



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

WHEN THE FCC CALLS

The Day CRUD Radio Died

by Donald Kimberlin



This story actually happened quite few years ago, and might be best categorized as “one of those war stories.” However, it also is an interesting look the way the FCC used to operate. Some might welcome a return to this way of doing things.

It was a happy, successful time in the history of station WOM. After several decades of virtual dormancy, AT&T's High Seas shore radiotelephone operation known to the maritime public as Radio Station WOM at Fort Lauderdale, Florida had again become active.

Ships of many flags discovered WOM's operators were prompt and helpful, and they could get a casual connection established from reaches as far as the Red Sea to the east, offshore from Chile to the south and as far west as the Society Islands in the Pacific.

INTERESTING ASSIGNMENT

I really enjoyed working the "High Seas assignment," as it was called. WOM's clientele ranged from huge ocean-going tuna trawlers through merchant ships of many nations, fabulous private yachts and cruise ships taking vacationers around the Caribbean. We even provided landside telephone connections for the crew members of the occasional U.S. Navy vessel and the government "hurricane hunter" aircraft in season.

It was a great job – you were being paid to operate a fantastic ham radio shack with a whole crew of "regulars" out there sailing around the oceans.

It kept you on your toes. With a monitoring receiver and speaker open on each channel under the WOM operator's control, the sharp ear of a human technical operator was required to snag each call.

AN INTERLOPER APPEARS

Beyond the actual calls for phone service, there was a constant hubbub of noise and static on each channel, interspersed with many sorts of "Pirates of the Caribbean" who found these channels handy for other

uses. Not the least of these were people who thought they were a clear spot for antenna tuning, so bursts of silent carrier were frequent, both between calls and causing heterodynes during actual transmissions.

As you can imagine, most of these “unapproved” transmissions were rarely on long enough to get any directional “fix” on them. Furthermore, they were mobile enough to never come from the same place twice – or so it seemed.

That is, until a local teenager decided to broadcast to his neighbors in Fort Lauderdale.

CRUD ON THE RADIO

The fellow actually was a fairly creditable disk jockey, with a line of patter that probably did entertain and impress his teen friends. Repeatedly identifying himself clearly as “K-R-U-D, Crud Radio, broadcasting at 825 on your dial,” he would broadcast each afternoon until Mom said it was dinnertime. That always brought a sign-off.

Crud Radio would not have worried us but for one not so minor technical problem. He was not only broadcasting on 825, but also on its fifth harmonic. That made his program blast out of our monitoring receiver on 4123.6 kilohertz, strong enough to wipe out the ships we were supposed to hear and handle their calls.

We really were not equipped to locate him and contact him. He never really told us exactly where he was, although it had to be some place fairly close. He was, in fact, close enough that our directional finder could not get a bearing on his rather strong signal.

CALLING THE RADIO COPS!

Eventually, we called the Fort Lauderdale FCC Monitoring Station for an assist, but they claimed they could not receive anything from him on any frequency he might be on.

However, the FCC was not very convincing. We were never sure they really wanted to hear the transmissions and have to take the draconian action required. So, we endured for a while. Finally, in desperation, I put a call in to Art Gilbert, the Field Engineer at Miami.

Art was a rather well known FCC employee in that time and part of the country. In his unique way, Art was an icon of the culture of radio.

THE SHERIFF’S IN TOWN

Gilbert was the one who traveled most of Florida inspecting radio and TV stations for technical Rules compliance at every three-year license renewal. In between, his duties included inspecting ship and aircraft radios when in port, administering amateur and commercial radio operator examinations, and sundry other related activities. Almost everyone in Florida who had an FCC license knew Art Gilbert, talking to him (always respectfully) on a first-name basis.

Art was just what you would expect him to be: A tall, lean, straw-hatted, sun-reddened, Down-South Good Ole Boy with a Georgia accent that just fit his physical image. But, he was also known for being a fair, tough cop on his beat. Break the Rules in a minor, unknowing way and Art would give you a break.

Have trouble meeting the FCC Rules and he would come by to talk to you about it, make some comment on what he saw, and perhaps even put you in touch with someone else who had fixed a similar problem. I even had Art come to me one day, trying to help get a really sick AM station back on the air, bringing some of his test equipment to help.

On the other hand, if you broke a Rule badly – repeatedly or intentionally – you quickly discovered that you were dealing with one tough cookie.

GOOD COP, TOUGH COP

Art had been on his beat for years, and he knew every occupant of it, both the legal ones and the law-breakers he had canned over the years. And, he told some stories about those cannings that made his image very credible.

For example, he liked to tell the story of the AM station that moved, tower and all, 12 miles from where it was licensed. He explained how he could not find the station at its former address, so he toured around the town till he found the several-hundred-foot tower. He then proceeded to the local hardware store where he bought a padlock and hasp, broke the feeble door lock, shut down the transmitter, and locked the place with his own lock. Then, he just sat in his car waiting for someone to show up.

When the engineer arrived, Gilbert showed the engineer his Federal Marshal's badge and told him he would remove the lock as soon as they filed the proper application and got approval from Washington to operate from that address. That was the "tough cop" side of Art.

TRACKING THE CRUD

True to form, when we called Miami for Art, he was not in the office. He responded by phone from another corner of the state and told us he would be around our way in a few days.

Meanwhile, Crud Radio was a daily occurrence in our High Seas Radio monitoring receiver. The day Art came in, Crud had not yet signed on. We told Art to just wait a while and, sure enough shortly after school let out, there was K-R-U-D. When Art heard it and its typical announcement, a tide of crimson rose right up his already reddened neck through his Good Ole Boy face. The image was just like the maddened bulldog in a Tom and Jerry animated cartoon.

Art jammed his straw hat onto his head, ran out the door and took off in his government-issue black Ford station wagon. WOM and AT&T's Fort Lauderdale HF station had a hundred acres or so of land and a long roadway out to the highway, so we could watch him for several minutes until he reached U.S. Highway 441 and sped off toward the south. And as he left, he was driving with one hand while twiddling dials on the Collins 51J receiver he had crammed onto the tunnel of the car and twirling the roof-mounted loop antenna with the other.

We listened intently, but Crud Radio operated unperturbed. It was still on when Art came back. He came inside to tell us that he had found the exact place and could see the teenager had strung as much antenna as he could around the eaves of the typical Florida subdivision house where he had built K-R-U-D.

THE CRUD WAS STILL THERE

The operator had bragged he was running 50 Watts and Art had measured Crud's signal strength on 825, 2475, 4125, 5775 and 7425 kilohertz, calculating the effective power on each. (Remember, this was a man who administered and corrected commercial radio license exams for a living, so things we all head for the book to do, Art had in working memory.)

In due course, Art determined that the amount of antenna the teen was using was particularly resonant at about 4 or 5 megahertz, so it favored radiating Crud's fifth harmonic, which was considerable. It was really only a mile or two from our large receiving antennas, so it did not need to be powerful to give us real fits.

Then, Art told us that despite his being a Federal Marshal as part of his office, his FCC masters back in Washington had some pretty strict concerns about FCC inspectors barging in on private residential property. He first would have to send a message to Washington asking for approval to do so. He also warned us that such approval was often denied. The FCC at the time did not want its employees risking bad public relations. He told us further action might take several weeks. It did. Crud Radio continued to annoy us daily.

A DIFFERENT WAY TO SKIN A CAT

Art returned unannounced one afternoon while Crud Radio was holding forth, to tell us that his approval for a frontal assault had been denied. But, he also told us he had "other methods." He was going to use Plan B. He told us to just listen to Crud closely while he acted.

We watched him drive out to the highway again, this time looking confident and leisurely in his handling of the car.

Sure enough, in about a half hour, the teen proprietor of K-R-U-D broke into the middle of a record and announced, *"This is the last you'll ever hear from Crud Radio."* The Carrier went off. The usual noises that we listened to resumed.

SHARP THINKING

In about half an hour, Art Gilbert, Chief Field Engineer for the FCC Seventh Radio District's Field Engineering and Monitoring Bureau drove back to our door. He was beaming, affable, Good Ole Boy Art again. We could tell he wanted to tell us how he had pulled it off when Washington would not let him use a frontal attack. Obviously, we wanted to know, and asked.

Art said, *"I kind of expected they'd deny me, so I researched the kid and family a bit, and found out the kid was a candidate for the Air Force Academy. I just rang the doorbell and told him that if he didn't want his sponsoring Congressman to hear about what a lawbreaker he was, he'd better dismantle his home-brew transmitter right on the spot. I watched it go into the trashcan in pieces."*

And *that* was, as they say, The End of Crud Radio.

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