

The Day The Bug Burped © D. S. Tyre 1986

This is another handed down story. It came to me from a person who had been a killick signalman in the ship central to the story and was verified by the former captain. Oh, yes, it has been embellished. But then, what sea story isn't?

HMCS ONTARIO was painting ship in Magdalena Bay. HMCS MAGNIFICENT was leaving Havana Cuba. HMCS ATHABASKAN was in the Caribbean awaiting rendezvous with MAGNIFICENT. HMCS CRESCENT was standing by in China with the British China Fleet. HMS ESKIMO was off the Azores, having just finished assisting in a rescue. The naval radio station at Albro Lake, N.S. was experiencing an increase in HF propagation, and signals were coming in from everywhere. The major tape relay at Esquimalt was entangled with messages; the west coast naval radio station too, had an open window and was taking in much more traffic than normal. The date shall remain confidential. (You may be able to put it all together by the location of the various ships.) The time is insignificant. You must only know that High Frequency signals of very low power were "skipping" all over the world.

The radio office of HMCS ONTARIO was roomier than many ships. She was one of the RCN's light cruisers and could afford to spare the room for elbows and stretched legs. It was hot in the radio office. Laying at anchor in Magdalena Bay with little or no wind meant the tropic heat was beating down on the metal of the ship making it a veritable oven within. The men of the radio watch sat stripped to the waist in front of their gear. Occasionally a signalman would pop in and drop off a message to be sent. The senior hand would snatch it with vigour, read it through, route it and have one of the 'sparkers' send it. It was not busy enough and for some strange reason long range radio communications were superb.

A communicator had just finished sending a radio message. He filled in his time of dispatch and distributed the paper into the appropriate baskets. He reached up to switch off his transmitter when for some reason, something still unknown today, he became distracted. The transmitter was left on. The receiver the man had been using was switched off about two minutes later by the senior hand of the watch. He had noticed the dial light and wanted to keep as much equipment off as possible; a small effort to reduce the heat in the compartment. We do not know why he didn't notice the dial light on the transmitter. Perhaps it was burned out, but in any case, the transmitter was still energized.

Because it was such a slack day for traffic in ONTARIO, a couple of communicators had been practicing their Morse Code using an oscillator and a speed key. They had been having fun sending jokes to each other. Only one of the men was competent with a speed key, commonly referred to as a 'bug'. The other was learning the art. It is a point of dispute whether the use of a bug with the naval radio stations was legal at the time, but it is known that the last HF message sent from ONTARIO had been sent using a speed key. The operator who was learning how to use a bug went back to the bay where he had been practicing. His winger was now too busy to play, so he decided to fool around with the key and improve his rhythm, an all important part of operating a bug. He did not notice that the key was plugged into the transmitter; the transmitter which had not been switched off. He sent short phrases which would make sense only to a radioman. He wasn't really worried about the fact that he couldn't hear his Morse. He had the

key set up to operate slowly and was using the clicking sound of the paddle and the movement of the counter-weight to gauge his meter and rhythm.

Understand that communications ratings are rarely affected by strange messages. If a message appears humorous, the communicator usually shows no outward sign of amusement. He may have a good laugh with other communicators about a funny message in private, but anyone outside the communicators world will not see it. A message is a message, and to a communicator it must be forwarded. That's the job and that's what is done.

Another curious point: When a communications rating is practicing, even today, the operator has some urge to generate some ridiculous statement and put it in message format. Nobody knows why. We can only assume that a higher power compels communications personnel to do such a thing.

The man practicing with his bug was no different from any other sparker. He was just a little more imaginative than some. He bashed out a message at about fifteen words per minute. He gave it a date-time-group. He gave it a precedence, EMERGENCY, to be exact. He put in the proper separative signs. He made the message short, and he gave it an unclassified security level. He was sending the final separative sign when he looked up and noticed that his bug was plugged-in to the transmitter, and to his horror, the key light was responding to his touch of the paddle. He automatically sent AR, the ending sign, which unfortunately made the message complete, although the procedure would be slightly incorrect.

The west coast naval radio station received the message and forwarded it to the addressee. The east naval coast radio station received the message and forwarded it to the major relay station in Ottawa, the location of the addressee. HMCS MAGNIFICENT received the message and though it was not addressed to MAGNIFICENT, forwarded the message to Albro lake because it appeared that ONTARIO had been sending in the blind. A copy of the message was sent to the Bridge. HMCS ATHABASKAN received the message, heard MAGNIFICENT relay it to Albro Lake, so took no further forwarding action, but sent a copy to the Chief Yeoman. HMCS CRESCENT received the message and a perplexed operator went to the Communications Officer with it, who in turn held it to show the Captain. HMS ESKIMO received the message, didn't hear anybody relay it, so got up on one of the Whitehall frequencies and sent to England for forwarding to Canada. It was all done at double time. The message carried an EMERGENCY precedence.

Onboard ONTARIO the next day, the Captain, Chief Yeoman of Signals and the Commander stood on the bridge scratching their heads in bewilderment. The Chief Yeoman held a sheaf of messages from an assortment of warships positioned around the globe. There was a message from each of HMC ships MAGNIFICENT, ATHABASKAN, CRESCENT and HM ship ESKIMO. All they said was ...

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The problem was the Chief Yeoman could not find the original message to which each ship had referred. It meant the incoming messages from the fleet created a small mystery.

Later in the day a message came in from CANAVHED, Canadian Naval Headquarters in Ottawa. It was a little less cryptic ...

YOUR 120500Z

CONGRATULATIONS. REPORT NAME AND SEX OF NEW MEMBER. MEDICAL STAFF EAGERLY AWAIT YOUR ARRIVAL HOME PORT. IF YOU HAVE TRULY GIVEN BIRTH TO AN 8 POUND BABY STOKER THERE MAY BE A PROMOTION IN IT FOR YOU.