An Early Australian Radiotelegrapher Remembers:

Extracts from the Narrative of Ellis Henry Smellie, 2650-SSGP

Arranged and copyedited, with endnotes by Bob Rydzewski

With footnote comments by CHRS Archivist Bart Lee

Photo restoration by Phillip Krejci

Eliis Henry Smellie, 2650-SSGP (1893-1991)
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Introduction

The only mention of Mr. Ellis H. Smellie to appear in the Society of Wireless Pioneers

Sparks Journal is a captioned version of the photo above.[*] Ellis Smellie was born in southeastern

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[*] CHRS Deputy Archivist Bob Rydzewski has determined that among the correspondence in the Society of Wireless Pioneers archive is an envelope from Lewis C. Fay, 2625-P to founder and *Sparks Journal* editor-in-chief Bill Breniman dated October 9, 1979. Breniman had asked him to review an attached 21-page, untitled document by Ellis H. Smellie, 2650-SGP, with an eye to publishing at least some of it in the *Journal*. He recommended that Breniman send it to someone else for review, but apparently that never happened. What is presented here is Mr. Smellie's text, lightly edited. He provides episodic glimpses into marine and wartime wireless communications more than a hundred years ago in exotic (to us) parts of the world.

Australia about 1893. According to a website that describes the 31 audiocassette recordings he made that are available at the State Library Victoria (http://www3.slv.vic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-36/t1-g-t3.html), his childhood was spent in Mallacoota and Bridgewater. He began as a telegrapher for the Victorian Railways and later became a radio operator. He would man 35 different ship and land stations during his long career, including one at Australia's Thursday Island before World War I. At the time he made the recordings (5-10 years after the document extracted here) he was in his 90s and blind.

Reading through the document, one finds some non-sequiturs, stories out of order, crossed-out typing, Australian slang, much self-praise, a few things best left unprinted, and at least one nice tall tale. If, however, you chop your way through this undergrowth a bit you'll find some interesting tales of wired and wireless telegraphy written by a man with panache who lived these adventures in a world now long gone and otherwise forgotten. In keeping with the mission of the Society of Wireless Pioneers and the California Historical Radio Society, herein you will find an edited transcript of selections from the document that Ellis H. Smellie sent for publication in the *Sparks Journal* that never did appear there. Though not normally given to manhandling original historical documents, to keep things organized and understandable I've taken the liberty of rearranging some sections, omitting others, adding most of the sub-headers, adding or subtracting a few words here and there to clarify the unobvious, and generally simplifying. Should anyone wish to see the originals I'd be happy to supply a copy. Keep in mind that any opinions expressed hereafter are very much those of Mr. Smellie alone. Enjoy! -- *Bob Rydzewski*

Growing Up

My family told my wife "Ellis brought himself up." My mother was a widow. Two older brothers went to earn money on their uncle's farm. This left "the man about the house" skinny (my nickname) little important me. At the age of eight, a job milking neighbors' cows and a boat on the Loddon River, rabbit traps, illegal set lines for fish, and odd jobs for little pay helped to keep the wolf from our door. I was also the proud owner of a big gun (actually a small pea rifle).

Because the policeman's wife was offered the first fish from my illegal set lines, that cop was too scared to run us in.

Because my mother was away from home so much working—we were bone poor—my wise, gentle grandmother brought me up if anyone did. She was an English lady. From her it was easy to learn to be honest and fearless. We were very close. On leaving school my first two jobs were: 1) Keeping sparrows and starlings from cherry trees in the orchard, and, 2) Keeping geese out of wheat crops along the banks with my crazy tin boat in the river. The cherry trees were protected but the geese bested me fair and square. They out-thought me, outwitted me, made a fool of me, and had to be sold.

The Code

At the age of 12, Morse code came easy. As a Post Office messenger, the clicking sounder in the office "talked" to me all day after a very short time. But having taught myself, my sending was shocking. When, two years later on my joining the Victorian Railways, the Station Master at Wycheproof, Mr. Gillard, saw a skinny little 14-year-old kid (as he thought) straight from school get out of the train and tell him he had come to help with the wheat season rush, he was shocked and disgusted, and showed it. Wycheproof was a relaying office for stations further up the line and he was a slow, steady type. Being an overly polite Frenchman, he could not tell farmers to go away. He could not terminate a conversation. They were filling in time, waiting till their wheat wagons were unloaded, so Mr. Gillard had to stay up nearly all night doing his office work. He could only read the tape from the register. When he found that not only the telegraph could be left to me but all his clerical work as well, it went to his head. "You can sound read?" he yelled. "You can SOUND READ!" and flattened me with pats on the back.

Maryborough was my next posting. Early in my stay there a man named Frank Black came on at the Head Office Melbourne operating room. His Morse was a pleasure to take. Thirty-five words per minute (WPM) from Frank Black was as easy to take down as 25 WPM even from good senders. As a soldier at the Queenscliff fort (built to repel Russians in the early days)[1] Fred used to handle messages to and from ships entering and leaving Melbourne by

helio lamp. Because the big key had a wide opening to work a shutter, it made his dots better spaced and more spaces between his dashes. It was "improved" Morse.

Wodonga was my next home. It was my job to see to the transfer of stock from the New South Wales side to our trucks on a different gauge track. It was there that one of the directors of a large stock and station firm Dalgetys was upset when I rejected his tempting offer to join his firm. "Morse will do me," made him scratch his head.

Six lads, all first-class telegraphists, were appointed to the Railways operating room. One of them was me, of course. We poor people had been a happy lot. For a year my job was to man an emergency telegraph office at Princes Bridge. Unless there was fog or a breakdown, all that was to be done was to take in a few messages from the public to send to the General Post Office suburban room—manned by women—in Melbourne on the land line. The Post Office and the Railways shared the takings. Both a sounder and a register were on the line. The tape was there to provide a record of work done in a panic. That tape was a godsend to me. After a year of dedicated practice, on a wide-open key with no spring at all, with the maximum up-and-down wrist movement, my thumb under the knob of the key lifting it — my Morse was as good as or better than Fred Black's. Finally only two blemishes remained: a short dash in "T" and a short dash in "A", but only by measurement could they be detected. What spurred me to greater efforts was praise of the women! "You send very well," "It is a pleasure to read you," etc., etc. Years later I could have killed a chap who told me that it was he who had made those remarks from Flinders Street, on the same line. After the women gave "OK" he chipped in and kidded me with false praise.

On my rejoining head office, we worked two lines. It was the fashion to keep a few words behind the sender. Going overboard as usual and keeping six words behind led to my making mistakes. So three was enough after that. Bad sending could be sorted out by keeping behind the sender.

We six lad used to overbuy food and fruit and hand the surplus to a new arrival, Jimmy Brown. Jimmy was there waiting for the building of wireless stations around Australia. He had been a cobber[2] of Marconi's and was the first Officer in Charge of the first wireless station in America at Siasconset, Massachusetts.[3] He was in Africa at the time of the Boer War where the

pay was for messages handled. An Australian named Bill Holloway—who was later a colleague of mine—got more pay than Jimmy though he was a poor operator. He took two messages and let the third be not received while he fixed up the two he had bits and pieces of. That always amused Jimmy to retell.

Wired to Wireless

We used the Balsillie system[4] with Balsillie in charge.[†] When Jimmy Brown got the job in charge at Thursday Island[5] he asked Balsillie for me to be on his staff. For some time he had seen the books on wireless that I was studying and was aware of my knowledge of wireless. My salary trebled when as "Engineer-operator" my three years of happy life at Thursday Island began.

Together we helped to raise two masts, lay down an earth mat of old telephone wires in trenches ten feet apart and a foot deep. For the two main center lengths ten wires were twisted by me into one thick rope using a carpenter's brace. The crossing wires were soldered at each and every junction. A long and boring job, but after being bare to the waist in the tropical sun, my suntan lasted three years. Not long after, we wired up the apparatus and opened for traffic. Jimmy Brown left to take charge of a wireless station in Honolulu. He shared his landing money with Paddy Walsh and me as a gift. Jimmy asked both of us to join him in Honolulu, but only Paddy went. Jimmy finished up as a very popular ship Radio Inspector in Sydney. A mighty little Irishman was Jimmy Brown, and his funeral was an amazingly big one.

Jimmy Brown's place at Thursday Island was taken by a remarkable individual who was younger than any of us. Tall, well built, handsome and ruthless, in many ways a genius, in others a fool. When he, Charlie Tapp, died young, he was the head of a big radio firm. As a Morse man he was a mistake. Now, this was well before such nonsense as exams and certificates were thought up in Australia. My certificates were all handed to me with no examinations at all—self taught. For Charlie four dots in "H" were too many: he paused in the

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[†] Marconi later formally asserted that the Balsillie wireless technology simply copied his.

middle. He could receive OK if the speed was slow enough for him and without rare letters like "Q" and "J".

So the scene was set for my humiliation. The world's worst wireless operator and the best. Why not? I could send up to 40 WPM with "improved Morse" and write down rotten signals at any speed possible. And, mark you, I was an equal expert at sending and receiving, which is rare. A sister station at Port Moresby, New Guinea[6] opened. Hooray! Hooray! He called me with a bunch of messages. The first message from New Guinea was received by me. But alas, the tropical static, radio inductive interference, and other ship and shore stations beat me. Try and try again! Only bits here and there… Not one single complete message. Then Charlie Tapp walked in and took all of those messages with no trouble at all. All in a day's work. Simple.

My changeover from land-line to wireless (sounder to buzzer) at the age of 19 in 1912 had been simple and easy, or so it seemed to me at the time. But Charlie Tapp proved me wrong. He had cut his teeth on following a weak signal through all sorts of louder sounds in the earphones. By ignoring all other noises, he had the ability to read the weak Morse through static, radio inductive interference, and stronger Morse from other ship and coast stations. They say an orchestra conductor can listen to any one of the instruments alone, separated from all the others. This is what Tapp had taught himself to do.

Following two years and fanatical determination and the writing down of thousands of the weakest signal of the lot at the time I could once again hold my head high. Because of my speed and ability to stay a word or two behind—not as easy in radio as land-line—and sort out bad and missed letters, my expertise was greater than Mr. Tapp's. Again, who was the world's best?

Landline (Sounder) Versus Wireless (Buzzer) - An Analogy

Should I be hitchhiking on a narrow road between trees and the driver listened to a news broadcast it would not worry me. The attention or concentration he gave to the news may not have been in use for his driving anyhow. Should a song begin, and he sang along with it, the same would apply. No worries there either. He does not need to know scales or crotchets or

quavers to associate the sound of the music with words. The words and the tune are one to him. No sorting out or thinking need be done. No worries.

Now, let us presume that the driver is one of the world's top landline and radio Morse telegraphists. He could listen to landline sounder clicking out the news and it would be the same to him as a man speaking the words. Actually, a bit more accurate, as each word is spelled out. The sound made by the instrument comes out as words to him. Not only more accuracy but less attention and less concentration needed. But once he starts listening to wireless or buzzer type of Morse, he is getting nearer danger. The sounder dot is two clicks close together; the dash two clicks more widely spaced.[‡] It "talks" at an even speed. The sound is words and sentences. Like handwriting or a voice on the telephone, an estimation of the character and disposition of the sender can be made.[§]

The buzzer Morse is a short sound for a dot and a longer sound for a dash.[**] It must be listened to and followed. A mate of mine, Arthur Sheard, could and did take a message on one line in a Post Office and send it on another without writing it down. He could stay further behind than my own six words. But when he took service messages from me at 60 or 80 words, he would often err in his word count. He missed short words like "the" and "and." I did too, and I settled for three words behind. Under the best conditions and a tone to suit the ear, staying one or two words behind on a buzzer would be the same as three or four words behind on a talking sounder.

[‡] The electrical impulse coming in actuates the sounder's solenoid. It pulls the moving arm down, which then clicks when it hits its stop. When the pulse ends, the arm is released and springs back up, making a second click. So a Morse "dot" is heard as two closely spaced clicks. Same for a "dash" except that the solenoid holds the arm down three times longer, because the electrical pulse for a dash is three times longer than that for a dot. The dots and dashes make up a Morse character, and the evenly spaced (in time, three times the length of a dash) characters make up a word. A longer time separates the words.

[§] A sender's characteristics in various aspects of telegraphic timing and other aspects of sending came to known as the sender's "fist." The "fist" could be unique to a seasoned listener. The author implies personality, as well as information, could be conveyed by a "fist."

[**] A landline buzzer, like a spark signal from the ether, would be heard as a short buzz or tone for a dot and a three times longer buzz or tone for a dash.

Now, by magic, let us presume that my driver is listening to a wireless receiver at Perth Radio when all messages were handled on the calling wave,[††] just after 6PM, dusk time, when the ships come on duty. San Francisco's KPH can be heard but will soon fade out. Singapore is loud. Many ships and coast stations are heard. Static and inductive interference is bothersome. Let that driver try and follow a weak signal through that lot like an orchestra conductor picks one instrument out of fifty to listen to, ignoring all others. That one signal had to be followed through the din, row, and vociferous clatter of shore stations, especially before we changed waves (or frequencies) to take traffic and did it all on the "calling wave." If I were hitchhiking with such a driver would jump out of his car and get a ride with someone safer—or walk, and keep an eye out for wreckage on the side of the road. If I had gotten a later ride with a beautiful blond, I would tell her to watch for a dead body and I would watch her.

On One Shift

Anything to do with our big battleship *HMAS Australia* interested me. Having to sign up for 5 years stopped me from joining the Navy or I would have been one of the six lads, all 40 WPM land-line telegraphers, sent to England for training and service on the *HMAS Australia*. My salary had trebled when at 19 I was appointed to the yet-unbuilt Thursday Island wireless station. So this was a better choice.

In 1914 after the German warships left German New Guinea, Australian troops with warship support captured the nearby German Islands. The Japanese [an ally at the time] took the others. Working "Navy procedure," a tremendous volume of messages passed between *HMAS Australia* and Thursday Island. As it was decoded at the local Navy office by some conscripted staff, errors could be rectified there. My job was to be there at dusk when signals were first heard, and clear the built-up pile, and then send to Melbourne what my mates had not yet sent.

One night static, lightning, and conditions were so bad that no contact was made. We were about 600 miles apart across the very high mountains of New Guinea. Port Moresby was

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[††] The 600 meters wavelength, 500 KHz.

fed the traffic the next night but neither of us could clear much. The heap looked frightening—a week's work. At dusk (Hooray! Hooray!) their very best operator was on. He sent me three. Then I asked for missed words and sent him three. He asked for missed words and sent me three, and so on. Perhaps as many as twenty messages were under our elbows when a clear few minutes would let us clear them all and start afresh.

About 1 AM the good man left. On came the British Chief Petty Officer. He worked one message at a time. When he was sent three messages, he ignored all but the first. He asked for missed words in that, and sent no messages. One at a time—one message in five or ten minutes! My temper rose. My nerves jangled, but the idiocy went on. The two messages I sent him every time to break him down were not written down. He won. Bursting out in uncontrolled sobbing and crying and rage, with the prospect of that craziness continuing for hours and hours till dawn, Charlie Tapp took over. I took a mile walk along the beach and back, and then Tapp handed the phones back to me. As he did so my yell startled him. The good man was back. "Hooray! Hooray! He is back." The routine commenced till daylight faded out the signals. The last OK for the last message was exchanged. The Chief Petty Officer had gone for a meal.

The good man was Dave Fleming. All messages were in figure/number code of five figures [at a time for a "word"]‡‡. Dave's Morse was so even and steady, with perfect long dashes, that figures (numbers) could be read by their length. Five dots in "5" and five dashes in "0" are of very different lengths [as a dash is three times longer than a dot]. Should the first component of a figure be picked out and also the last, the choice was this: to take a risk and work more messages per hour or to make certain of it being accurate and have unsent messages at daylight. Charlie Tapp, who had entry to the decoding room nearby told me, "No errors." So more and more figures were read by their length. Although Dave's sending was even, the signals were not. They came over the very high mountains of New Guinea and varied

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‡‡ E.g.: 50785 95728 85523 74560 73287; in the first set of numbers, the "5=five" is ····· and the 0=zero" is −−−−−. The author is saying that seasoned wireless operators could read the numbers by their unique length alone without focusing on the Morse code signal for each.

all over the place. In and out. Up and down. Fast variations and long variations, and sometimes quite loud and easy to read for short periods.

Unlike me, Dave had signed on with the Navy for five years. Like me, he had joined the Coastal Radio Service. On retirement we both became Radio Officers on merchant ships. Dave was the elder. He must have stayed at sea till around 80. He then began travelling, so he may be anywhere.

German Ships and the Dotty Code

A spin-off of my self-taught course on picking out weak signals was that the German secret code was broken by me when war broke out on August 4, 1914. At that time all ship operators were in bed after midnight. For practice, the exercises of the German ships *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau*, *Comet*,[7] *Gier*, and *Emden* in the early morning hours were used for my practice of latching my eardrums to a tone and keeping them there. Soon every man's "fist" on every ship was known to me. So when Admiral Beatty's ships sunk those two big German ships at the Falklands it seemed to me that a lot of my mates had died.[8] After this, knowing the "fist" of the man aboard, it was my job to advise Navy Melbourne of the secret call sign for all of them.

Yap in the Caroline Islands was the site of a German 400-foot mast (the same as Perth and Sydney). On a long wavelength of about 900 meters Yap sent what was dubbed "Dotty" code. Just before the Japanese gunned the station—yes, they were on our side then, with Britain and Japan having a sweetheart agreement and Japan modelling their Army on the Germans but their Navy on the British—that code was sorted out as a dot before each dot and dash. That is, as if the key made a false dot on its way down. Before then, though thousands of words had been copied by me, its makeup was obscure. [§§]

[§§] The "dotty code" is a quick and dirty way to keep the naive from making any sense at all of intercepted and even encrypted Morse code message content. It is about as simple an additive cypher as can be. And it would work -- until even a field-expedient cryptanalyst thought about it. But it could make a difference, in the ether, between some interceptions and fewer interceptions. Any operational security is better than none.

It happened after midnight. Wakening from a doze with the "Dotty" code tuned in, it was as readable as Morse. Slow Morse. But when I was fully awake to read it was impossible. When war broke out, however, reading it was a "must." By sending myself into "wakening up" mode, with no thoughts and just allowing it to "flow through" I could read it again. Let one thought take over, though, and it was gone. It was a ten-letter code: a consonant and a vowel, a consonant and a vowel… From sunset to midnight my task was to copy Yap. Then to the landline, where we put [the copy] through, via four repeaters, over 2000 miles to Melbourne. My widely spaced dots went through those repeaters at speeds three times those of my mates.***

Weak Signals

Out of the hundreds of times that my ability to read crook Morse and weak signals was made use of, I will detail three. The first was at Applecross (Perth Radio Western Australia) when one of my mates could not make a decent copy of an hourly new bulletin sent on about 17,000 meters from aerials on masts some 600 feet high by Nauen in Germany.[9] It suited me to come up about 3AM, take it down, send it on a land-line to Melbourne, and go home, my day's work done.

Commander Bowen, the Navy head of the patrol boats at Freemantle told his radio lads he would hornswoggle one or two of them into our service if they were good boys. One of them, Jack Christie, was put on my Navy shift for training and appraisal. He would listen to nothing I told him, but gave me the benefit of his Navy training. After a week, early one morning he asked me to give him "the watch." With a pair of earphones in parallel, the chance of a sleep was taken and down on the floor did me fine. Some sixth sense—others also had it— woke me to hear a very weak ship say "Here – QRB - 2500 - QRM - QRN - cannot hear you - here six on spec," and he sent six messages. This was before the nonsense of going off the calling wave to work traffic was thought of. Jack wondered why a pad of forms was grabbed and messages written down. On the third message Jack identified the ship sending to me and

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*** The author here may be saying that his clean Morse code never required repeats.

then got bits and pieces. My "Give him OK for six" amazed him. Next day he said to me, "Ellis, will you please teach me the job?" In the last war (World War II) Jack was selected to train Air Force trainee pilots in Morse code.

From his ship in Freemantle a Radio Officer named Beard came to Perth Radio to ask me if a tale Tapp told him was true. It was that in 1913 "mind over mind at 300 miles" was used by me to turn Sid Cusack at Port Moresby from a frightful sender into a better-than-average sender. British Navy trained Sid Cusack sent the worst Morse anyone ever heard. Worse still, when he broke, he did not repeat the word he broke on, but the one before it. Often, he went backwards. Sid often broke five or six times on "tomorrow." If he made a mess of it he would pause. If he paused long enough, he would carry on, but habit often took over and he would repeat "tomorrow" and be made to repeat the whole message. Finally, after working with me he sent very carefully. His confidence returned and he was better than average—never an error at all. Tapp later took a bunch of traffic from Cusack and asked me "Who is that?" "Sid Cusack," he was told. "I cannot read Sid," he said. "This is good Morse." Tapp, amazed, asked me how it was done. Jokingly, he was told "Mind over mind at 300 miles and nothing else!"

SOS - CQD

Very few coastal Radio Officers ever heard and worked an SOS (CQD in the old days: "CQ" for general call and "D" for distress). Six that I heard and worked come to mind. The *Suva* went ashore on a sandbank in the Gulf of Carpinteria, the *Merrimac* (?) 80 miles south of Thursday Island, and the Dutch passenger liner *Tasman* on Bramble Cay for five days or more halfway between Thursday Island and Port Moresby. All of these were during my 1912/1913 tour at Thursday Island. Then there was the *Saros* ashore at Everard on the sand, the *Kahika* SOS via Melbourne Radio and the sticky SOS from the *Trevessa* 1600 miles west of Perth. Five men on the *Trevessa* died who should not have died. Was the blame partly mine?

The *Kahika* ashore on the NW corner of Tasmania in the war year of 1940 sent an SOS, then "On the rocks," then "now going off," and then was gone.[10] Melbourne Radio was part of the big Beam office and the Beam supervisor, an ex-Coastal Radio man, agreed with me they were now swimming for their lives. Alas, one vital figure of their position was missing. The

Radio Officer's "fist" was known to me: it was not an enemy submarine with a false call. So a CQ call was made—someone please give that missing figure! To our amazement, all ships in the vicinity came in with their positions and how much coal they had and how long it would take them to get there. The Navy sent *Victoria* to Tasmania fast ferry with a doctor. He would certainly be needed as they would have no time to take to the boats before the ship sank in deep water.

After being off duty for three months with a nervous collapse which took me two years to get over, the fate of the *Kahika* was told to me. "Going off" meant that they rowed ashore to a village on a clear night in calm waters. They drank the pub dry. The publican's wife played, the barmaid sang, the locals joined in, and a good time was had by all.

The captain of the *Trevessa* became a British hero. He wrote a book about the boats going west to Madagascar.[11] My fate for him would have been the firing squad. The ship was in trouble with a shifted cargo of mineral sludge and had been listing for two days. At 3:45 AM [on June 3, 1923] he sent his SOS and abandoned ship. He had left it too late. The radio aerial was earthed (grounded) on the funnel or somewhere, and our replies—mine—were not heard by the good operator aboard. My quandary was: should the big, high power set be used? It would mean my sprinting 50 yards to the engine room and starting the 45 HP Gardiner engine by hand. This drove, by belt, a 35 kW DC generator which could pump three times the power into my 2 kW Telefunken transmitter.[12] There is no answer as to whether it should or should not have been done. The *Trevessa* boats waited for 36 hours, then thinking their SOS had not been heard, they sailed west. One hour later a sister ship, *Tregenna*, got there. A bit later another sister ship, the *Trevean* also arrived on the scene.

The *SS Tasman* SOS in 1913 should not have been mine at all. On coming on duty at 6AM, Bill Wing said to me "There was an SOS, or something like one, about 1AM. Static was too bad to be sure, and no one was there since." As he spoke the *Tasman* called "Ashore on Bramble Cay." Bill had laid down on his bed for an hour or so but had overslept and had only just awakened. The wreck was world news as a famous singer, Madame Nordica,[13] was aboard. After pumps sent from Townsville had pumped the ship out, the *Tasman* came to Thursday

Island. The whole island laughed when a crowing rooster was bought by Madame Nordica and beheaded: she could not stand hearing it crow at dawn.

Another SOS heard by me was the *SS Van Cloon*, ashore on the coast of Java.[14] No one answered it. Acting on an urgent memo sent by the land line, Darwin (Australia) sent a cable to the Dutch shore station on Java. He started up and called CQ, and contact was made. Darwin could have heard my calls, but it was my decision not to risk interfering with the SOS itself.

An amusing fiasco was the *Suva*. Thursday Island was working the ship for some time when Townsville Radio worked out that they were the nearest Coastal station to the *Suva* and demanded we hand over the working to them. Are we civilized when that sort of thing happens?

The Model L Receiver and DX

At Applecross (Perth Radio Western Australia) there was an extensive umbrella aerial branching out from the top of a 400-foot high Telefunken mast, and the station was on the top of a fairly high hill. Brilliant reception from ships was possible because of this and a marvelous British Navy receiver, the Model L. The Model L was a one valve receiver with a variable grid leak. Both A and B voltages to the filament and plate of the valve were adjustable. The aerial coil, of thick wire, had a condenser across it. So, of course, did the secondary coil, also of thick wire. The coupling between the aerial coil and the secondary was adjustable from maximum to nil. In addition, the tone of the audio signal was brought to a peak with a variable inductance. The core of the inductance was pulled out or pushed in to isolate the note of the audio signal by tuning out the unwanted ships or coastal stations sending at the same time. It also lessened static and radio interference. Because the condensers had to follow the variation of coupling and the signal could be lost till the right settings were reached, most of the staff rarely used these great advantages. Ray Anderson, who was Navy trained, and I used it to tune in every call. We knew the condenser settings. Ray taught me the set's terrific capabilities.

The procedure was this: Lessen the coupling between the aerial and the secondary coil till the signal was just audible, readjusting the condensers to match. Then, having tuned out strong signals and static, increase the grid leak to near infinity. Increase the voltage on the plate

or find the best setting. Then peak the resonance of the final audio tone. That weak ship was now isolated two ways and my trademark was sent out: "K the lot one fast sending." If any of you old gaffers can remember that from Perth Radio in the twenties, that would be me. From Melbourne Radio in the 1940s and 1950s my trademark was "2 THANKU" or dot dot dot dash dot --dot.[†††]

Distance mattered not at all—often beyond 2000 miles, now and then over 3000. We would lose ships near Colombo (Sri Lanka) but pick them up again when nearing Suez. Lance Allison (who learned his trade with New South Wales Railways) and I were fanatics on long distance work. Many ships' operators relayed traffic every time they came our way. Three lads (all non-drinkers) in the *Themistocles* used to contact us from near South Africa's southern tip both coming and going. Ships went west up near the equator and came east nearer the South Pole, so over 1000 miles separated them. A clever P&O ship operator used to know the time and hours good working conditions might prevail. It varied and he would come on in the early morning specifically to contact us from near Suez.

Willing Workers

A mate of mine in Australian Coastal Radio was a wizard at getting others to do his work for him. Perth Radio has the most extensive coverage of any coastal station. But instead of struggling with weak signals from ships up to 3500 miles off it suited Freddy to have a "willing worker" [a ship's radio operator at sea] about 500 miles off [the coast] collecting the traffic and sending it in batches with loud signals. Fred had them not only doing it, but eager and proud to do it. We others were all for it. Freddy's "willing workers" relayed for us as well till they were out of range.

Once, just before he was due to hand over to me at midnight, Freddy was cozy. Before a roaring log fire, he had tilted his office chair and put his feet up. Light came over his left shoulder. With a cushion under his head, Freddy was reading. By reaching over his head he could tune the receiver. By stretching his arm across his chest, he could reach the key to transmit. A Norwegian ship called, with a weak signal. Freddy's "willing worker" was not there.

[†††] The author's dots and dash may have been heard as his "sine" or radio signature.

The ship called again. In order to start his willing worker, Fred told him his signal was weak. "But," the ship replied, "we have just left Freemantle" and it went on to send a long TR.

Freddy reached over his head and tuned him in. With earphones clamped tightly to your head, have you ever tuned in a 2 kW Telefunken set at the range of 10 miles? The roar could have been read at the top of the 400-foot-high mast! Fred swung his arms up to drag off the earphones but could not get there. The whole crazy contraption collapsed, and Fred was on the floor. The tilted chair fell into the fire. The diabolical roar in his ears sent him berserk. It went in both ears, with no way out.

When I got there, he still had his little fingers in both ears trying to dig it out. He was still digging as he went home down the hill.

Down to the Sea in Ships

Of the more than 100 ship's captains in the 32 ships that had me aboard, two were worse than almost any of our own men. One, over 70, would not allow the radar to be used because it might break down. Another spoke to me only on the day he saw the last of me. He had become a "loner" because he thought it a good idea not to mix with those he might have to discipline. He was only seen in the saloon on Sunday for the midday dinner. He went down, gobbled his food, and went up to his cabin. He talked to his budgerigar (an Australian parakeet) in a cage. He was as mad as a hatter.

The half-drunk captain of the *Bass Trader* sacked me because of my not being able to fix the radar in ten minutes in the fog at Port Phillip Bay. He was told off by Bruce Spriggs and had to put up with me still being aboard.

My most interesting ship was the oil rig *Navigator*, owned by Zapata of USA. Wayne Callan, the shore boss in Darwin, told me that no man should stay aboard more than three weeks: trouble erupts after that. My stay of three months was a record. My brawls with the Hungarian helicopter mechanic and others never reached his ears, and he wanted me back. Zapata did the drilling only, and a man was there to tell them how to do it. About 13 "contracts" were let for all else. Twice a week a helicopter was full bringing specialists from Sydney and Melbourne, many staying only a week. Fishing took up my time there. It was

banned later on. The constant stream of new faces suited me fine. Most had more brains than me and were good company. The pay seemed high, but the hourly rate was low. I was on call 24 hours a day, on watch—more or less—for 18 hours, seven days a week. It was hard to leave, but it was no longer possible to leave my wife alone at home. My wife and my sister desperately needed me there. *Navigator* was my last ship.

No Respect for Shipboard Radio Operators

I was with the Australian Coastal Radio Service at Thursday Island and Port Moresby in the Post Office. Port Moresby, Adelaide, and Perth in the Navy, Perth again in the Post Office, Geraldton, Broome and Melbourne under Amalgamated Wireless (Aust) Ltd. Then Melbourne, Thursday Island, Hobart, and Adelaide under Overseas Telecommunications Commission. Many ship operators came visiting and firm friendships were made. Far too many were unhappy. Soft city lads, unwanted aboard, they wilted under the sarcasm and teasing by the flatfooted fussy floorwalkers on the bridge, became "loners" and went downhill.

One day after my 65th birthday I was afloat. An old mate who ran the ship Radio Officers for AWA [Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia)] had shifted a man off the best ship for me out of Melbourne. The Radio Inspector who examined me for the ships grinned when he met me: "You have already passed." Another old mate (now a P.O. head) had put in a word for me. With old friends to rely on, no ship's captain need be feared. Perhaps foolishly, it was my task to even matters up with those bridge floorwalkers who had caused young Radio Officers so much distress.

A few of those uppity, snooty navigators told me where I was wrong and, oh the brawls and snarling matches that took place over those 10 years! They had never understood the reason that Radio Officers, ships' carpenters, and ships' electricians becoming "loners" was blamed on them. "Radio Officers are always treated as dills (idiots). The best they can hope for is to be tolerated." Far too often, this statement had the ring of truth to it.

When my first of six times aboard a "special service" small ship had begun, the lad being relieved was a handsome, active, articulate young man who could have been a ruckman on a football field.[15] On my last time aboard the same man was there. He acted like a broken old

man. For five or six years he had demanded to be on that ship. They told me that for some time would leave his cabin/radio shack at mealtimes only. He gobbled up his food and went up again. He had won a large sum in a lottery and then went ashore but came back to that damned ship. After three weeks aboard, all the rest of us yelled "Off!" His cabin was full of science fiction books. Each time his going downhill was plain to see over the years, both myself and others told AWA to shift him off for his own good. But it suited Sydney to have a permanent man there instead of one for three weeks only. We lost touch. Let us hope he recovered.

Beam Me Up, Scotty!

Has any old SOWP gaffer got a set to drag in matter as well as wireless signals? If so, and if Willie Beamer turns up please tell him to give me a call in Melbourne. Wille Beamer was ahead of his time 70 years ago. He put a transmitter in his bedroom and a receiver down in a hut in the back yard. Then he sent a piece of wood from his bedroom to his shack. Next, his cat made the journey safely and then, after Willie had a lot of trouble with the feathers, a fowl.

It hit the headlines, and a great crowd gathered at Willie's home to see a demonstration. Scientists came from all over the place. They were petrified with terror and horror as they saw Willie slowly fade away. He was putting himself through. They fell over things and each other in the dark as each rushed to the cabin in the back yard to greet Willie there. Alas! Willie had not switched on his receiver and is still somewhere waiting to be picked up.

Should he be collected on a planet circling a sun in the Southern Cross, will Willie be able to point to where he was from? What age will he be? Still a boy, or my age, 85?[16]

AND HERE MR. SMELLIE'S ACCOUNT COMES TO A CLOSE.
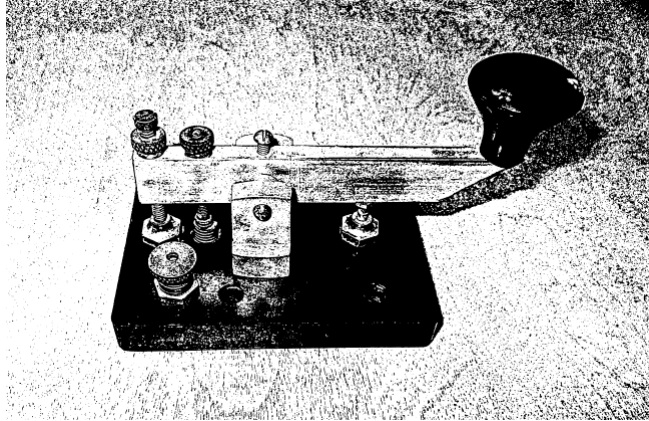
"Aussie key" from the collection of Bob Rydzewski

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[1] According to Wikipedia, Fort Queenscliff in Victoria, Australia, was built to protect Melbourne from hostile powers, identified at various times as the French, the Russians, and, during the American Civil War, the United States.

[2] An Australian term for "friend"

[3] Ellis's original text says "'Siar's Concert' or some such name".

[4] John Graeme Balsillie (1885-1924) established Australia's first coastal wireless telegraphy network.

[5] Thursday Island is off the tip of the northernmost part of the Australian continent, the Cape York peninsula, across the Torres Strait from Papua New Guinea.

[6] About 350 miles ENE of Thursday Island.

[7] According to Wikipedia, however, *SMS Comet* had been decommissioned in 1911 and was in German coastal waters at the time: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMS_Comet.

[8] On December 8, 1914, Admiral Beatty's ships, including the HMS I*nvincible* and HMS I*nflexible* sank the SMS *Scharnhorst*, the flagship of Vice Admiral Maximillian Graf von Spee, with him and 800 German sailors on board, as well as the SMS *Gneisenau* at the Battle of the Falkland Islands.

[9] Station POZ.

[10] According to the Burnie, Tasmania *Advocate*, on March 18, 1940, the *Kahika*, belonging to the Union Steamship Company and laden with ore, struck an uncharted rock and foundered. Their wireless operator, J.D. Ferguson, sent the SOS. All 24 on board reached shore.

[11] Captain Cecil Foster, *1700 Miles in Open Boats: The Story of the Loss of the S.S. Trevessa in the Indian Ocean, and the Voyage of Her Boats to Safety* (London, Marin Hopkinson & Co., 1926).

[12] Mr. Smellie unfortunately did not elaborate on the disadvantage of going to start up the high power transmitter, but one reason might be that, if lacking another radio operator to monitor reception, vital information could be lost while starting up the high power transmitter, which might not have been heard anyway.

[13] Lillian Nordica, born Lillian Norton, of Farmington, Massachusetts, was an opera diva chosen by Cosima Wagner as the first American to sing at the Richard Wagner festival in Bayreuth, Germany. After the *Tasman* incident, and possibly as a result of it she contracted pneumonia. Continuing on her world tour, she died in Java the following year.

[14] The *Van Cloon* was sunk by Japanese gunfire on February 7, 1942, then salvaged by the Japanese Navy, renamed the *Tatebe Maru*, and sunk again by US aircraft on January 12, 1945. Source: https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?190924

[15] The ruckman is an important position player in Australian rules football.

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[16] Any reader who turns on his receiver only to find Wille Beamer materializing is urged to seek professional help. Keep in mind, though, that tales of this type, though usually about the possibility of it rather than an account of it, can be found in the radio literature of the early 1920s.