

THE ARMED FORCES RADIO SERVICE



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An Entertainment Industry Treasure

Thousands of Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS) transcriptions were recorded from 1942 and thereafter. Many of these recordings are preserved at the GMA in the form of the original discs and also first generation reel-to-reel tapes. These recordings are in the process of being transferred to digital storage. The AFRS series of recordings include the full spectrum of American Popular Entertainment of the mid 20th Century. All forms of music are represented, as well as comedic and dramatic performances.

Founding and Organization

The War Department of the United States created a Morale Service Division in 1940. This department was re-designated as the Special Service Division (SSD) as of July 20, 1942. In October 1943, the SSD was split into two sections. Athletic, entertainment and recreational activities retained the SSD name. Informational and educational activities became a new Morale Service Division. In November 1943, the SSD became Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS). As early as January 1942, several agencies had started distribution of entertainment programs. American service personnel overseas were, at that time, limited to receiving only shortwave radio broadcasts. The Army had only a few radio stations. The first Army radio stations airing programs at that time were limited to locations such as Alaska. During 1942, operations to record and assemble kits or packages of recordings for stations and bases were put in place, as well as overseas radio operations.

The work product of the recording, distribution and broadcasting services is represented in the GMA collections. AFRS and its forerunners produced their own programs with live audiences and the assistance of the radio networks. Most live audience programs were recorded at NBC Studio D or CBS Studio A in Hollywood, California. AFRS also had the cooperation of the networks in lifting original network programming and re-packaging it for distribution with the commercial content edited out. AFRS also produced a series of programs with studio hosts playing records and interviewing guests.

Programs and Personnel

Within the Morale Service Division of the War Department, a “radio section” of the Bureau of Public Relations (BPR) was formed in 1941 to make sports broadcasts available to personnel scattered in locations outside the United States. Edward Montague Kirby, Public Relations Director for the National Association of Broadcasters, formerly an executive with WSM, Nashville, Tennessee, and his colleague, Jack Harris, joined the Army. Kirby was appointed chief of BPR and Harris his deputy. They realized that demand and need existed for other types of programs. Their initial ideas included disk jockey-type programs, a format eventually used for programs such as the “Yank Swing Session”, “Downbeat”, “G. I. Jive”, and so forth. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the BPR team led by Lt. Col. Kirby conceived “Command Performance”, which essentially was a musical-variety format. The first program was produced March 1, 1942 and broadcast by short wave. This program is in our GMA collection. There were 11 stations broadcasting the first program, to Australia, Iceland, Ireland and, poignantly, the Philippines, where American and Filipino forces were besieged by the Japanese. “Command Performance” would continue forward and be polished by trial and error into a reliable and popular vehicle. By July 1942, over 40 stations were broadcasting the program.

Col. (then Maj.) Thomas H. A. Lewis, formerly a prominent Young and Rubicam Advertising and Audience Research, Inc. media executive, became Chief of the Radio Section, Information and Orientation Branch, Morale Services Division in May 1942. The Morale Services Division was renamed Special Services Division (SSD) in July 1942.

The Special Services Division (SSD) was operating separately from BPR at this time. Because of the success BPR was having with “Command Performance”, SSD launched a similar program August 11, 1942, which was titled “Mail Call”. On December 15, 1942, SSD took over responsibility for “Command Performance” and resources of talent and support personnel were shared for “Command Performance” and “Mail Call”. The former was produced in cooperation with CBS, using CBS facilities. The latter was produced in cooperation with NBC, using NBC facilities. Two additional live-audience variety productions were added to the schedule, “Jubilee” and “G. I. Journal”. The programs included requests from service personnel around the world. On “Command Performance”, there was a feature including requests for “sounds from home”. One of the most famous was heard on Program #17, June 17, 1942, when host Don Ameche announced that actress Carole Landis would simply “sigh” for a sailor somewhere in the Pacific, which is exactly what she did.



Col. Thomas H. A. (Tom) Lewis, Commanding Officer of the Armed Forces Radio Service

Lt. Col Kirby and his staff departed Washington, DC in 1943, transferring to London to head American Radio Operations in the European theatre, American Forces Network (AFN) Europe and, later, SHAEF's Allied Expeditionary Forces (AEFP) Network. SSD/AFRS was consolidated in Los Angeles. Col. Lewis was the Commanding Officer of the consolidated unit and he is, today, considered the founder of AFRS.

About the Recordings

The SSD was staffed with experienced radio and recording industry personnel, many of whom had been receiving draft notices and found the prospect of continuing their civilian work in uniform quite appealing, as opposed to carrying a rifle. Starting from scratch, they grew the number of stations from 21 in January 1943 to 306 in December 1943. This included studio operations around the world, as well as Army mobile stations, which operated near the front lines in theatres of operation. AFRS was based in Los Angeles. Most wartime AFRS programs were produced in Hollywood, hence the "H" designation that AFRS gave to most of its programs.

One of the things that SSD and then AFRS had to straighten out was that during 1942, there were no less than six government agencies that were in the business of releasing entertainment programming, although distribution was limited to shortwave broadcasting. However, as early as 1941, the idea of shipping phonographs, needles, records and broadcast transcriptions to service personnel had been conceived and acted upon. SSD set up, perfected and greatly expanded upon this idea of sending “kits” out to personnel around the world.



"G. I. Journal", Jerry Colonna, Kay Kyser, Linda Darnell, Fred MacMurray and Mel Blanc

The amount of transcriptions pressed monthly from SSD and AFRS increased to 7,891 by January 1943 and 117,695 by October 1945. These were 16 inch discs. Twelve inch discs were used earlier, but were discontinued. For “off-network” programs, commercials were edited out before mastering. Not all commercial references could be realistically dropped, but actual advertising was consistently erased. Early programs picked up by BPR and SSD simply had disclaimers added at the close of the program and commercials remained; or, wholesale edits and substitutions were made that resulted in the final products often sounding disjointed. This practice ended by later in 1943, as SSD brought more engineering personnel on line and polished their techniques and practices. By 1944, a very efficient system seamlessly produced clean “off-network” edited programs and very professionally produced original products. With many network and local radio talent employed in uniform by AFRS, the quality of the AFRS work product could be considered superior in some respects to wartime commercial (civilian) radio. AFRS Programs could be classed into three categories: (a.) AFRS-produced (live audience or studio host), (b.) off-network, and (c.) libraries.



An AFRS 16 inch transcription disc - the May 1945 V-E Day "Special Program"

Live audience and studio host programs included "Command Performance", "Mail Call", "G. I. Journal", "Jubilee", "G. I. Jive", "Downbeat" et. al. Popular off-network programs included "The Music Hall" (Kraft Music Hall) with Bing Crosby, "The Bob Hope Show", "The Tommy Dorsey Show", "The Harry James Show" and dozens more. Commercial program names were edited, hence, just "Music Hall" for Crosby, no mention of Pepsodent toothpaste for Hope, Raleigh and Chesterfield cigarettes dropped for Dorsey and James. Libraries were assembled by artist using studio recordings, and recordings of domestic and AFRS studio radio programs. The libraries allowed disc jockeys at OWI and Army radio stations around the world to play records at their individual locations. The Basic Music Library (BML) would grow to include thousands of records by a wide cross-section of American musicians and singers. In addition to its mainstream popular music and jazz features, AFRS programming was targeted to specific types of music and ethnic audiences. There were programs formatted for African-American service personnel (including "Jubilee") and Latin-American service personnel (including "Viva America" and "Saludos Amigos"). "Melody Round Up" was formatted for country-western (hillbilly, western swing) audiences. "Music by Kostelanetz" (The CBS "Pause that Refreshes on the Air with Andre Kostelanetz") and "NBC Symphony" (The NBC Symphony broadcasts conducted by Arturo Toscanini and Leopold Stokowski) presented serious music of the classical era.



Martha Wilkerson, the popular "G. I. Jill" and host of AFRS "G. I. Jive" and Bing Crosby; AFRS "Command Performance"

Transmission and Distribution

Until mid-July 1943, SSD programs were broadcast exclusively (from transcriptions) by the Office of War Information (OWI). The primary OWI "Voice of America" shortwave radio stations were located on the east and west coasts of the United States. The OWI also operated operations and transmitter sites overseas. Transcriptions were shipped by the Radio Section in bulk to the OWI. Those for shortwave stations located in the United States were separated out for subsequent broadcasts and the remainder was sent to the OWI stations overseas, including the American Broadcasting Station in Europe (ABSIE). There were only a few Army-operated radio stations in 1942. More had been put on the air around the world by 1943; however, nowhere near as many as would eventually exist by 1944 and 1945. In mid-1943, the Radio Section was confident that the Army had increased their number of stations enough to ship transcriptions directly to them and not just to the OWI.

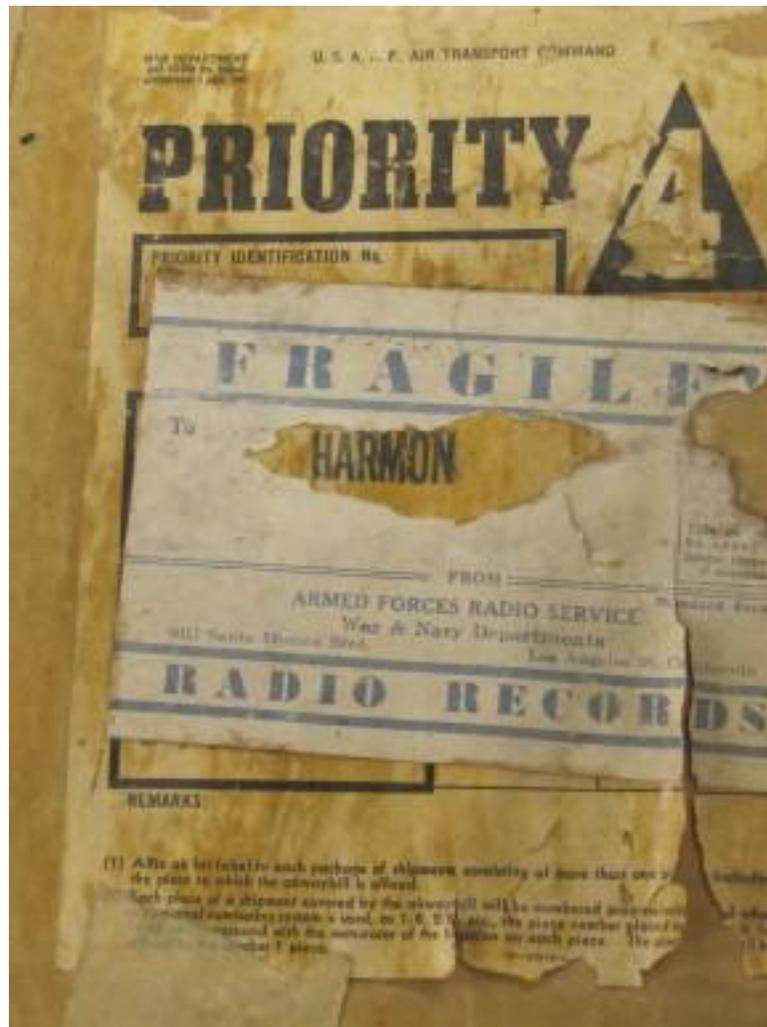
The first set of five Basic Music Library (BML) transcriptions were distributed by the SSD to overseas Army radio stations in September 1943. This was the idea of Maj. Meredith Willson, director of the AFRS orchestra. The first mention of the name change from SSD to AFRS was made in October 1943 radio scripts.



Major Meredith Willson and Nelson Eddy, AFRS "Command Performance"

Every week, cartons of AFRS program releases were sent out en-masse in two boxes, A and B, including 110 discs each, 55 per box. This was done for weight considerations and to prevent loss. Each set had a mix of original programs, off-network programs and library selections. Initially, shipments went by sea, taking considerable time and exposing the packages to risk. They often arrived with cracked and broken discs that had to be thrown away. Shipments were sent to installations that were asked to then send the discs along to other installations; of course, not all the discs would be sent along from place to place. Some shipments never arrived at all. This was a situation that was inefficient, intolerable and unsustainable. Col. Lewis and his staff negotiated an agreement with the Air Transport Command of the Army Air Forces and the Naval Air Transport Service to ship the cartons by air. This would save time and limit, if not eliminate, potential damage. Shipments were accelerated and increased so that packages would not be passed between units but distributed directly to each destination. Distribution circuits were established by geography. By July 1, 1943, cartons were being shipped by air from Los Angeles. The system became very efficient and the loss rate was virtually eliminated.

All of the cartons were clearly marked “priority”, “urgent”, “radio transcriptions”, “government property,” and “must go through.” For example, by the fall of 1944, AFN-London and AEFP could have off-network, prime time American radio programs on the air within a week to ten days, which was a remarkable accomplishment.



AFRS Kit Shipment with Air Transport Command Priority Labels (CU GMA Collections)

By the end of hostilities, AFRS was operating arguably the largest and most diverse radio network in the world, with facilities located on every continent, diverse programming from its own original productions and rebroadcast from every domestic radio network, as well as a global distribution network using transcription discs express shipped by air and broadcast over dedicated AFRS transmission facilities. This was a massive undertaking that was successfully accomplished. Most AFRS personnel had returned to the broadcasting and entertainment industry by the end of 1946.



V-J Day, August 1945, "Command Performance", CBS, Hollywood - Lina Romay, Alvino Rey, The King Sisters and Danny Kaye