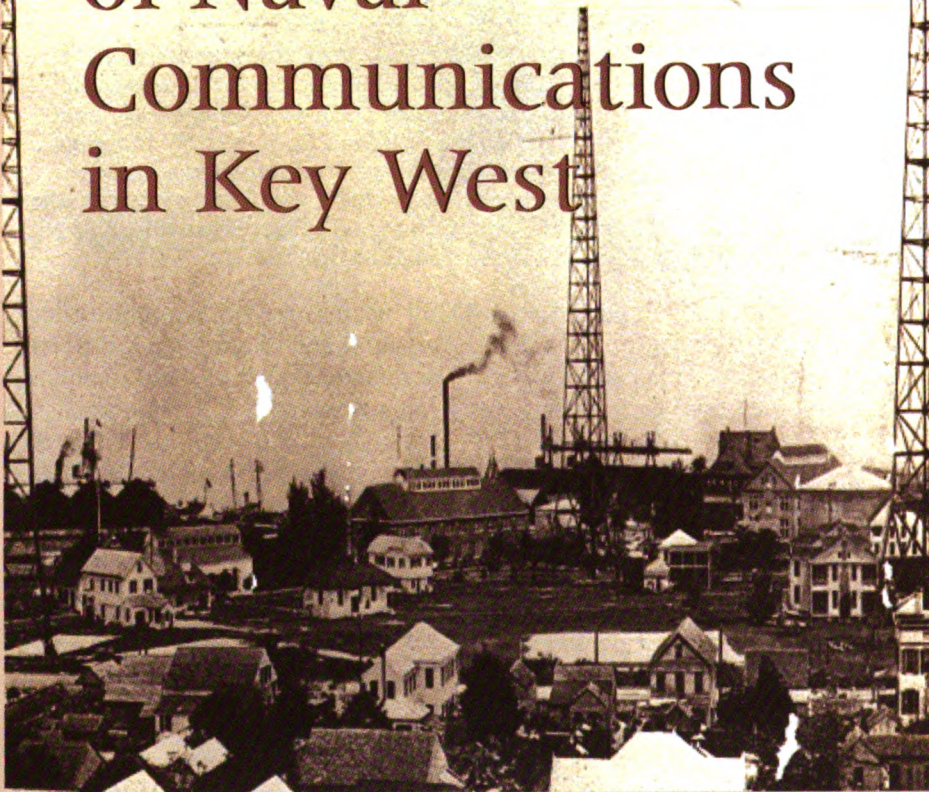


The History of Naval Communications in Key West



In 1914, wooden antenna supports at Naval Radio Station Key West were removed and replaced by three triangular based steel towers (left photo), each 300 feet tall.

in Key West” Said Sommers, who retired as a Warrant Officer. “And although prohibition was in effect in the U.S. you would never have known it here — the place was wide open.”

“I had my problems getting to Key West in 1925,” said Sommer. “It took me 24 hours to get from Jacksonville to Miami because there was only one railroad track from Jacksonville to Miami. The passenger trains were almost always on the sidings waiting for the fruit trains, which had priority, to get through. When I finally got to Miami the hotels were crowded— it seemed like people were sleeping in shifts in the hotel rooms.”

Eventually Sommers got on the Florida East Coast Railroad which ran along the keys from Miami to Key West. When Sommers arrived at Key West, he was sent to a remote radio station site on the eastern end of the island where the Naval Hospital is

By Ivette Schoonover and LCDR Reece Morgan

Key West, Florida has been a Navy town for more than 180 years. Commodore David Porter (hero of the War of 1812) was commander of the first Navy outpost in Key West, established in 1823 to drive the pirates out of the Straits of Florida.

The island proved to be of extreme strategic importance – physically commanding the gate of the Gulf of Mexico – during the Civil War. During World War I, World War II, and through the Cold War, Key West was a primary anti-submarine warfare base. In the late 1980s, Key West became a major player in the war against drug traffickers in the Gulf of Mexico and South America.

Naval communications in Key West also has a colorful history. In 1904 the DeForest Wireless Telegraph Company was awarded a contract from the United States Navy to build five radio stations.

Naval Radio Station (NAVRAD-STA) Key West was one of those five.

Established in 1905, NAVRAD-STA Key West was a link in a chain of Wireless Telegraph Stations in what was then known as the Coastal Signal Service of the Navy extending from Cape Elizabeth, Maine, to New Orleans, La., and including Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Colon, Isthmus of Panama.

Radio Shack in the 1920s

George Sommer enlisted in the Navy on Oct. 21, 1920, and went to boot camp in Norfolk. He went to preliminary radio school there and then to Great Lakes. In 1921 he attended Aviation Radio School at Norfolk. He served for 25 years. Sommers had two tours of shore duty in Key West – from 1925 to 1927 and again from 1937 to 1938.

“In 1925 everybody had a girl friend



now located. He was a Radioman First Class at the time, and sat the CW circuits. The radio station had two CW circuits: one Navy and one commercial. “During the summer the static was so bad that the Chief in Charge would get frustrated, grab the backlogged messages and mail them to Charleston,” said Sommers.

The radio crew at the remote site also

had occasion to use the U.S. flag for communications. "The Commandant of the Naval District had his headquarters in Key West then," Sommer said, "And he went golfing out near the radio shack. Because we had the nearest telephone, the Commandant told us that if he got a phone call while golfing to lower the flag to half mast as a signal. So we did."

"In 1925 the Navy began to encourage its radio operators to work the 40 to 80 meter bands used by ham operators. Some of the boys in Building 57 built a short wave transmitter, and we began working it at the remote site. Part of the radio station's job was to take noon position reports from Navy, and commercial position

reports over a landline to Western Union in Key West. We got along well with the Western Union operator. I can't recall his name, but his sign was 'DR'" Sommers said.

"For instance, if he thought there was a mistake in a posrep, he would break in on the line and say 'Try again' or 'I'll ignore that one.' Because we were up on the short wave, ships in European waters began to relay traffic to us and we would reroute it. When Charleston and New York began getting all these messages from Europe via Key West we received all sorts of commendations and citations for our splendid work."



During the World Wars

During World War I, the Navy Coastal Radio Stations were used to sound the alarm when German U-boats were operating in the Gulf of Mexico. Due to the unreliability of early radio communications, carrier pigeons were used to carry vital messages between shore stations.

During World War II and the Battle of the At-

lantic against German submarines, Key West became an important anti-submarine base for U.S. and Allied destroyers, submarines and aircraft. The Naval Radio Station was a vital link passing German U-boat sightings and positions, as well as S.O.S. calls from torpedoed merchant ships to other stations. In mid-1943, the communication office and code room were moved to Bldg. 124 and the radio receiving station was moved to the Naval Air Station where radio reception was deemed better.

Cold War Communications

The Cold War brought nuclear détente and demands for more reliable, long-range naval communications. NAVRADSTA Key West was deeply involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis and Bay of Pigs incident in 1962, and in 1964 Naval Communications Unit Key West was commissioned and absorbed the Naval Radio Station.

Planning began for expanding the communications facilities in Key West. In 1968, NAVCOMMU was redesignated as a Naval Communications Station, and in 1969 the then state-of-the-art Naval Radio Transmitter Facility (NRTF) on Saddlebunch Key was completed, followed by the new Naval Radio Receiver Facility (NRRF) on NAS Boca Chica in 1970. These facilities continue to be the backbone of naval radio communications in the Southeastern United States today.

In 1975 the command was again redesignated as a Naval Communications Unit as satellite communications began replacing HF as the Navy's primary long-haul medium.

Recent History

In 1992, NAVCOMMU Key West was decommissioned and became a Government Owned/Contractor Operated detachment under NCTAMS LANT until 2000, when it was realigned as a Detachment under NAVCOMTELSTA Jacksonville. Key West continues to adapt to the realities of the shifting naval communications environment. A recent reduced scope of the GOCO contract has enabled them to consolidate operations and management into a single building.



Clockwise from left: Sailors pictured in Tech Control in 1977 (note the facial hair). The newly constructed transmitter site at Saddlebunch Key as it looked in 1969, and as it appears today. Naval Communication Station Key West maintains and operates communication guard centers in support of Commander Key West Forces, Commander Naval Base, Commander Fleet Air Squadron and other components of local naval activities.