

K H K IN THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

by H. W. Dickow

In the mountains of Oahu, some twenty-five miles beyond the naval base at Pearl Harbor, the Mutual Telephone Company of Hawaii erected an important wireless station in the little village of Wahiawa shortly after Marconi first spanned the Atlantic. Its first call letters were HK, then KHK when the new series of station calls was assigned.

Wahiawa, pronounced Wah-hee-ah-wah, was a one-street town a single block long surrounded by rice paddies, sugar-cane fields and pineapple plantations. Its business district contained a half-dozen little shops operated by local Japanese and Chinese residents, whose places were stocked with sparse quantities of merchandise and a surplus of mosquitos and flies.

The wireless station at KHK was commandeered by the U.S. Navy from the Mutual Telephone Company for the duration of World War II and a complement of navy wireless operators replaced the civilians who had earlier manned the plant.

I was selected to assume charge. Orders were duly written by the District Communication Superintendent in Honolulu, and I was summoned before him for further instructions.

"You will take charge of KHK," he said, "And you will then make your presence known to the mayor, the chief of police, the fire chief, the sheriff, and the coroner - and, believe me, he's a hell of a fine fellow."

KHK was a picture-book station, set in the center of a grass lawn two blocks in area. It consisted of the wireless operations building, a power house, storage building, telephone exchange, and living quarters for the operating personnel.

The station was the hub of an inter-island network which included Maui, Hawaii, Kauai, and Molokai. It was also the principal source of communication with ships at sea, and it maintained a nightly schedule with a station in Samoa. It did not handle traffic with naval vessels, but it served the U.S. Army transports on the Trans-Pacific route.

There wasn't a radio operator in Hawaii who did not cherish a post at KHK. The station was surrounded by pineapple fields, while bananas, papayas, and other tropical fruit grew on trees nearby.

Living costs were low. An entire week's washing and ironing of white uniforms cost only twenty-five cents when performed by the local Japanese colony, while a full meal in the Japanese restaurant on the main thoroughfare could be had for a like amount.

The spark gap at KHK was of the rotary variety. It emitted a beautiful sing-song note, which on a clear night could be heard many blocks away.

The operators sent to the station by the Navy were, with few exceptions, ex-Marconi men who had been recruited into the service hurriedly on the outbreak of World War I. They were among the best. They had to be, because



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their duties required them to work in both the Morse and Continental codes. They were good land-wire telegraphers and good wireless men. They often worked in eight-hour shifts. They handled hundreds of plain-language messages daily, and a wide assortment of four- and five- and ten-letter code groups of commercial and governmental origin.

One of these operators was Wallace G. Ludgate, whose proficiency rating was above average. He was a native of Portland, Oregon.

And one of the employees at the wireless station was a young Japanese caretaker named Ogawa.

Ogawa and Ludgate did not see eye to eye. Dislike gave rise to scorn when Ludgate learned that Ogawa, who spoke no English, was paid a higher salary for his services as a roustabout than any of the wireless operators at KHK received from the U.S. Navy for performing skilled duties.

When Ogawa was first hired, he was told that it would be necessary for him to go to Pearl Harbor once each month to collect his pay. He would be asked to identify himself by name, whereupon the clerk in the paymaster's office would produce a voucher.

Ludgate took it upon himself to tutor Ogawa in the rudiments of the English language, teaching him only a few words, but enough to enable him to identify himself properly when he appeared before the paymaster.

When payday came, Ogawa proceeded to Pearl Harbor. Standing at the paymaster's wicket, a navy yeoman addressed him:

"What is your name?"

The Japanese caretaker replied: "My - - name - - Ogawa - - I - - am -- Japanese - - sonofabitch."

He did not know what he had said.

Then the telephone rang in the office at KHK. It was the Paymaster himself, at Pearl Harbor, demanding that I explain the actions of the Japanese. I did not know whereof he spoke because I had not been apprised of the situation by Ludgate.

When the situation was explained to me, I burst into laughter. At the other end of the line, the Paymaster did likewise. And we both hung up.

Ludgate's Return to Portland

The war ended, Ludgate returned to his home in Portland and accepted employment with the Telephone Company. Like the rest of us, he had been an amateur from the days of his youth and he chose to resume his lifelong hobby.

In need of a better antenna and a higher pole to support it, he dug a deep hole in his backyard in the place where the new pole was to be erected. He was at work on it when lunch hour came. His wife Doris called to him. He did not answer. She peered out the back window and saw him lying on the ground at the site of the hole. When she reached his side, she found him dead. Wallace Ludgate had, literally, dug his own grave.

Story from unpublished book "TALES OF THE WIRELESS PIONEERS" (BOOK 2 - Telegraphers & others I have known) by the late Henry W. Dickow, Honorary Member #1 and Member 3-SSGP. Mr. Dickow donated his publications to Bill Breniman before becoming a silent key on April 17, 1971. The 'Ancient Mariner' is publishing them for enjoyment of Society members.