

8 Penguin Parade,
Burleigh Waters, Q'ld 4220
27th September 1994 (et on)

VK7RO, Hobart:

Dear OM,

At last a start on the letter about VIH. Although I have visited the station (early 1967 just before the fires) I did not have the pleasure of working there. I've worked with many of the people who did and they were unanimous in their praise of the station and the Hobart lifestyle - and their regrets at having to leave it.

As mentioned previously, VIH was the second of the "formal" Coast Stations to be set up; VIM the first on 8th February 1912 and Hobart on 30th April. However there was an "informal" ship-shore service set up in Sydney by special license to the Australasian Wireless Company. Its first operations were from the Bulletin Building and shortly after from the 6th floor of the Australia Hotel. This was in 1910; the permit issued on 27th August.

As far as I can ascertain, the first recorded ship-shore radio communication in Australia was in 1899 when staff of the WA Post Office conducted test transmissions between the Royal Yacht Club, Perth, and a police launch on the Swan River. This was in October. In Melbourne H. W. Jenvey (father of OTC's Chief Engineer, Bill - a silent key - used to be VK3AY, then VK220) was in contact with HMS St. George in May 1901 and a few weeks later the Hobart boys had their turn with that ship. You will recall the re-enactment some years ago. In Brisbane HMCS "Gayundah" was fitted and communicated with PO staff - this was in 1900.

Recommendation for setting up the stations came from a committee of PMG and Defence Department representatives in 1907. The need for wireless safety came in July 1909 when SS Waratah was lost on passage from South Africa to Australia. There was also concern about German intentions in its Pacific territories. In September Commonwealth Government provided £10,000 in the estimates.

Then the fun started with competing companies taking each other to court. You can read about it in "Taming The Tyrant" by E. C. Harcourt ISBN 0 04 9940112. Very well written, a most interesting insight into our early telecommunication problems both technically and politically.

The upshot was that the high power stations at Sydney and Perth would be built by Australasian Wireless (Telefunken) and that the government would build stations at Hobart, Melbourne, Cooktown and Port Moresby, the equipment being designed by J. C. Balsillie -(an Australian radio engineer) and manufactured by Father Shaw's Randwick Wireless Works in Sydney. These stations were operational well ahead of Sydney and Perth.

The upshot of the litigation was the combining of Australasian Wireless, Telefunken and Marconi Company into Amalgamated Wireless Australasia, A.W.A.

All told, 19 stations were set up between 1912 and 1914. Their ranges overlapped slightly. At night when the 500 kHz range extended the smaller stations were not needed and so Hobart, Esperance, Geraldton, Roebourne and Rockhampton operated daytime only. In 1914 all came under Navy control; I am uncertain but feel it likely that all would have been on continuous watch.

Navy control continued until 1920 when it reverted to PMG and in 1922 to AWA. OTC took control in 1946.

In 1927 AWA opened the beam service to England with equipment at Rockbank and Ballan, well inland. Melbourne Radio ceased operation at the Domain and transferred to the Queen Street office in Melbourne with remote control of its transmitters at the inland sites.

During WW2 all stations went back on continuous watch. Tom Weekes told me about

the good life at VIH. There was a good fire burning throughout the winter and it was a real home away from home. The duty operator provided a kettle of boiling water for the relief's cuppa so that he could thaw out after the long cold walk up to the station. Watchkeeping was pretty intense; never knew when some faint QRP lifeboat distress call was likely. Tom was a most interesting and entertaining OIC; he was a junior Signals rating on HMAS Sydney when she sank the Emden at Cocos Island. He did a stint at Thursday Island VII during the war (WW2) and then back to VIH, never expecting to be transferred again but in 1953 he had to come back to VII - and how he hated it !! He did have a ham callsign but I cannot locate it.

After the war small ships started fitting radio in earnest; a mixture of converted disposals stuff along with commercially made; you will recall the various small companies of that time along with the big boys. It was then that VIH came into its own; very good propagation being near the sea. 2524 kHz was the popular intership frequency but not being an international distress frequency the CRS was not licensed for it. We used 6280. The problem was that 2524 was the big seller and the companies optimised the centre loaded whips for it; on 6280 the signal was very poor. Eventually the Radio Branch insisted that plain whips were to be used and ATUs, switchable, mandatory. I think that this is when the smaller manufacturers dropped out. Later on distress and calling frequencies in the 2 and 4 MHz bands were allocated along with radfones with channels right across the 2-30 MHz range.

2182 kHz was right up VIH's alley, being right on the water's edge. VIM had had its gear remoted to Ballan and Rockbank as previously mentioned. As you know, frequencies in the 1.5-3 MHz range suffer severe attenuation over land; Ballan was 44 air miles from Port Phillip and 96 from Cape Otway. At Sydney our transmitters were at Doonside, abt 28 miles from LaPerouse so 2182 was installed at that site near the sea. In those days our receivers were there too.

VIH did very well, able to work ships all around the state plus some outpost radios down in the southwest. QRN had been a problem - you can see the flashes from Risdon - and by 1967 a remote receiving site had been opened at Mt. Romney, later, I believe, on Bruny Island. At the VIH site a conical monopole transmitting antenna was installed, the only CRS station to have one as far as I know. (Pity that it wasn't left for you; should have been tuneable on 160 metres. It covered the 2-8 MHz range.)

However the change of VIM to Cape Schank overcame the HF problem and was, I think, the beginning of the end for VIH as it could cover the same area, and VHF translators were in the offing. There was talk of closing VIH 20 years ago and more but local political pressure prevailed. As it was, VIH was remoted through VIM at night for many years before it did cease operation.

Now for a couple of tales out of school. The outside of the building is much as it was in 1912 but the interior has been altered. Back in the early 1960s OTC designed and installed new operating consoles for the stations. An installation team came down from Sydney and did the job at VIH. Then one morning the oncoming operator found himself with a complete electrical failure. He called the OIC and he called an electrician.

This man poked around here and there, opened the back of the console and found that the earthing was via the lead sheathing of the a.c. cables. He took a horrified look and called the Hydro. Its Inspector promptly condemned the whole show.

I don't know what the fault was but the electrician found and rectified it and also earthed things in the approved manner with 7/20 copper or whatever. Also found that the main fuses were in the neutral; probably a hangover from wartime when this was often done by electricians in domestic/civilian situations due to limited supplies of cable. (If the old rubber insulated cloth covered active broke down to earth, the wires were reversed at the switchboard as a temporary measure, I worked in a bank in Sydney just after the war; Sel VK2SH was 1st teller, I was 2nd and my old Signals Officer Jack VK2CX was a customer; the manager would emerge and break up the hamfest. Hold-up alarms had to be installed; at our branch the electrician removed the fuses and touched what he thought was the neutral and got a helluva belt; he then explained what had been going on.)

Anyway, the incident was reported to Head Office. The manager got a rocket for having brought the Hydro in !!! Little did the big boys know that in Tasmania the Hydro might not equate with the Almighty but it comes very close - as far as electricians are concerned.

VIH was not a high density paid traffic station. Most of the ships going to VK7 went to the north coast ports; Launceston, Bell Bay, Beauty Point, Devonport, Burnie and Port Latta from where they could work VIM on MF at any hour. The small traffic figures at VIH worried nobody there or at Head Office. Not so at other stations where some of the old-timer OICs were convinced that HO was staffed by a vast army of clerks who, when not drinking innumerable cups of tea, plotted and schemed indescribable evil against the Coast Service in general and their station in particular, it being, of course the most important link in the chain.

One beef was that VIS and VIP with their HF took the lion's share of the traffic resulting in the small figures from the outstations and this did not reflect their True Worth. So they demanded Their Rights; at Sydney we were instructed to redirect all paid traffic to the station that listed the particular ship as being "in range"; i.e. MF.

It was a darned nuisance; no sooner had we redirected the traffic via the PMG than the ship would bob up on HF for it; then we'd have to go through all the rigmarole of cancelling, but orders were orders.

One day a long, very long, message came for one of the cruise ships. Being in VIH range it was redirected. In due course VIH sent us a REDIP (Redirected to ship in port) and the call sign was taken off the traffic list and the message endorsed and filed.

Years later we found out what had happened when Bill VK2YZ (SK) went to VIH for a leave relief. His foot was barely through the door when he was informed, more in sorrow than anger, about the Dreadful Disaster that had shaken the place to its foundations some years before. That this enormous message, more paid words than VIH would handle in months, came in. But worse was to follow; the ship was alongside and its radio room closed down; the message had to be redirected for delivery as an ordinary telegram through the PMG channels. So it all had to be sent back to the Hobart CTO and then a service message made out to the office of origin explaining this and authorising refund of ship charges - coast and landline charges to stand, and then another to VIS (the Redip). Nothing as catastrophic had occurred in living memory. Life would never be quite the same again.

Vale, VIH. You were great while you lasted. You really shone. Ask any small ship owner.

73

WAEasterling

("Blue" VK4BBL-ex VK2BJ, 4BL, 2ABL, 9WE and now VK4BBL..)

P.S. Like many others I had no idea of the extended ranges that could be worked on 500 kHz at night. VIS has been copied between Honolulu and San Francisco. We regularly logged Alaska and US West Coast stations at night along with Shanghai, Singapore, occasionally Mauritius. During WW2 MF became very quiet (staticwise) and Thursday Island VII used to log Malta sending positions of Hospital Ships and sometimes a German station acknowledging. Bill Sawyer at VII was at Macquarie Island in 1912 and could work VIH with ease. Len Ternes was at Flinders Island in the 1930s when AWA did the aeradio work (before DCA) and he could hear Karumba (Gulf of Carpentaria) on 333 kHz at midday. FI was dead quiet; almost no electrical noise in those days. It was a very good distress/calling frequency; I hope that the new GMDSS system does as well.