

CLANDESTINE CORNER

MADAGASCAR'S RADIO DIEGO SUAREZ



One of the best examples of what a propaganda transmitter at close range can do in an actual military campaign was the operation of Radio Diego Suarez. The little known story concerns the exploits of a British naval officer during the occupation of Madagascar (now Malagasy Rep.) in the spring of 1942.

The story concerns an anonymous officer who became a one-man radio squadron with his clandestine station which helped substantially to prepare the population and the small French armed force, which was resisting in the name of Vichy, for the British takeover.

The battle for the naval base of Diego Suarez at the northern tip of Madagascar lasted three days and all during that time the Axis radio was particularly active trying to discredit the British. They charged the town had been heavily bombed, that many inhabitants had been killed and that the streets were practically running with blood. It was essential that these stories be refuted in broadcasts to the remainder of the island, for the occupation would be immeasurably more difficult if the island's residents were given the impression that the British were conducting a massacre instead of a relatively bloodless occupation. The Vichy controlled French radio at Tananarive, the capital, sent out desperate appeals for news of the inhabitants of Diego Suarez, with which normal communications had been cut.

A British officer on one of the warships in the harbor at Diego Suarez had access to a broadcasting transmitter powerful enough to reach the entire island and it was decided to set up a station. He decided to simply "borrow" the wavelength of the Tananarive station. Accordingly, he listened for the next regular broadcast, made certain that he had the exact frequency and prepared to begin transmission at the end of the Tananarive broadcast. With the aid of a signals sergeant who worked the controls which had been set up in a small cabin on the warship, Radio Diego Suarez was born. The English officer knew enough French, including the vernacular of radio, to get by.

As soon as the Vichy radio Tananarive signed off, he came on with his introduction in orthodox radio style: "Allo, Allo! Ici Radio Diego Suarez! Ici Radio Diego Suarez! Ne quittez pas l'ecoute. Un officier anglais vous parle." Then he began to read from a prepared script, which, he recounted, was grammatically correct thanks to the editing of a French chef who was aboard the vessel. He told the inhabitants that Diego Suarez was normal and that there had been no civilian casualties, and to prove his assurance, he read about 25 messages from French civilians reporting that they were in good health. These had been hastily collected as soon as the landing was made.

He learned later that the effect had been immediate. Monitors at Tananarive radio, who had tuned in out of curiosity to see what the English officer might have to say, had taken down the names and repeated them in their next broadcast.

The officer had not planned to begin a regular service, but merely to make one or two broadcasts to set the population right as to what was happening at the northern end of Madagascar. However, he was carried away by the enthusiasm for the first broadcast and announced that he would be on with more messages the following day. Soon he realized that his French was too shaky for him to do the job alone, even with the help of the menu-French provided by the chef. Luckily, aboard the same ship he found a Royal Marine who spoke the language fluently.

The new Diego Suarez station began to come in regularly at the end of the Tananarive broadcasts--putting on a record of "La Marseillaise" right after Tananarive had finished playing its own record of the anthem, and holding its audience with the bait of personal messages. The service was enlarged to include news bulletins, which the ship's radio operator recorded from London broadcasts, and which the Marine translated into French. In the field of propaganda, Radio Diego Suarez began to counteract Vichy propaganda, which reached Madagascar from stations in France, by inaugurating a feature called "Paroles de Churchill," quotations from speeches by the prime minister, either stressing confidence in an Allied victory, or predicting the rise of France again after the war. The personal message business became so good that the officer had to open an office in the town to take them from the inhabitants.

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RADIO DIEGO SUAREZ (Continued)

When the ship left the harbor, the officer and his radio station were put ashore and ordered to keep Radio Diego Suarez going. He installed a broadcasting studio in the projecting room of a disused movie theater, which had a few drawbacks but which was satisfactory on the whole. The officer said that the most important of the drawbacks was the fact that outside the studio was a farmyard where there were some chickens who seemed particularly radio-minded. On one occasion, the signals sergeant left the window of the projecting room open and while the officer was on the air, a hen jumped onto the window sill and began to cluck into the microphone right at his ear. To shoo the hen away, the sergeant left the controls without turning them off, which caused all Madagascar to hear the hen's violent protests at being driven off.

While the occupation of the remainder of the island proceeded slowly, the British officer and his station held forth in Diego Suarez. They fought methodically to eradicate the effects of Axis propaganda which had saturated the island during the preceding two years. They broadcast in Malagash, the language of the island, as well as in French, and they managed to scrape up a variety of programs which interested listeners, including music by British military bands and various French features.

When the British armies moved south, the officer remained at Diego Suarez with orders to move to Tananarive when it was occupied. That finally occurred on November 5, 1942, just six months after the start of the campaign. Radio Diego Suarez then ended its remarkable career and the facilities of the British officer were merged with those of Radio Tananarive.

(Digested from "The History of Clandestine Radio Operations," A DXplorer Radio Assn. publication)