

Hemmant Radio Station

I was the sole radio technician attending the Hemmant Radio Station in the early 1970's. I say attending because there was not a lot to do! It housed the equipment that formed the transmitter side of a few remaining SSB (Single Side Band) radio communication networks. The receiving side was several kilometres away in an outer Brisbane suburb that was then called Capalaba.

The site was constructed by the Americans in the Second World War. It was built in a tidal swamp which offered excellent ground conductivity to enhance SSB radio transmission from a number of large rhomboid antennas that occupied several hectares on both sides of Youngs Road, Hemmant. Nestled between these paddocks stood the main building and a side building that housed the emergency diesel generator. These buildings were enclosed behind a tall, barbed wire fence with white wooden posts. Someone pointed out to me that the fence appeared to be built to keep people in, rather than keep people out, which may well have been true. The main building was a large, T-shaped brick construction, raised on brick stumps about a metre above the ground. A concrete apron served as a place to park one's vehicle at the front steps in the centre of the T. To the left were white wooden posts joined by a platform to form a distribution frame for the pairs of transmission lines to the rhomboid aerials. To the right was a large evergreen tree surrounded by a rock wall that was covered in a leafy ficus fig. The corrugated fibro roof was well ventilated with large whirly gig vents that still worked with little, if any noise. A recent addition was a concrete apron behind the left hand side of the T, which was used to store various galvanised items of radio linesmen's equipment; microwave dishes, antennas etc.

The front door opened to the centre of the equipment room. To the right of this was a corridor separating a store room for spare parts on the left, a repair room opposite, followed by the lunch room on the far left and the toilet and shower on the far right. A back door opened from the lunch room, beside which was an elaborate sewerage system, which fortunately never required any maintenance. A long section stretched back roughly from the centre of the transmitter hall. The floor of this section was ducted and the walls on either side had pairs of insulators that once carried transmission lines, so presumably this section also housed SSB transmitters during the war. It was just a huge storage area when I was there, again mostly for miscellaneous radio linesmen's equipment. There was what appeared to be an ex-army canvas stretcher bed that was still comfortable enough to take a nap on!

I did souvenir a couple of fire buckets which look like they might have been there from the very beginning.



Perhaps as a legacy of World War II, nearly everything else was painted in various shades of battleship grey, including the wooden covers over the ducts that ran beneath and between the old transmitters that the Americans left behind. Four remained, standing waist high, more or less a one meter metal cube, with the colour exception being drab army green. From memory there were two orange coloured indicator lights either side of a modulation meter. I remember the lights, because I stupidly tried to change a blown lamp bulb without turning the transmitter off. First it sucked me in for a while and I thought I was a goner, but then it threw me across the transmitter hall against the equipment racks.

Opposite the transmitters was my antique, wooden desk, to the left of which stood four or five standard equipment racks housing mostly Racal RA17C-12 SSB Receivers, an audio oscillator and a telephone patch panel.



The principle purpose of the station was the emergency radio communication network. Of course it was owned by the PMG (Post Master General's Department) in those days. Post Offices in remote regional towns across Queensland would have a Racal SSB transceiver with which they could communicate when telephone lines were down for whatever reason, typically cyclones, fires or floods.



Fred Lubach at the Capalaba Receiving Station had a weekly schedule for calling each post office. He would talk over a landline patched to the transmitters at Hemmant, which were the originals left by the USA in World War II. He would also chat regularly with the people at the weather station on Willis Island, in the Coral Sea 450km east of Cairns.

Another, more modern SSB transmitter was used for teletype messages to Thursday Island.

An elderly gentleman leased the aerial paddock across the way to fatten a few cattle. He would occasionally call in for a cuppa and a chat. He could remember the Americans being there in the second world war. He recalled how Australian young men would riot because they couldn't compete with the extravagant Yanks when courting local girls. He described how the railway locomotives would burn wood, shooting flames and sparks high into the air, offering a spectacular display at night. He believed the US soldiers excavated a huge hole in the aerial paddock and buried much of the equipment they didn't wish to ship back to the USA.

The SSB telephone system to Birdsville was constructed while I was there. With no chance of a satellite dish for Birdsville in the not too distant future, this system was designed by one of our radio engineers in Brisbane, to serve the 27 subscribers in Birdsville. It consisted of 3 Codan Transceivers set to different frequencies with vertical, log periodic antennas that stretched for some 50 metres, or so. The tallest dipole would have been at least 20 metres high.



Charleville had one of just a few telephone exchanges in Queensland that still employed telephonists at the time, so telephone calls were directed via dedicated telephone channels from Capalaba to Charleville and back to Hemant. The switch board in Birdsville was initially installed in the Birdsville Post Office that was conveniently situated half-way between the Birdsville Hotel and the Radio Hut on the eastern side of the town. Of course, being an SSB radio system, the telephone handsets in Birdsville were modified with a push-to-talk button. Subscribers were encouraged to say 'over' before releasing their handset button. I well remember when the Birdsville Hotel first placed a call to order provisions from their major supplier. The lady started reading off her long list of items without pause. The guy receiving the call was trying to tell her that he needed to get a pencil. Of course, I could hear both sides of this conversation. I was rolling on the floor laughing and yelling; "you might as well shout out the window mate, she can't hear you while she has her button pressed"!

There was a public phone outside the Birdsville Post Office. The then typical black box with button A and button B was ingeniously modified with three different sized clock chiming coils so that the telephonist in Charleville could recognise the sound of different coins when she asked the caller to insert the required amount of money. Sometimes she would ask the caller to press button B to return the coins and start again. It became a well-known tourist attraction and people would often queue up to use the strange push-to-talk public phone to call home.



The PMG's postal and communication services were separated in 1975 to form Australia Post and Telecom. The Birdsville post office was closed and the telephone switch board was relocated to the police station on the west side of town beyond the airstrip. The police sergeant's wife became the switchboard operator. Despite being re-assigned to the Radio Communication Centre on top of Mount Gravatt, I continued as the de-facto maintenance technician for the Birdsville radio telephone system for a number of years following.

With more reliable communication systems the SSB emergency network became redundant. Birdsville's funky telephone system was eventually replaced with satellite communications. Yours truly resigned from Telecom in 1983 to complete full time studies in Occupational Therapy at the University of Queensland, graduating with first class honours in 1986.