



**Defense Media Activity**  
AFN Broadcast Center (Public Affairs)  
**News Release**

Media Contact: +1 (951) 413-2319  
DSN 312-248-1319

Public Contact  
[george.a.smith32.civ@mail.mil](mailto:george.a.smith32.civ@mail.mil)

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## The Seldom Heard Stories of the U.S. Military's Broadcast Network: AFN

*By George A. Smith, American Forces Network Broadcast Center*

The convoy of Soldiers looked right and left for improvised explosive devices and enemy combatants as they sped along a 100-mile gauntlet near the Iraqi/Syrian border. They were on one of the most unusual missions of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Soldiers wanted an American Forces Network (AFN) decoder box to watch live NFL football.

The commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment had arranged for the decoder to get mailed directly to him in April 2003, for his 1,200 Soldiers occupying an old train station in Al Qaim, Iraq, in Al Anbar province.

“We were probably the only unit in Iraq watching live TV at the time,” said the unit’s commander at that time, U.S. Army Colonel (Ret.) Greg Reilly: “Total morale boost like no other!” That’s why a unit of Soldiers hungry for live NFL football valued that box so dearly. After it went missing for a day, the unit command sergeant major seized control of the box, chained it to a wall and put it under 24/7 security, and set up a distribution system for their singular decoder.

This is just one of the many stories which illustrate the elevated importance AFN has had over its 75 years of service to American military personnel serving far from home. The network has helped change Hollywood, topple a dictator, inspire legendary musicians, feed a starving city and save lives.

Many Americans have never heard of AFN, since it only operates overseas for U.S. military personnel, DoD civilians and their families. But the overseas U.S. military knows their radio and television network connection with the States well. In some cases that connection has endured across generations. American military families first listened to U.S. Army Pvt. Gary Bautell on AFN Europe in 1962. Today, Gary is still on the air as a DoD civilian, the same energetic AFN voice enjoyed by their grandparents now connecting with the youngest members of the American military community.

Bautell’s first assignment and AFN’s history both began with radio. In the late 30’s and early 40’s, television was still largely confined to laboratories. Many people lived beyond the reach of daily newspapers and barely 20 percent of American households had phones. For “The Greatest Generation,” radio was the single, indispensable, real-time connection to the world, and they couldn’t get enough of it. One of the first radio stations, KGEI, was actually located in San Francisco. KGEI broadcasted by shortwave to U.S. military personnel in the Philippines in 1939. In 1940, the commander of the Panama Canal Artillery Command, started PCAC radio. These early military radio stations provided troops the preferred medium of the time, and when they had it, morale soared. The War Department’s Raymond Fosdick said it best, “Morale is as important as ammunition.”

But it wasn't until May 26, 1942, when the importance of radio became official. That was the date when the War Department established the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS). In the years to follow, military DJs would open their microphone under many names: the Far East Network, Blue Danube Network, American Forces Vietnam Network, American Forces Thailand Network, American Forces Korea Network, and the name now used by all military broadcast stations today: the American Forces Network.

Once the War Department established the military network, they commissioned a civilian, senior advertising agency official, Tom Lewis, to lead it as a U.S. Army officer. Lewis was perfect for the challenge. He lived in Los Angeles, had scores of Hollywood contacts and was married to movie star Loretta Young. The new major quickly found the entertainment, equipment and personnel to create a network of radio stations for U.S. military personnel.

World War II troops serving overseas listened and loved it. Some got creative, and when they didn't have a radio, they built their own. Soldiers built radios out of whatever parts they could scrounge, whether it was a razor blade and copper wire, or a mess kit with metal scrap.

AFN delivered morale to millions in the 40s using popular entertainment from the era's top stars such as comedians Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Abbott and Costello, singers Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore, actor Clark Gable and bandleader Glenn Miller.

The first AFN shows were broadcasted from BBC studios in the United Kingdom to Americans preparing to storm the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. Later, AFN mobile radio studios and transmitters followed GIs as they surged ashore in France and advanced inland.

It wasn't the only network aimed to influence morale on the battlefield. The enemy was in the game, but with a goal to send American morale in a different direction. American troops advancing across Europe and the Pacific were greeted by propagandists like Axis Sally and Tokyo Rose sneaking demoralizing messages into English language music and news programs.

AFN countered with GI Jill, a female DJ who played the latest music and endeared herself to the troops by reading and responding to G.I. letters.

The network kept propaganda off the airwaves. Its leaders knew that American military personnel expected their news to be just like it was in the United States. At the same time, the broadcasters carefully avoided even the inadvertent mention of any information that could give the enemy an advantage.

Sometimes AFN DJs were told to do odd things that didn't make sense from a programming standpoint. For example, AFN London played "Sur le Pont d'Avignon," a French children's song about dancing on the Avignon Bridge ... 14 times in one day. DJs later learned that it was a code song for the French resistant forces.

Eventually the sounds of World War II fell silent, but AFN did not. AFN stations were set up at locations where there were major concentrations of U.S. troops, mostly in Japan, Korea, Germany, Italy and Belgium. Stations were also set up in France, Austria and Taiwan, which eventually closed.

The outbreak of war in Korea sent the network scrambling for new studio facilities. Radio broadcast operations once again combined fixed locations with mobile studios to ensure complete coverage on what became AFKN, the American Forces Korea Network. It carried music, news and command information which, in one historic instance, included commands to the enemy. As American forces pushed the North

Koreans and their Chinese allies into full retreat in October, 1950, General Douglas MacArthur used the AFKN airwaves to demand the surrender of the communist forces.

When the fighting stopped, AFKN continued to give the U.S. military round-the-clock force protection messages on curfews, off limits areas, local customs, phrase-of-the-day language hints and news and entertainment from back home.

AFKN radio and TV broadcasts were a hit with South Koreans who wanted to learn English, or were curious about American culture and music. AFKN was especially popular because it offered its TV services in color before the technology was available on Korean TV. Korean broadcast organizations used the dominance of American color TV as part of a successful pitch for their own government's support in converting to color.

Though AFKN's television programming was not intended for host nationals, it was widely watched by locals just the same. AFKN personnel were told that when then South Korean President, Park Chung-hee, was assassinated in 1979, inside his presidential compound; it was AFKN that was being watched on television sets in the area where four of his bodyguards had been killed.

While AFKN broadcasts were targeted only to Americans, host nationals living close to U.S. military installations could watch AFKN TV and listen to AFKN radio. Before AFN started broadcasting TV only to Americans on-base with AFN decoder boxes, host nationals living within the TV broadcast "footprint" were able to watch using old-fashioned rooftop antennas or set-top rabbit ears.

AFN radio meant more to locals than just a way to brush up their English or stay current with uncensored news. Radio was always first and foremost about the music, and AFN's reputation was built on having the latest and the best of every genre. Among talented young European musicians eager to broaden their own repertoire, AFN DJs became musi-cultural emissaries for new sounds. Robert Plant, the lead vocalist for rock legends, Led Zeppelin, said he tuned to AFN broadcasts in the 50s to hear the jazz and blues which became influences for the iconic music he himself would create. Singer, Van Morrison was another avid listener, and even mentioned AFN in his 70s song "In the Days before Rock and Roll," as did the German Country band "Truck Stop."

Their success as military broadcasters inevitably led to wider fame for some DJs and journalists. Game show host Pat Sajak, *American Top 40* host, Casey Kasem and actor George Kennedy of *The Naked Gun*, were three military broadcasters who went on to become household names in the United States and around the world.

One military DJ in Vietnam, Adrian Cronauer, had already enjoyed a measure of fame among his generation of warriors, but achieved immortality when portrayed by Robin Williams, in the film, *Good Morning Vietnam*. For many Americans that movie marked the first – and in some cases, the only time they'd heard of the military broadcast network.

In multiple conflicts to follow, the Cronauer-Williams connection inspired other DJs to crack their mics for the first shows from each new combat zone and say: "Good Morning Bosnia," "Good Morning Saudi Arabia," "Good Morning Iraq," or "Good Morning Afghanistan."

AFN radio is traditionally the first service provided when U.S. military personnel deploy, which means American music has gone on the air in some unlikely locations. In World War II, AFN broadcasted from China, India and Burma. From the late '50s until 1976 the network was on the air from Tehran, Iran. The Armed Forces Network Taiwan operated until 1979. AFN DJs had a brief presence in Somalia from 1993-

1994 and today are still broadcasting from Guantanamo Bay Cuba, Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, Honduras in Central America, and Kwajalein Atoll in the Pacific.

Places where AFN radio signals arrive are sometimes more surprising than the places they originate. Programs from Germany have been heard in Latvia and Estonia, and AFN broadcasts from Japan have been picked up in Scandinavia this year. In the '70s, people in communist East Germany and Czechoslovakia routinely tuned-in to AFN radio, despite their country's attempts to jam the signals. In 1979, a communist defector and his U.S. military escort arrived unannounced at AFN Nürnberg. After being introduced to the morning DJ, an Army sergeant, the defector said, "I always wanted to meet you. I always listened to your station instead of other English language radio stations because you weren't trying to influence me. You're just a Soldier talking to other Soldiers, and a Soldier wouldn't lie to his comrades."

AFN's satellite-delivered services are especially valuable for military personnel deployed to remote combat zones, regions where the Internet is unreliable and to U.S. Navy ships at sea. AFN broadcasts four Direct to Sailor (DTS) channels: News, Sports, Sports2, and AFN|prime to personnel afloat around the world.

Getting morale-boosting entertainment to the force, wherever they are in the world, has always been an important part of AFN's mission. But an even more critical function of AFN has been, and continues to be, keeping Americans informed in times of emergencies, life threatening calamities and crisis.

During the Soviet blockade of West Berlin in 1948-49, the city faced starvation and a fearful future. America and its allies managed to keep catastrophe at bay only through an epic airlift of food and other critical supplies, with more than 8,000 tons a day delivered by round-the-clock flights into Tempelhof Airport. At the airlift's peak, planes were landing every 45 seconds.

AFN Berlin's music and news were undisguised morale boosters during the blockade's darkest days. But equally important was the position of the station's radio transmitter tower sitting directly in the flight path to Tempelhof, its signal served double duty as a beacon, guiding the allied aircrews as they flew to the city's rescue.

In 1989, the AFN network in Panama, the Southern Command Network (SCN), gave Americans around-the-clock force protection updates on radio and TV when troops under military dictator Manuel Noriega started a series of increasingly violent actions against U.S. military personnel and their families. The U.S. military commander in the Canal Zone directed all personnel to tune to SCN for real time updates on the rapidly unfolding events and important safety advisories. SCN remained an information lifeline during the invasion in Operation Just Cause, right up until the day Noriega was removed from power.

Ironically, it was SCN music that U.S. forces decided to play non-stop through loudspeakers at maximum volume as a way to help force Noriega out of the Vatican embassy where he had fled to escape capture. It might be the only known instance of AFN deliberately attempting to create a dissatisfied listener.

In 1991, military broadcasters at the station at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines became a lifeline when the Mt. Pinatubo volcano erupted catastrophically. Then-Air Force Master Sergeant, Rusty Barfield, became the "face" on AFN TV giving updates on the eruption, keeping the force informed of the threat, which eventually buried the Air base and forced the evacuation of 15,000 Americans. A full generation later many Filipinos remember Barfield, from his in-depth reporting from the crisis.

Amid the horrors of September 11, 2001, AFN was a crucial tool for commanders to reach the force and their families, both on and off military installations, with critical information. Overseas, Americans got

continual live reports on what was happening in the United States, force protection guidance from commanders, details on additional security measures and threat vulnerabilities, updates on airline flights or travel and the latest on the changing global threat level.

When the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami hit Japan, causing nearly 16,000 deaths, AFN coordinated its radio, TV and social media platforms to provide real time updates on damage, recovery efforts and ongoing hazards. In 2012, as torrential storms lashed Terceira Island in Portugal's Azores, the AFN Lajes team was in the field providing and frequently updating video, radio and social media reports. Following the 2016 terrorist attack at the Brussels airport, AFN Benelux became the American military population's trusted source for up-to-the-minute information, synchronizing its radio coverage and Facebook posts in a running series of force protection updates spanning the attack and its aftermath.

Today's AFN stations enjoy advantages unimagined four generations ago. Radio is now just one part of a force protection and entertainment triad that includes television and social media. Once a single channel, radio now offers a dozen different audio services. No longer confined to local transmitters alone, those services now arrive by satellite and offered via online streaming. A single channel of AFN television was a big deal a generation ago. Now, the network's Broadcast Center in Riverside, California, offers eight, with content tailored to the time zones and lifestyles of regional audiences. Each AFN station and the AFN Broadcast Center have a Facebook page as well as other social media accounts to compliment radio and TV services. The [www.myafn.net](http://www.myafn.net) website features an interactive TV schedule, a Frequently Asked Questions section and an audience feedback tab.

Big changes are coming to AFN radio as well. This year AFN has replaced its AFN 360 Internet Radio App with a new service, AFN Go. The streaming Internet radio service gives listeners the ability to tune AFN radio services even when they can't lock in a good terrestrial radio signal.

While it's critical that AFN keeps up with technology and continues to broadcast the world's most unique blend of news, sports and entertainment, it's the network's real-time emergency messaging that makes it an irreplaceable resource for commanders. Whether it's a typhoon warning in the Pacific, a winter weather closing in Europe, or a terrorist attack ... AFN is there.

While Americans now serving overseas have many more entertainment choices than they had in 1942, they continue to make AFN radio and TV an important part of their day. U.S. Presidents, Secretaries of Defense and other leaders use the military network to communicate directly to the troops.

The October 2013 Government Shutdown revealed AFN's continued relevance when the network reduced its services from eight TV services to just one: AFN|news. Thousands of irate viewers lit AFN up with incredulous complaints on social media. They wanted *all* of their live sports and entertainment. NFL commentator Howie Long went on live TV asking why the U.S. government was denying live football to the troops. Service members bombarded Senators and Congressmen. After that, the Department of Defense quickly authorized AFN to give the American military all of eight of its TV services, not just AFN|news.

A 2018 government shutdown had similar results. When a young infantryman Tweeted then White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders lamenting AFN would not be broadcasting NFL playoff games, services were quickly restored.

Today, AFN is proud to be a military-operated network for our DoD audiences serving overseas, providing Americans with command information and keeping them connected. AFN personnel care for and relate to

the U.S. military because they either wear a uniform themselves, or, in the case of 95% of its civilian work force, once did. AFN goes where American warriors are stationed to tell their story. AFN TV signals go by satellite to remote areas with little to no bandwidth or to Sailors afloat in some remote hot spot far from home. AFN continues to evolve with streaming Internet radio and social media. What hasn't changed in the past 75 years is that the American Forces Network continues to provide its warriors with a touch of home, real time force protection messages, and live entertainment, news and sports.

AFN's anniversary isn't about AFN. AFN exists for the most deserving, unique audience in the world: the United States military. Morale is just as important as bullets. Just ask the troopers of 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq in 2003. Getting live NFL football on AFN TV was worth braving a 100-mile stretch of road through hostile enemy territory.