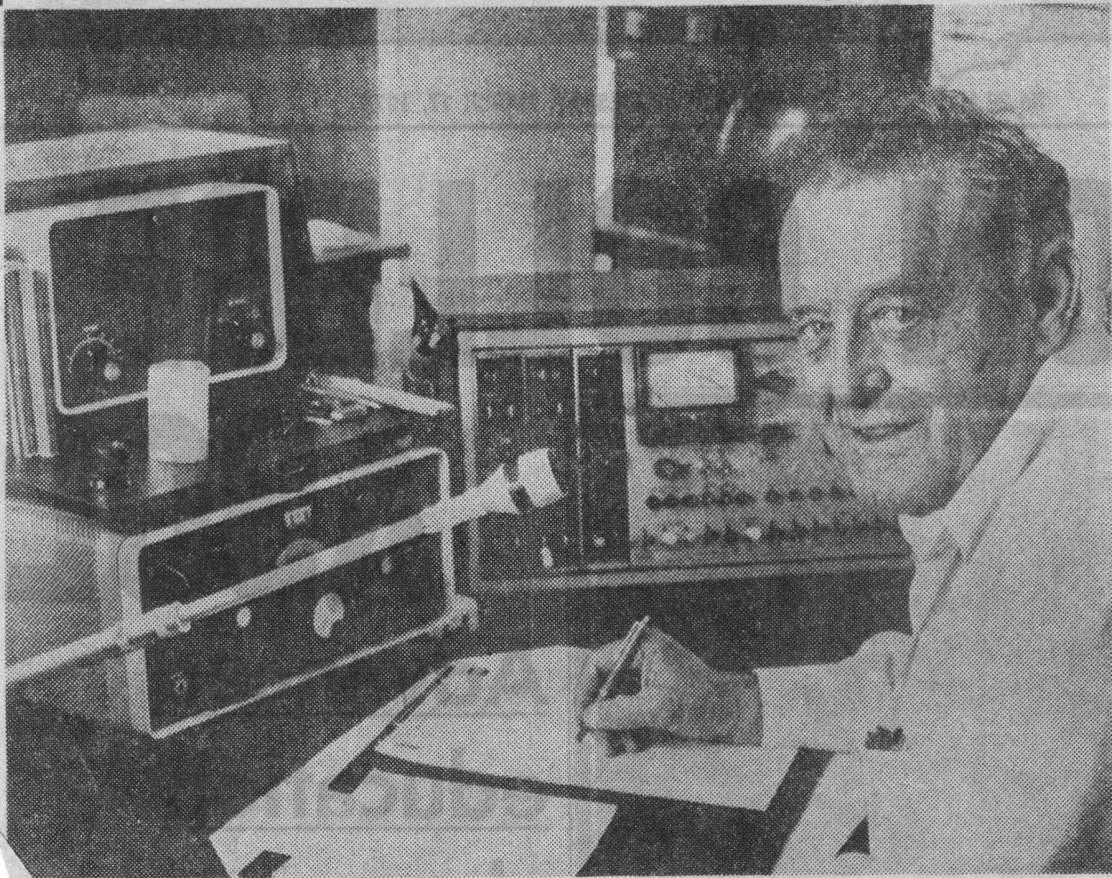


Sailors' friend calls it day



HARRY BANKS might not hear a telephone ring but a faint "Mayday, Mayday" call on the radio registers with him immediately.

● Mr Harry Banks at the microphone on his last day at Hobart Radio.

His ear is finely tuned to distress calls after 17 years as a radio operator with Hobart Radio, OTC's coastal service based on top of the Domain.

Mr Banks retired yesterday full of praise for the coastal service OTC provides.

The station communicates with fishing boats, yachts and pleasure craft by radio telephone to guard their safety, take messages, and give navigation help, weather forecasts, and warnings.

It covers Bass Strait, all Tasmanian waters and beyond. It has receiving stations on Mount Rumney and Bruny Island and the range can extend to New Zealand although there are dead spots around Tasmania's coast.

Salvage vessel

Mr Banks said the service had improved tremendously since he started as a radio operator.

"The equipment here is completely up-to-date and I don't think OTC get enough credit for the service they provide," he said.

"This station is going on to better things all the time. It's a very elaborate station, as well equipped as any other in Australia, and it's

hurts people who were involved."

His sensitivity to distress calls has been heightened by nine years at sea on cargo boats when he has had to send Mayday calls, as well as receive them.

"Hearing calls is a subconscious thing with me now," he said. "We had some technicians up here some time ago and when I was out of the room they had to tell me the phone was ringing."

"Later in the day I heard a faint Mayday call come in which they missed completely."

Two shifts

Another call he doesn't miss hearing is the slightly less urgent call — Pan.

For the past three years Hobart Radio has provided a 24-hour service.

The station is manned in two shifts from 7.30 am to 5.30 pm. At other times Melbourne Radio receives and transmits calls around Tasmania by land line.

Mr Banks said the service could not be completely operated from Melbourne because the load would be too great through the busy periods and local know-

ledge played a big part in providing efficient help.

"I've had phone calls from Melbourne at night asking where a particular landmark is because fishermen have strange ways of describing them."

"There are about 600 boats licensed to carry radio working off Tasmania and every skipper has a different intonation to his voice."

"There have been several occasions, some of them distress calls, where we have identified the boat simply by the voice on the radio."

Mr Banks began as a telegraphist in New Zealand and he worked as a radio communicator during World War Two and on ships after the war.

"I grew up with Morse code and I got a lot of satisfaction and enjoyment from that work," he said.

Mr Banks "swallowed the anchor" when he got married and settled in Tasmania as council clerk at Richmond.

He gave up that job 21 years later to join Hobart Radio and he won't be losing contact completely with radio in his retirement.

He is a licensed amateur radio operator.

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"The equipment here is completely up-to-date and I don't think OTC get enough credit for the service they provide," he said.

"This station is going on to better things all the time. It's a very elaborate station, as well equipped as any other in Australia, and it's fully backed up so power failures or accidents don't put us out."

Reports of recent cuts on the weather service given by Hobart Radio were not entirely accurate.

Weather forecasts were still provided. The only cuts were on coastal reports which covered the state of the sea, barometric pressures and the wind.

If a vessel requested that information it was provided by the Weather Bureau without hesitation, he said.

In his time at Hobart Radio Mr Banks has answered many Mayday calls but he prefers not to talk about them.

"A Mayday call means someone is in trouble. If it turns out all right it's forgotten and if the call is followed by tragedy, recalling it only

hurts people who were involved."

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