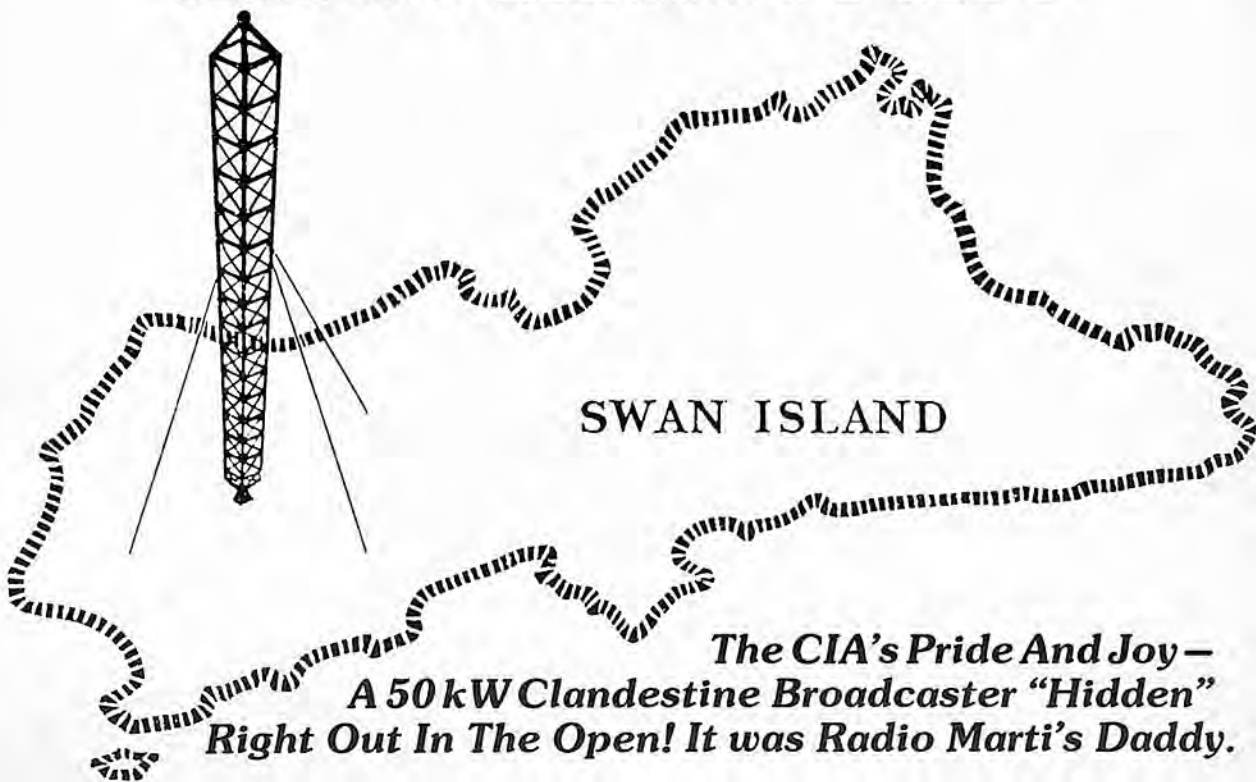


Inside The CIA's Secret Radio Paradise: Part I



BY TOM KNEITEL, K2AES, EDITOR

It was the Spring of 1960. Fidel Castro had not only taken control of Cuba, he had made it quite clear that he wasn't a friend of the United States. Castro was making plans to grab the lucrative American industries in Cuba even though they had not only brought a considerable amount of money into Cuba for years, they had supported the revolution that put Castro in power in February of 1959.

Because of the tense Cuban-American situation and the fear of further weakening inter-American diplomatic esteem, our nation held off on using the Voice of America to send "truth broadcasts" to Cuba. Obviously something had to be done—but who was to do it, and how?

The national media and (presumably) Washington was mulling over various possibilities when suddenly something took place to change the status quo. Without any warning whatsoever, a broadcaster calling itself Radio Swan appeared with a 50 kW signal (3.5 kW on 6.000 MHz shortwave).

And where was it operating? Right on 1160 kHz (measured 1157 kHz), a "clear

channel" which, until then, had been mainly occupied by KSL in Salt Lake City and WJJD in Chicago, both 50 kilowatts. Listeners throughout North America reported the RS signals on 1160 kHz, while the 6 MHz signals were heard over a far wider area.

Not only that, the RS programming was mainly a wealth of very strong anti-Castro sentiment, far sharper than would have been attempted by the VOA.

A Mystery Wrapped In An Enigma

The immediate question was, "Who or what is Radio Swan, and by what authority was it operating on 1160 kHz?" It soon became apparent that the station was a fantastic bootlegger that had brazenly "allegedly found a means of issuing a license to itself" (as put by Jack Gould in *The New York Times* of 5 April 1961) and had generously assigned itself a choice operating frequency.

Station KSL complained vigorously but their pleas did no good, as RS claimed that their signal pattern was directed away from

Salt Lake City. Even if the RS signal was directed right at KSL, it wouldn't have made any difference since no governmental authority had ever been granted for the RS station to exist. It seemed to be operating outside of all international broadcasting agreements and treaties. Oddly enough, RS claimed to be an American station and, furthermore, the station announced that it was beginning to line up commercial sponsors for its programs!

The station claimed that its transmitters were located on Swan Island, a tiny and forlorn chunk of limestone and coral between Cuba and Honduras. Some DX fans doubted these claims.

Swan Island, What?

The Swan Islands (there are two of them) were actually an interesting choice for the location of RS since their own heritage (at that time) was a matter of controversy. Honduras claimed ownership of the islands because, under Honduran Law, the islands lie within their territorial waters (they're 97 miles offshore).



Swan Island lies between Honduras and Cuba.

The easternmost island, "Little Swan," is uninhabited. The western island, "Great Swan," is 2 miles long by 1/2-mile wide, and was inhabited by 20 Cayman Islanders who were brought there by the Americans to work as laborers. There were also employees of the U.S. Federal Aviation Agency, the Weather Bureau, the RS personnel, plus millions of iguanas (lizards)!

Regardless of the claims Honduras had on the islands, in 1863 they were declared to be an American possession (by an Act of Congress). To further complicate the situation, a Mr. Sumner Smith of Boston claimed that the islands were his personal property and that all who used the land there pay rent to him. Smith was the vice president of RS!

Shortly after RS went on the air, Honduras decided to take a stand on its ownership claim. About a dozen brave souls set out in a small rented boat for an "invasion" of the islands. After a rough trip they "stormed the beach" and asked if anybody could provide them with seasickness remedies. They also wanted to know where they might run up a Honduran flag. The invaders were shown a cordial welcome by the Americans (including the RS staff), and given a spot to fly their flag. After the flag ceremony, luncheon was served by the RS staff and the invaders offered the Americans a gift of a bottle of Honduran "Scotch" as a goodwill gesture. The invaders then sailed back to Honduras. A good time was had by all!

The Status Of RS

The Swan Islands, being considered by Uncle Sam as an American possession, were administered by various federal agencies. The FCC has long given out Amateur Radio licenses (KS4 prefix) for the islands, thus affirming our government's claims to control of the islands. However when the question of RS' official status was tossed at the FCC, they were in a quandry. On 16 September 1960 they wrote to me stating, "In response to your letter . . . you are advised that the Commission has no information regarding the radio operations to which you refer." Can you imagine a similar FCC reaction to a 50 kW bootlegger in Los Angeles or Houston?

Ironically, the FCC eventually issued the staff at Radio Swan a license for their Amateur Radio Club; the call sign was KS4CC!

An inquiry about RS was also sent to Honduras and was answered, "We wish to inform you that Radio Swan, located on Honduras' Swan Islands, has neither solicited nor obtained government permission to operate on Honduras territory."

Castro In A Snit

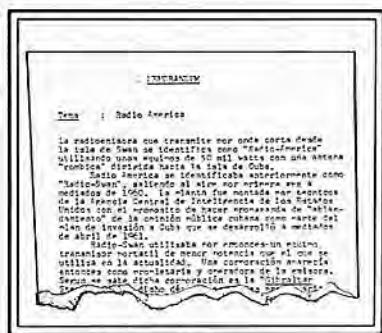
Fidel Castro was enraged about the appearance of the station and he took quick action. In Cuba there had been a few small broadcasters on or near 1160 kHz—CMDX, CMBQ, CMJK and others. Castro announced that these would be leaving the air and replaced by a new high-powered station, CMBN, La Voz del INRA, which would jam Radio Swan. The broadcast (and noise) jamming was only partially effective on an island-wide basis, however, Castro also made it illegal for Cubans to listen to RS.

Furthermore, in September of 1960, Castro showed up at the United Nations and angrily denounced Radio Swan. He said, in part, "In the Caribbean Islands is a territory which belongs to Honduras and which is known as the Swan Islands, and the Government of the United States has taken over this island. It has set up a very powerful broadcasting station which it has placed at the disposal of war criminals and the subversive groups that are being sheltered by this country."

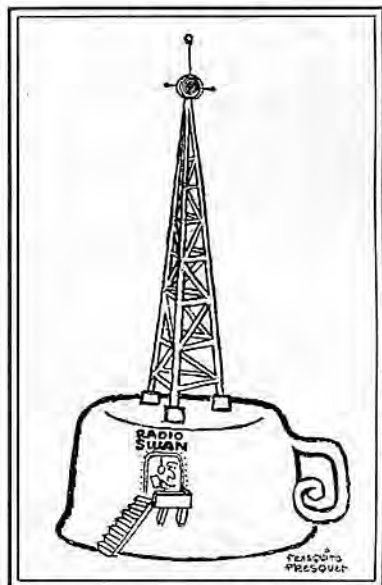
War Criminals?

Radio Swan, at that time, was owned by the Gibraltar Steamship Corporation of New York City, a company that did not own a single steamship. The company was acting as a regular commercial broadcaster, and had lined up sponsors such as R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, Radio Bible Class, Accion Cristiana Dominicana, The World Tomorrow, Philip Morris Co., Kleenex, and others. News broadcasts were sponsored by "the Cuban Freedom Committee of an American anti-Communist Foundation known as the Christianform."

The president of Gibraltar Steamship was



One of my information sources was this report provided me by Cuban nationals employed at one time by RS/RA. This is part of one of these memos. In the second paragraph the memo notes that the plant (transmitter) "was constructed by technicians of the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States."



Cuban publications fought back against Radio Swan with wry humor. This cartoon compares RS to a chamber pot. The analogy is pretty obvious.



Fidel took direct action against RS by establishing his own high powered broadcaster right on the RS frequency.

9BRD print
Amateur Radio Station

KD4HHS

GEORGE M. GROVER, OPR.

RADIO: *W8AN6* thanks for 14 Mc. contact *May 2, 41*.
at *1:40 AM, EST.* *Thanks for QSL!* Hallicrafters HT-9
Xmtr, 100 W. Rcvr: 2 AR-77's Ant: 2-element Beam

SWAN ISLAND, West Indies

The FCC was hard pressed to explain why RS/RA was operating minus a license inasmuch as the agency had long issued licenses for transmitters there. The FCC's ham prefix for Swan was KS4, however this QSL from a 1940's Swan operator shows that in earlier days Swan had a KD4 prefix.



The Radio Americas QSL claimed the station was on Swan, however, a noisy group of hardcore skeptics refused to accept that location as accurate. The more RS/RA said it was on Swan, the more certain were the skeptics that it was elsewhere.



This 1960 photo supplied by RS was careful not to show the technician's face.

Thomas Dudley Cabot, not only a former President of the United Fruit Company, but also a former Director of The Office of Internal Security at the U.S. Department of State!

When asked about how this American owned (and largely American staffed) station was able to operate from American territory without an FCC license, they *did* have an answer! They said that they had not applied for an FCC license because they weren't satisfied with the U.S. claim to the ownership of the islands, and that they could effectively fight the American claim to the islands if they wanted to (although they had no intention of pursuing the matter). (In 1973 the U.S. relinquished its claim to ownership of the Swan Islands and they were ceded to Honduras.)

The RS programs were in both Spanish and English and ranged from anti-Castro (and anti-Trujillo) types to musical and religious offerings. Taped in the United States, most were flown to the island by chartered plane from Miami (via Cozumel, Mexico). News programs were prepared in New York and sent to the station daily via RCA commercial point-to-point circuits.

The RS technical staff on Swan consisted

of 15 engineers and technicians who were employees of The Philco Corporation's Tech Rep "flying squad," which provided these people on a "for hire" basis. Operators were sent to Swan for a six month hitch.

Food supplies, diesel fuel for the generators and heavy equipment for RS and other installations on Swan came from Tampa, Florida aboard the M/V Don Emilio B., an ex-U.S. Navy LCI operated by The Hamilton Brothers Steamship Co. A small pier on the island offered the only docking available and it was, at best, very poor. The LCI had to anchor off shore and send a rowboat to the pier.

Bay Of Pigs

It was during the Bay of Pigs invasion of April, 1961, that RS took a new turn in its broadcasting career. Immediately prior to the invasion, and throughout the event, RS broadcast an almost endless stream of cryptic messages. One typical message was, "Attention, Stanislaus, the moon is red 19 April." Other messages were overt battle instructions to specific military units. Whether

or not any of these were valid messages or were simply a matter of psychological warfare intended to impress or frighten the Cubans has never been determined.

The RS activities in connection with the Bay of Pigs fiasco caused a number of RS-watchers to come to the conclusion that, regardless of its commercial facade, Gibraltar Steamship Corp. was your basic CIA *spook* or *front* type of black operation. In fact, the 1 May 1961 issue of *Newsweek* referred to RS as a CIA operation.

After the Bay of Pigs, Gibraltar Steamship moved its headquarters to Miami and inexplicably changed the station's name to Radio Americas. In 1962, Gibraltar Steamship was phased out and the new "owners" of the station became the Vanguard Service Corp., which claimed it was a firm of "business consultants." In time, Vanguard turned over the station to another CIA front, Radio Americas, Inc. of Coral Gables, Florida.

RA continued in operation under its revised status. The actual operation of the station in its Florida days was under two men, Robert J. Wilkinson and Orlando Alvarez, although most of the corporate officers of

Another 1960 photo shows the Miami-based aircraft unloading mail and packages on Swan. Again, all RS technicians face away from the camera.



Personnel Directory

Listed here are the companies concerned with the operation of Radio Americas and predecessor Radio Swan, along with the officers of these companies and, in some cases, their other business connections.

Gibraltar Steamship Corp. (1960)

Pres.: Thomas D. Cabot, Weston, MA
Director, 1st Natl. Bank, Boston
VP: Sumner Smith, Lincoln, MA
Owner of Swan Island(s)

Stockholder: Walter G. Lohr, Baltimore, MD
Commercial Mgr.: Horton H. Heath, New York, NY

Program Dir.: R. J. Wilkinson, Miami, FL
Operations Mgr.: Roger C. Butts, Miami, FL

Vanguard Service Corp. (1962)

Pres. & Treas.: Leon D. Black, Miami Shores, FL
VP: Robert R. Bellamy, Miami, FL
Investment broker

Secy: Frank J. Kelly, Coral Gables, FL

Radio Americas, Inc.

Pres: Roosevelt C. Houser, Coral Gables, FL
Director, 1st Natl. Bank, Miami, FL

VP: W. R. Maddux, Miami, FL

Maddux & Co., real estate

Secy-Treas.: Walter S. C. Rogers, Coral Gables, FL

Pres., Florida Bond & Mortgage Co.

Program Dir.: R. J. Wilkinson, Miami, FL

Former Vanguard Officers

Pres.: William H. West, Jr., Millwood, VA
VP, Farmers & Merchants Natl. Bank,
Winchester, VA

VP: James E. Hollingsworth, Palm Beach, FL

Director, 1st Natl. Bank, Palm Beach, FL

VP & Genl. Mgr.: Mr. Butts, then of Hollywood, FL

Former employee, W. R. Maddux

Secy: Richard S. Greenlee, New York, NY

Attorney

Commercial Manager: Mr. Heath

Program Dir.: Mr. Wilkinson

Office Mgr.: Frederick Fazakerly, Miami, FL

George Wass, address unknown

the station were always persons with important banking or other financial positions.

Wilkinson, a Cuban-American, had been with the station since its early days. His official title was Program Director. Cubans in Miami identified him as the CIA agent in charge of the station.

In pre-Castro Cuba, Wilkinson was a well-known producer/performer for the CMQ radio network.

Alvarez, in pre-Castro Cuba, had owned the important Radio Cadena Habana (stations CMCH and COBH).

These two men headed a staff of more than 30 persons in Miami—artists, newsmen, and technicians. They also controlled the Cuban newscasters and the technicians stationed on Swan.

In this period, RA was producing many of its dramatic, comedy, and soap opera programs (most with an anti-Castro flavor) at the Continental Recording Studios, 2020 N.W. 7th Street, Miami. Continental was operated by Aldo Vazquez, although the second banana there was RA's Orlando Alvarez. The recordings were directed by Angel Fernandez Varela, former director of the Havana newspaper, *Informacion*. Many of the commentary programs were narrated by Cuban counter-revolutionary Luis Conte Aguero.

The remainder of the taped shows were recorded off the air from broadcasts of Radio New York Worldwide, WNYW. The voices of "Havana Rose" (as she was known) and Luis Conte Aguero were usually recorded

by RA from the WNYW transmissions.

Cubans in Miami to whom I spoke in the Summer of 1967 said that RA had become something of a bore, with its unremitting anti-Castro torrent of words. Fact was, they said that the folks in Cuba had acquired a taste for the soft-sell VOA 1180 kHz station in Marathon, Florida (the station reborn in 1985 as Radio Marti). RA had, however, acquired a rather large audience throughout Central and South America, where its anti-Castro message was backfiring. It seems listeners figured that if the U.S. was spending so much money to knock Castro he must be far greater and more important to Latin America than it would otherwise appear.

The Moment Of Truth

Within DX circles, RA had become entrenched as one of the hottest topics of discussion throughout the 1960's. After years of broadcasting, during which it never varied so much as an inch from its claims that it was on Swan Island, there were those who continued to insist that the announced Swan location was a CIA diversionary tactic to draw attention away from the true (and secret) location. In fact, the longer the station announced it was on Swan, the more certain were some that it was elsewhere!

Some DX'ers speculated that RA was in south Florida, aboard a ship at sea, Cay Sal in the Bahamas, Venezuela, or Navassa Island. The reasoning and logic employed by some members of the DX'ing community

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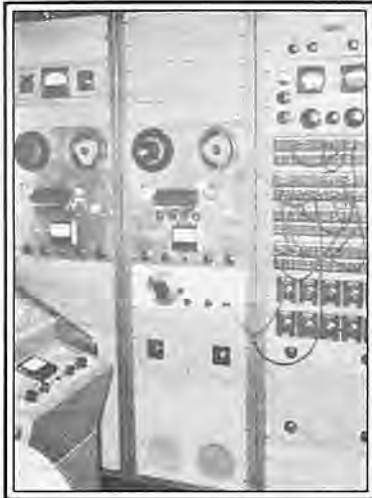
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Ampex tape decks, Super-Pro receiver and a patching board show in this 1960 photo of the equipment used at RS to record some programs from stateside transmitters.



U.S. claims to control over Swan are backed up by a QSL from station WSG (the FAA on Swan) mailed in 1950. On 17 March of 1961 RS itself sent out special letters bearing American postage stamps, even though the FCC claimed it was unaware of the existence of the 50 kW station.

was usually preposterous, convoluted, and esoteric in an effort to prove that the station was at a location other than Swan. Perhaps, what with the CIA involved, the notion of a secret location was a cheap thrill to some.

One perfect example of the way in which this "controversy" was fed and perpetuated appeared in the May, 1963, edition of *Electronics Illustrated* magazine. Ontario DX'er C.M. Stanbury II solemnly announced that he had devised a "Short Wave Fraud Finder" antenna that would supposedly settle the matter. Let it be noted that this outlandish super whizbang skyhook consisted of nothing more than two wires, one strung in a vertical plane and the other horizontally. The idea was to compare various S-meter readings between the two antennas so the CIA's mysteries would be revealed.

After setting his "Fraud Finder" contraption into action, Stanbury finally revealed, "Tests I ran on several evenings . . . indicated R. Americas was not on Swan Island . . . RA is much nearer Cuba than it is to Swan . . ." The mystery-solver further proclaimed that those DX'ers who maintained that RA was on Swan only did so because, "A good many DX'ers would rather cling to that theory than drop a rare country from their logs . . . We see no reason why its location (RA) should be kept secret at this late date."

Notwithstanding such ominous charges, RA blithely continued in operation, eventually shifting its broadcast band frequency slightly to 1165 kHz, and opening up a second shortwave frequency of 11800 kHz.

By 1968 DX'ers were still quite fascinated with RA and its activities; there was scarcely a DX club bulletin that didn't discuss the station in every issue. I had done quite a bit of writing in national magazines about RA and I figured that my efforts had been noticed by Gibraltar Steamship, Vanguard Service, Radio Americas, Inc., or whomever.

It therefore crossed my mind that it might be interesting to see what would happen if I contacted RA and tried to convince them that it would be a great idea to permit me to travel to Swan to check out the hardware to make certain that they weren't trifling with the emotions of the DX fraternity—and while I was there I could take some pictures and chat with the personnel. True, after RA began broadcasting, the island became off limits to casual visitors (although an elderly couple from Boston had been permitted to go there each year to count the birds), but when I told them how important it was for the DX'ing community to know for sure, they'd certainly understand. That, at least, was my fantasy.

I discussed my brainstorm with Bob Beason, the editor of *Electronics Illustrated*, hoping that he might be interested in publishing the story of my proposed visit to Swan. He regarded with total incredulity my idea of asking RA if I could visit Swan. Finally he facetiously said, "Sure—and ask them if I can tag along with you!"

Without delay, I dashed off a letter to the RA office and bluntly asked if I could stop by their transmitting site, take some photos, and rap with the engineers. Also, I added that I wanted to bring someone along to verify my findings. It was a lark, I'll admit.

To my amazement, RA's Bob Wilkinson came back with the answer that we would be welcome on Swan as long as we had permission from the FAA (which, he said, had control over the island). In addition, we would also have to provide our own transportation since no regularly scheduled airline flights or cruise ships stopped at Swan. We envisioned miles of red tape in order to get FAA approval. Beason felt FAA approval was a "Catch 22" to keep us off Swan.

As things turned out, the FAA was the very least of our problems and their quick



The last civilians allowed to visit Swan before RS made it off limits were hams W4KFC, W3KA, and W4JNE, who received the callsign KS4AZ for their DXpedition in February of 1960. They did not report seeing any preparation for RS, which went on the air only two or three months after their visit. Obviously RS was tossed into operation on little more than a moment's notice. My own visit to the island revealed that RS was a highly portable station with many components in mobile vans. More on this in the next issue of POP'COMM. The story of the KS4AZ DXpedition was told in the May, 1960, issue of CQ magazine.

approval opened the way for a strange and eerie excursion that culminated in our flight aboard a chartered 1938-vintage DC-3 aircraft heading toward the grass runway on Swan, a runway that the pilot insisted might be too short to land a DC-3, and probably was unsuitable for us ever to use for taking off to return to civilization.

Was there a 50 kW clandestine CIA broadcaster on this strange little speck of rock? You betcha! Was it ever, and I'll tell you about it and show you some of the photos I took in Part II appearing in the next (December) issue of POP'COMM. Watch for it!

PC