

January 2006 Meeting - RADIO CAROLINE Carl Thomson G3PEM

The meeting was attended by more than 100 members and visitors; probably our highest ever number. Carl started by giving credit and thanks to all those who had helped him in the presentation, with information, photographs and loan of equipment.

Carl told us he first got involved when Stan Fisher asked him if he would like a well paid job on high power transmitters, as he knew of an organisation who were looking for Engineers. He had his first interview with a man in Billericay who was a Radio Amateur (since moved to New Zealand). He fixed up a second interview with Mr. Gillman, an ex-BBC Engineer at the agents at Parkestone Quay. Carl said this was a real in depth exam and he even asked him how a valve worked!

At this time the average wage at Marconi Marine where Carl worked was between £7 & £8 per week (in the 1960's) he was offered and accepted £25 per week with a two week on and one week off scheme.

He then asked what it was for and he was told "Radio Caroline Offshore Radio".

On his first day he reported to Parkestone Quay to join the supply vessel to the Mi Amigo, called Offshore 2; it was blowing Gale Force 6 or 7. The journey to outside the 3 mile limit by the Gunfleet Sands took one and a half hours and Carl said although he had been a deep sea sailor, he was soaking wet and feeding the fish all the way. He thought "what the heck am I doing out here when I had a nice warm comfortable job back in Chelmsford Marconis?" To illustrate this kind of situation, Carl showed some pictures he took of the larger tender vessel bringing his Engineer relief one day, attempting to get alongside the Mi Amigo on the lee-side and finally giving it up. This showed some of the difficulties of getting to work, although it was not always like this.

MV Caroline was a larger ship than the Mi Amigo and was moved to be called "The North Ship" in Ramsey Bay, off the Isle of Man. The radio audience for this ship was enormous, covering Manchester and Liverpool. Carl said that if a radio programme presenter today has an audience of 100K he thinks he is doing well, the Disc Jockeys on Caroline North were exceeding a 2million figure. Carl at a later time worked on both ships. Using photographs and drawings he took us through the accommodation and facilities of both ships. Caroline being the larger vessel had much more comfortable facilities but he assured us that the Mi Amigo was more cramped but "cosy".

Mi Amigo had originally been a sailing ship but had been refitted with a small engine and a new central section of steel, welded into the iron bow and stern sections of its original 1921 build, to be used as a Radio Ship by Radio Nord in Sweden. We were then given a run down of the studio and transmitter equipment which was all new and up to the minute state of the art stuff at the time. Gates control panels and switches, Garrard studio record decks, spot tape players for adverts and jingles and the latest Continental Electronics type 316 transmitters. Continental Electronics a well known American high power transmitter manufacturer designed their transmitters using a minimum of valve types so that the spares holding was kept to small number of types, a good feature for offshore or remote locations.

The maintenance routine was to do a complete clean up of the studio, switches, tape-heads and the air filters in the transmitters which were taken out and washed in the cook's sink in fresh water each night after shutdown. Once a week at night a full audio and full power line up was made culminating in playing mainly big band jazz at about 2am. This began to generate fan mail, mainly from the American forces in Germany with requests. On one occasion they apologised and said "unfortunately we don't have that one"; three copies arrived from "they know not where" in the next post delivery.

They also received many signal reports from as far afield as the States and Australia (a 10kW transmitter, vertical aerial and as Carl put it, "the best ground plane in the world - sea water").

When Carl arrived on the Mi Amigo they were only using one of the two 10kW transmitters although they had a combiner which they could not make work because it kept blowing its load. It was eventually discovered after one of the Engineers whilst on shore, rang a friend who had used Continental Electronics gear, that the American names for some of the component parts of the combiner were not the ones used in Europe. (microwave circulators from the States were always opposite hand to ours - causing BT problems at Goonhilly - Tony, G4YTG). They reconnected with this knowledge and presto, 20 kW ready for 24-hr working.

The aerial was a cage with circular forms tapering from the top held up by the mast which the designer specified must have stays at no less than 13 degrees. This meant that large spreaders had to be provided, the lower one high enough up for the supply tender (which went to Holland once a month for fuel, water and other supplies) to get alongside.

Carl then said the first inkling that we were in any trouble was when the TV aerial on the set we were watching had to keep being realigned. They also felt that the motion of the ship at anchor had changed. Some of the crew went on deck and although the anchor chain was tight (miles of chain being dragged) came to the conclusion they were inside the three mile limit. A race ensued to shut down the transmitter and stow the crystals in a safe draw. Later in the evening they were told to put on their lifejackets and very soon they were on the beach with the heavy sea now breaking over them. The coastguards were firing rockets and eventually set up a Breeches Buoy. Carl helped all the DJs and operatives into the Buoy and on to the beach and then reported to the Captain that all the English crew were ashore and asked, as he had been a seaman, did he want him to stay? The Captain said "no you go". Carl made his way to the Buoy and realised that there was no one to help him in. He eventually managed with one leg in and one half in and doubled over, he lost his slippers but had the crystals and the theme record under his jacket. He walked up the beach and over the seawall with his toes and a few other parts of his anatomy blue with the cold (it had been snowing).

The Mi Amigo had gone ashore at Frinton where the space between the concrete groynes was not big enough to take a ship except at the one place near a concrete pillar - which was where they were! They were now Distressed Seamen and were driven to Walton Police Station where a Customs man appeared and said "any thing to declare". Carl said "yes" and handed over a part used wet packet of Peter Styveson

cigarettes. They were taken to a Walton outfitters and kitted out with plimsolls, jeans and a check shirt each. He said the jeans were rubbish, but the shirt was marvellous and he only threw it away a year or so ago.

Carl volunteered to go with the ship whilst being towed to Holland and was signed on as super-numary crew to comply with the landing laws. When the ship arrived in Holland the whole area was swarmed with well-wishers and people wanting autographs as a result of the national press coverage. Carl's scrap book, which he had with him, contained many of these reports and pictures.

While all this was going on, Ronan had negotiated with a Swedish lady to hire the radio ship *Cheater 2*. This was a small ship with wire aerials and Carl came back with it to be positioned to be off the Essex coast. He says looking at the pictures of it now, it was like you wanted to forget you had ever been there.

The *Mi Amigo* was refitted with a new generator with a diesel of the sort used by the German U-boats during the war to power their new 50kW transmitter. After it had been up and running for sometime the company sent an old boy from out of retirement to give it a working tune-up. Carl said the German used a stethoscope to listen to the injectors and brought the revs and the fuel consumption down considerably, whilst still giving the same power output to the transmitter - he was most impressed with the expertise of a master. The 50kW transmitter was in three cabinets and was chosen over the Marconi equivalent as the cabinets would pass through a standard door opening. The studios were also re-equipped with Gates controls, turntables and a VU meter (volume units - audio level) for the DJs which they would keep well up into the red (max) level. However, there was another level control after this, only available to the Engineers to make sure the DJs were not too enthusiastic and overdrive the transmitter!

One night when Carl was on duty and had been working all day he set the level just before a DJ change and nodded off to get some sleep. The next DJ was Rosko, whose theme or signature tune was Memphis, a noisy number with high audio peaks. There were cries of "Engineer, Engineer, the aerial is on fire". Carl rushed out to find every insulator arcing over to the rhythm of Memphis. He quickly shut down the transmitter, turned down the level and went back on the air. At a subsequent inspection of the stays it was found that some were only holding on with a single strand - they had someone looking over them that night or they would have lost the mast!

Carl, you put the story over so that I thought it was as if you were yarning across an armchair just to me, and you had the attention and accolade from the audience that you deserved.

Write-up by Tony G4YTG.