World War One and rechristened Leviathan. The large Jewish population of New York affectionately called her the Levi Nathan. Her chief wireless operator was paid \$125 per month, her junior operator \$100. In small ships, however, the new pay scale was only \$75 to \$90 per month for juniors, or \$3 per day at most, because these were the days when only two operators were still being hired, each of whom was required to work 12 hours out of every 24.

So the going rate of pay in 1932 for the junior operators was exactly 25 cents per hour, while the Chief earned ten percent more.

In 1936 Haddock resigned as president of the union and joined forces with Standard Oil as a Labor Relations Consultant. Mervyn Rathborne again assumed the office of president. The increase in pay from 8 cents per hour in 1913 to 25 cents in 1932, over a span of nineteen years, was regarded as nothing short of phenomenal in those “good old days”.

Then danger lurked ahead.

Communism threw its fangs into the up-and-coming wireless union. And as it reared its ugly head above the men of more reasonable mind, the organization was thrown into chaos. Old friendships fell, brother fought brother. Physical violence brought injury to many. One of the officers was carried out of a meeting bodily while still seated in his chair, refusing to relinquish it to the anti-communistic forces. Some of the members openly proclaimed themselves to be active supporters of the “party” while others vigorously denounced their stand. To this day many of the old scars have not yet healed. The radio officers now have two separate national unions – American Radio Telegraphers Association and Radio Officers Union. Both are powerful in their own right.

Wartime Pay

The U.S. Emergency Fleet Corporation (or Shipping Board as it was more commonly known) was charged with the program of building and staffing a great fleet of merchant ships to replace those sunk by the German U-boats in World War One. They came down the ways in such numbers that crews were often hard to find. Wireless operators in particular were

unavailable. Emergency maritime centers were hastily organized, and a crash program of training produced a new crop of operators on a production line basis.

Wars bring prosperity to some, starvation to others. Many are maimed or killed, while the fortunate emerge unscathed. More than 20,000 mariners died by enemy action during the First World War. The wireless men who lived to tell the tale were first paid \$120 per month by the Shipping Board on vessels where they did both wireless and purser work. For straight wireless duty the pay was \$90. But in 1920 a general reduction in pay amounting to 10 percent was ordered for all in the service of the Board. The maritime unions rebelled. An ill-timed strike was called. It failed after 90 days of lethargy. Soon the wages dropped to a low of \$60 in some cases. And at this level the pay scale held – for almost 14 years.

The A.R.T.A. had three locals: No. 1 in New York, No. 2 in Boston, and No. 3 in San Francisco. Leslie E. Grogan was secretary of the San Francisco office during the early months of 1934, relinquishing it to Roy Pyle. Volney G. Mathison was Pacific Coast organizer. His first success came when he effected an agreement with Mackay Radio for a substantial increase in pay and improved working conditions for its point-to-point operators.

The year 1934 is also remembered for the general strike which paralyzed not only the waterfront but almost all of San Francisco's business and industrial establishment. Another maritime strike was called in 1936. It was the first major victory for the seagoing wireless operators. It broke the shipowners' stranglehold on the operators. It gave them the hard-fought right to establish and conduct a hiring hall of their own. And a small increase in pay was also a net result of this strike. And again another strike took place in 1937. It was called the Pacific Coast Maritime Strike. The wireless men fared well. Shipowners were thereafter compelled to

hire their wireless operators only through the Hiring Hall, thereby achieving total autonomy.

The union was reorganized and only the best qualified operators were retained. Scores of so-so telegraphers, the remnants of the crash program of the War, were cashiered out. The cream of the crop was now available for seagoing duty.

Passenger ships which formerly carried only two operators were thereafter required to carry three. No longer would the wireless men be required to serve both as operator and purser. It was the end of "combination jobs". Finally, a 1937 U.S. Radio Law made mandatory the removal of all spark transmitters from shipboard. The new and vastly more efficient vacuum tube transmitters replaced the venerable but often detested antiques of the early wireless era. In the same year, 1937, the R.O.U. (Radio Officers' Union) emerged out of a strife-torn A.C.A. and A.R.T.A. The bitter wrangling between the Reds, Pinks, Grays, and Whites came at a time when the nation was in the throes of the Great Depression. Charges of Communism were hurled with abandon. There were card carrying members of the "Party", and others in the underground. The infiltration was so widespread that almost every known "ism" came to the fore. Marxism, Leninism, and Communism were intermingled with hypnotism, mesmerism, and rheumatism! Brother was pitted against brother. It was a clear case of the pot calling the kettle black. Today the witch hunt is over. The old scars have healed. But there are still two separate and distinct wireless unions in operation, one an affiliate of the A.F.L. and the other tied into the C.I.O.

Earlier animosities and inter-union disputes were completely forgotten, along with the Great Depression, in December 1941, when the masses shouted: "Here we go again!" It was war! War is a plunge into violence. Death came not only to those under arms, but to the

mariner as well. Thousands of wireless operators and more than 20,000 other seamen were lost. The risk assumed by the man at the controls in the wireless room was often greater than that of the soldier in the frontline trenches. He had no warning when a torpedo struck or when a bomb came hurtling out of the sky. It was unfair that the merchant mariners were criticized for having shirked a patriotic duty; theirs was a duty no others could perform.

Wireless men were such a scarce commodity at the outbreak of war that anyone who had previously held a commercial license could qualify for a post on shipboard. A temporary "ticket" was issued by the Federal Communications Commission. Union membership of these operators was mandatory. But in hardship cases where the initiation fee of \$1,000 was unavailable, the new men were permitted to make payment on a percentage-of-wages-earned basis.

The Radio Officers' Union, with its one-time roster of 30 members, blossomed into a full-fledged counterpart of the other union, A.C.A. Soon its membership soared to nearly 1,000. The U.S. Maritime Commission allotted one-half of its ships to each of the two wireless unions. Soon the combined ranks swelled to 2,000 men. Many were ill-fitted for the task. But if they could send and receive at a speed of 25 words per minute, a government "ticket" on a temporary basis would be issued them. Today, with the Viet Nam war's acceleration, these temporary permits are again being issued. Old-timers whose hands and fingers are gnarled and knurled from arthritis or other deformities are permitted to use a typewriter in lieu of a pencil to copy the symbols of the code test given them by a government inspector. And in some cases, as much as \$2000 per month can now be earned. There is only one requirement which is keeping many of the old guard from returning to lucrative posts at sea: their health. A federal

license will be issued to those qualified regardless of his physical condition. But the road to Viet Nam is barred to those who do not possess the physical stamina to endure the voyage.

Just prior to the outbreak of World War Two, the starting rate of pay for the wireless operator was \$125. Quickly it was boosted to \$177.91. On December 7, 1941 the Maritime Commission authorized a bonus of \$5 per day for non-risk duty, and a 100 percent bonus while in the danger zones. Thus, within a single week, in some instances, a bonus of as much as \$375.00 was paid – over and above the regular wage. This runaway road-to-riches was blocked 90 days later when it was determined that a bonus of \$125 per way was unrealistic. Not even an accomplished plumber could earn as much. On the other hand, there were harsh inequities. The wireless operator aboard a munitions ship, a carrier even more dangerous than the vulnerable oil tanker, was paid only \$287.99 per month in safe waters, and \$425 when his ship ventured into the “hot zone”. Uncounted thousands in the nation’s shipyards earned more, and at little or no risk. But the shipboard wireless operator was the recipient of a bonus of another kind, a prepaid life insurance policy in the amount of \$10,000. And free medical care and hospitalization for the duration.

Victory in war brought bad news in the years of peace immediately ahead. There as an enormous surplus of wireless operators as ships were put into mothballs, or laid up in scores of harbors and bays. Great numbers of maritime operators became landlubbers and found work in the many new electronics plants and in other segments of a booming post-war era. The wireless unions settled down into bastions of strength, with a continuing membership of almost 2,000 between them. Pension plans were inaugurated. After 20 years of service, the pensioner would receive \$200 per month; after 15 years it would be \$150, while for 30 years it rose to

\$300. Both unions pay the same rate, plus a death benefit of \$1000. There is no friction whatever between the two organizations. The R.O.U. pension fund has a portfolio of securities with a market value of more than \$1,250,000. Some 40 members now receive pensions. The other union, A.R.A., with a larger membership, has some 60 men on its pension rolls. It too has a substantial fund in reserve. The entire pension fund is made up from payments by the shipowners. Salaries of union officials vary between \$10,000 and \$12,000 per year. The members pay monthly dues of \$15 to R.O.U. and \$20 to A.R.A. Each year following his first year of service a union member is required to take time off for vacation, 30 days. With additional service he is granted 2 months off with pay. By this means, a great number of members ordinarily "on the beach" are given work at sea, a month or two at a time. Pensioners likewise receive limited prepaid medical care and hospitalization.

In the final analysis, the wireless operator of today can earn as much as \$65 per day in the war zones, just 65 times more than he earned when he first went to sea in 1910. Today there is another shortage of wireless operators. History has repeated itself with the demands for operators increasing in proportion to the escalation of the war in Viet Nam. The "TLT", or time-limit-ticket, is again available, for the duration, from the F.C.C. And the faces of a few of the very old wireless pioneers are again seen on the waterfront. Their duties today are unlike those of decades ago. They work long hours and they work hard. Ship-to-ship radiotelephone circuits, ship-to-shore communication, and all of the conventional duties required of a seagoing wireless man now keep his nose to the grindstone during all hours of the day or night. Today he is compensated generously for these services. Not too many years ago he performed them for a pittance.

Today he attends school while in port. The unions have set up a program of training in radio and advanced electronics that is second to none. Today's radio officer is a highly qualified technician or engineer, in spite of the fact that not more than a half dozen are college graduates. Wireless is not learned from college training. Its regards today are comparable to those in the medical and engineering fields. But the wireless man leads a better life. The open sea is his home, the world his oyster.

By government decree he is now a Radio Officer, recognized and respected as such by his fellow workers on shipboard. His training never ends. Nothing in this world is moving with the speed of electronics. Soon the maritime radio officer will be a combination radio-electronics specialist. As more and more automation comes into play and fewer men are needed to man the super-ships of today, the radio officer's duties will eventually encompass many unheard of in this decade. Unlike others in the maritime services, the radio officer will be wholly irreplaceable. The more mechanized and automated a vessel becomes, the more his services will be required. His future is bright. His opportunities unlimited. His remuneration commensurate with his knowledge.

The future of the American Merchant Marine is still in doubt. It can survive only with government subsidy. The wages paid American seamen prohibits competition with ships of other nations. The costs of operations of a modern oil-tank ship are astronomical. As much as a half-million dollars a year, or just twice what it costs a foreign shipowner. Faster American cargo ships are coming, the fastest of their kind in the world. By reducing the number of officers and men aboard, a shipowner will save as much as \$100,000 per vessel a year.

Automation will replace manpower. But it will never replace the radio operator. Why? Simply because a robot cannot summon aid when a ship is in distress. True, it can transmit the ominous signal – if someone turns it on. But it cannot give the location of the doomed ship in latitude and longitude. It cannot explain the nature of the emergency. It cannot tell what help is needed. It cannot tell what, if any, rescue operations are already on the way or in the offing. The robot may yet emerge as a boon companion, but never a substitute for human brain and brawn. A sinking ship must of necessity transmit an ever-changing report of conditions as they exist, both to ships in search of the stricken vessel and to stations ashore. Questions asked by the rescuers must be answered.

It has been said that the ship of the future may be manned by a scant half-dozen experts with widely divergent qualifications, such as a combination Captain-Engineer, Navigator-Radio Officer, and an electronics technician charged with preparation and serving of food by modern methods. Tankers and freighters may be thus affected, but hardly the luxury liner whose passengers pay for and demand service of a more personal and intimate nature.

But the radio officer will still be with us.

A chronological record of the evolution of the early wireless unions into the American Radio Association and the Radio Officers' Union of today is found in the Appendix.

APPENDIX

Chronological Table of Radio Unions and Affiliations

1913	Commercial Telegraphers' Union of America (C.T.U.A) enrolls small percentage of Pacific Coast wireless operators and issues strike call. Effort fails. Prevailing wage scale of \$30 - \$40 per month remains in effect
1920	United Radio Telegraphers' Association organized in San Francisco by C.C. Langevin, aided by Gilson Willets. Less than 100 Coast operators enrolled. Disbanded in 1922 with dissolution of Shipping Board and removal of many ships to "graveyard" in Suisun Bay and elsewhere.
1931	American Radio Telegraphists' Association (A.R.T.A.) organized by James J. Delaney on August 19, 1931. Headquarters: 20 Irving Place, New York City. Hoyt S. Haddock assumed the presidency; Richard J. Golden vice president.
1932	M.R. Rathborne Jr. organized Radiomen's Protective Association in April, with headquarters in New York. Rathborne took leave of duties for 2 years. Union membership in New York local said to be 300, Pacific Coast membership 200.
1934	Codes of Fair Practice established under Wagner Act. A.R.T.A. recognized as bargaining agency for ship operators, while International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Radio Division, recognized as agency for broadcast stations. NBC and CBS organize company unions of their own.
1934	Prevailing wage scale \$125 per month for Chief Operator aboard largest passenger liners. Second operator \$100 per month. Rate of pay for smaller vessels, \$75 to \$100 per month. Tour of duty: 12 hours out of every 24.
1936	A.R.T.A. affiliates with C.I.O. Name changed to American Communications Association (A.C.A.)
1937	Dissension in ranks of A.C.A. brings rival union, Radio Officers' Union (R.O.U.) in competition with A.C.A. R.O.U. organized with 30 charter members. Fred Howe, president.
1941	Outbreak of World War II. U.S. Maritime Commission allots one-half of its ships to A.C.A., one-half to R.O.U. Need arises for more than 2,000 marine operators. Prevailing wage scale increased to \$177.91 per month, with substantial war-zone bonus payments.
1948	A.C.A. dissolved. I.B.E.W. charter for marine radio officers withdrawn October 2, 1948 from Local 1593. American Radio Association (A.R.A.) succeeds A.C.A. with treasury fund of \$83,000. George King elected president of West Coast Local #3. Total national membership 1100. R.O.U. 800.