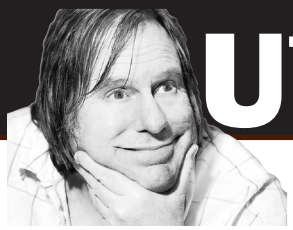

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Globe Wireless Abandons HF

The latest major closure to affect shortwave (HF, High Frequency) radio is on the utility side. It's the end of the Globe Wireless Maritime Digital Radio Network.

Not very long ago, this world-spanning net was an integral part of Globe's turnkey communication system for large cargo vessels. It was billed as a cheaper alternative to satellites for e-mail. Shore stations would repeatedly page ships with outstanding traffic, and the vessels would eventually answer to pick up their mail. Now, though, the network is essentially gone.

Here, only two stations are still audible. These are KPH, San Francisco Radio, CA, on 8606.0 and 13017.0 kilohertz (kHz), and WNU, Slidell Radio, LA, on 18224. These frequencies are the shore side of international duplex channels. Ships transmit on 8343, 12427, and 18203.5 kHz.

On July first, the two KPH pairs were much busier than before. The marker, in 100-baud FSK (Frequency-Shift Keying), was switching frequently to faster digital modes used to actually move traffic with ships. It would seem highly apparent that at least a few of Globe's oft-cited 4000 HF customers have been slow to give it up.

It's obvious that change is afoot at Globe Wireless. Articles in the investment press describe recent management changes, and an effort to build a leaner company, better suited to the shifting winds of the shipping industry.

Ten-Tec RX-321 receiver, custom made for Globe Wireless (courtesy N5NA).

While June 30 was given as something of a cutoff date, some HF signals vanished well before that. Some, like KPH, persisted after it. There was no abrupt, dramatic sign-off like the one on that dark day when Globe dropped Morse code services. It ended with a whimper, not a bang.

Even so, the decision must have come relatively quickly. The Globe web site continues at press time to stress the value of this "24-station network." It's still being pitched as a cheap and reliable satellite backup or alternative. The only problem is that it no longer exists.

❖ The End of History?

People who have been around for a while remember when Globe's call signs actually referred to real stations with proud histories of highly trained operators saving lives at sea. Some of the original station sites still exist, while others don't. In many cases, Globe bought the licenses from companies giving up on stations, and used the calls at other transmitters.

The good part of all this was that the network kept some pretty historic calls in use - sort of. They survived in the license documents. One could still refer to a particular Globe station by its old, iconic letters. Their very sound conjured up a more heroic time, when real humans made the strange beeping noises that connected ships at sea with the rest of the world.

Recently, these old calls lived on in another form. A free Java program called Rivet made it possible for ordinary listeners to find identifying bit sequences in the arcane, proprietary protocol used for Globe markers. These were decoded into hexadecimal bytes which could be used to look up the station calls. OK, it wasn't the same as the window-rattling, almost danceable, Morse code rhythm from KFS, but at least it was something.

Rivet, which does a lot of other good things too, remains a remarkable feat of programming. One has to feel good for amateur radio and utility listening when smart people like creator Ian Wraith can produce seemingly magical code for the rest of us. This is especially true when said code costs nothing, or at least a tiny fraction of the thousands of dollars required for the high-end commercial decoders.

Rivet led to quite a flurry of Globe loggings. The latest versions were also able to extract a vessel's Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) from FSK packets on either side of the duplex pair. Listening on the ship side, when it was audible, would sometimes give the vessel's position. This was fun, not to mention a good way to rack up ships.

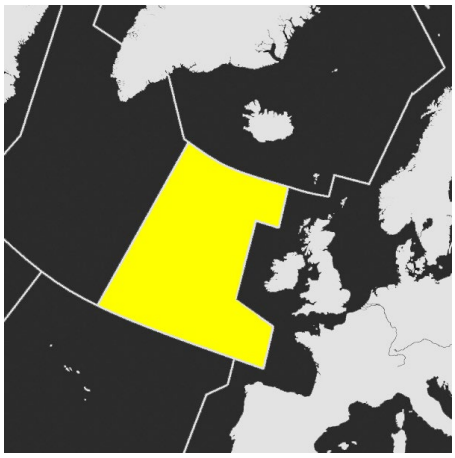
All of this will be missed, along with these echoes of the old call signs. Some will simply vanish forever, while others will still be used for other services. Right now, it's impossible to say which ones are which.

❖ More Shanwick Frequencies

This month's column is finally able to list all the "additional" frequencies being used for North Atlantic oceanic air traffic control by the center at Shanwick (Shannon/Prestwick). These were mentioned last month, but details were scarce.

The Shanwick aero mobile frequencies listed in all the publications and web sites are Major World Air Route Area (MWARA) allocations. These still exist, but in 2011 a number of others were authorized for Shanwick's use on the same North Atlantic routes. They came from the center's lesser-known allocations for Regional and Domestic Air Route Areas (RDARA).

As with the MWARA, these additional frequencies are organized into "families." The



Shanwick Oceanic Control Area (map by author).

publications all mention the North Atlantic families NAT-A through F. Now one can add H, I, and J. (It's unknown why there is no "G.")

Family H is 2965, 3491, 5583, 6556, 6667, 10021, 10036, and 11363 kHz. All of these are upper sideband voice (USB). 5583 and 6667 have recently been active with voice traffic.

Family I is 2860, 2881, 2890, 3458, 3473, 3488, 5484, 5568, 6550, 6595, and 10066 kHz USB.

Family J is 2869, 2944, 2992, 3446, 3473, 4651, 4666, 4684, 5460, 5481, 5559, 5577, 6547, 8843, 8954, and 11276 kHz USB. 6547 has recently been very active, with selective calling (selcal) and voice traffic.

In addition, some other changes were made in the use of families B and C on April 22, 2013. These relate to the assignment of frequencies based on the position of the aircraft. According to the Notice To Airmen (NOTAM), families B and C will now be used for aircraft between 47 and 64 degrees north latitude.

April's changes might relate to the increased use of automated systems for oceanic air traffic control. Then again, they might not. At this time, the voice channels still sound pretty busy.

❖ Tallinn Airport

Tallinn Airport (designators TLL and EETN) is the largest one in Estonia. It's short for Lennart Meri Tallinn Airport. Tallinn is the Estonian capital, and Lennart Meri was a leader in the movement for independence from the Soviet Union. He became the country's second president.

This airport is different because of the way it does its broadcasts of recorded information for arriving pilots. All airports of any consequence do these. They're a simple, time-saving way to brief pilots on the weather, approach conditions, and any special circumstances affecting safety of flight.