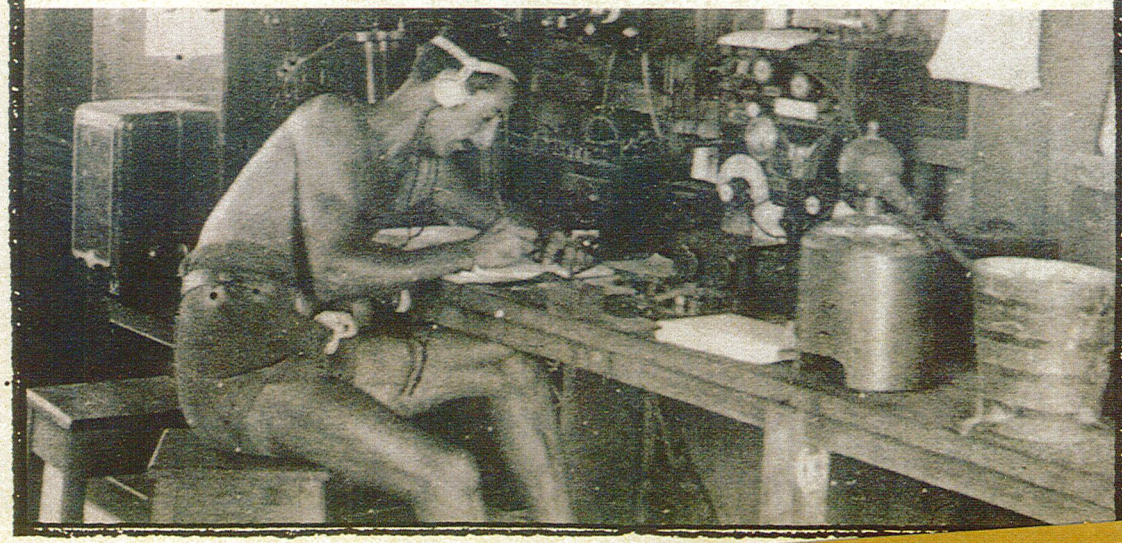
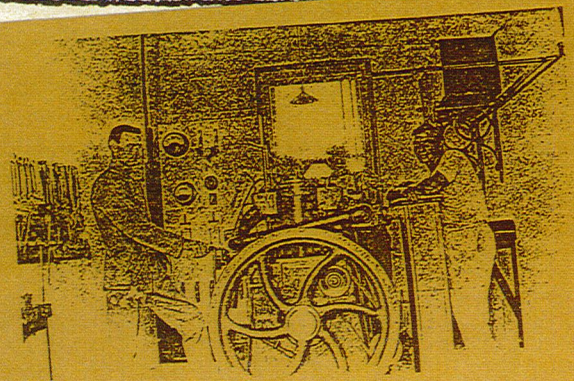


Coast Radio Calling

A pictorial history of the first thirty-five years of Australia's Coastal Radio Service 1912-1947

PART 2 - Australia's islands and territories





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Preface

THIS BOOK continues the story of Australia's Coastal Radio Service, covering the stations on Australia's islands and those in Papua and New Guinea.

The men of the Coastal Radio Service who worked in these remote settlements often had to face extreme hardships: isolation from family and friends, the risk of tropical disease, and in Papua and New Guinea, the dangers of a native population, some of whom still practised cannibalism.

During World War II, many of these radio operators were forced to flee the Japanese, some narrowly escaping, and spending months in the jungles of Papua and New Guinea before their eventual rescue.

The photographs in this book come from a fascinating collection in the AOTC archives. Many were donated by members of the Overseas Telecommunications Veterans' Association, to whom we extend our deepest gratitude.

Australia's worldwide communications company, AOTC, continues to operate the Coastal Radio Service around our shores — albeit renamed the Maritime Communications Service. Since 1947, some stations have closed, others have been relocated, and new stations have been built. But a vital function of the stations continues to be the safety of life at sea.

We've come a long way since those early days, but we should never forget the enormous legacy of those who worked to provide the vital links between Australia and the rest of the world.

This book, and others in the series, is dedicated to the memory of that pioneering spirit. The communicators' creed of 1870 remains unchanged today:

The message must get through!

Steve Burdon

S W R Burdon
Group Managing Director
Australian and Overseas Telecommunications Corporation



Island Stations and Stations of the Island Radio Service c. 1939

Flinders Island Radio (VIL)

FLINDERS ISLAND in Bass Strait is the largest in the Furneaux group. On 8 October 1913, the Postmaster General's Department opened a coastal radio station on the island to maintain contact with steamers on coastal runs.

By 1935, the island had a population of approximately 700 and was largely a self-supporting farming community. Farmers grazed their cattle and sheep for milk and meat and gathered mutton birds in March and April to supplement their diet. They also baked bread and grew vegetables.

The establishment of a radio station on the island helped break the isolation of the small community. By the mid-1930s, aeradio services operated from the station; from 1941, it took part in the Air Intelligence Reporting Scheme.

Gradually, the station became redundant as a point of contact with shipping — acting as a relay station for communications from local outstations in the region.

When OTC took over the Coastal Radio Service in 1947 and reviewed coverage areas and commercial viability, Flinders Island Radio was one of the first stations to be closed.

King Island Radio (VZE)

KING ISLAND RADIO in Bass Strait was first established as an experimental station by Australian radio pioneer, Father Shaw, in 1911. This station was abandoned in 1916, when the Australian Government opened its own station on the island.

By the 1930s, King Island was equipped with aeradio facilities and the station was involved in the Air Intelligence Reporting Scheme from January 1941 until the end of World War II.

When OTC took over the Coastal Radio Service in 1947, King Island's main function was as a collecting centre for local traffic from nearby islands in Bass Strait. It had ceased to be used for ships' traffic several years previously.

Lord Howe Island Radio (VJN)

LORD HOWE ISLAND Radio was established in 1929 by AWA, and equipped with the latest wireless apparatus.

Situated about 800 kilometres north-east of Sydney, the island was first settled in 1834 by Captain Andrews, who was sent to supervise the cultivation of food stocks which could be used to supply whaling fleets in the area.

Until 1929, communication with the outside world had been confined to the monthly steamer, so the use of radio communication became immediately popular with the island's small population.

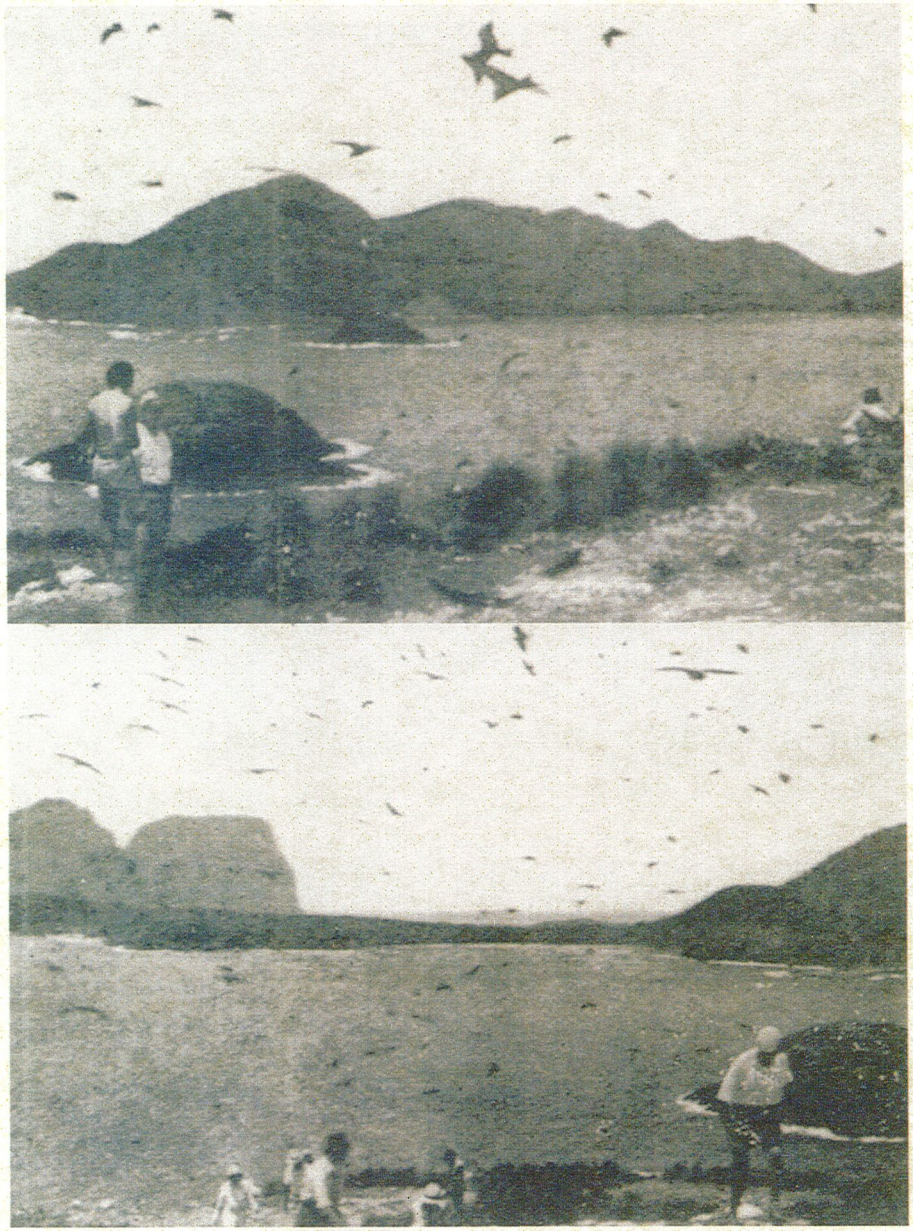
Lord Howe Island was a very remote spot but many operators who served there were impressed by its natural beauty.

By 1931, the island's principal industry was harvesting Howea palm seeds (the palms were popular as house plants).

The radio station remained under AWA's control until 1939, when it was taken over by the Department of Civil Aviation.

Making friends with a nesting gannet.





(Top) The Malabar.
(Above) Gathering mutton birds' eggs. (Photographs from the AWA magazine The Radiogram, Vol II, No 6, May 1931, p24)

Port Moresby Radio (VIG)

THE ORIGINAL station at Port Moresby opened on 26 February 1913, to ensure the safety of vessels in Papuan waters and provide a communications link with mainland Australia. The original station was located at Konedobu, about two and a half kilometres from the centre of town.

A few years later, when stations were set up offshore at Samarai and Misima and in remoter parts of the region such as the oilfields of Popo and Oriomo, Port Moresby acted as a relay station for local traffic and between Australia and the Papuan mainland. The station had direct communication with Thursday Island.

Government administration of the Territory was based in Port Moresby, providing a large amount of traffic for the station. Until 1931, traffic from Port Moresby to Sydney was sent via Cooktown and later Townsville.

In 1930, AWA began modernising the Port Moresby station, and decided to build a completely new high-powered station in the centre of Port Moresby, with direct communication to Sydney . The new station opened on 10 March 1931.

By 1936, the station only required two staff members and three native messenger boys, but the operator on duty was never idle. He handled regular schedules to Sydney, Samarai, Wau, Townsville and the Guinea Airways station. There was short -wave telephony with outstations at Yodda, Lekekamu, Oroville and Strickland River (which operated pedal radio sets), 600-metre ship work, and long and short-wave aeradio work. Port Moresby radio 4PM was also based at the radio station.

Port Moresby offered a number of activities for the operators: tennis, golf, cricket, fishing, canoe racing, annual race meetings, the annual Gala week, kangaroo, duck and pigeon shooting, and many parties and annual balls.

Port Moresby radio station was the only Papua-New Guinean station to operate throughout the whole of World War II. It was a vital communications centre for regional military operations and was central to the Coast Watching Scheme in the Pacific Islands.

Early in the war, a Naval Intelligence officer joined the radio station and an Area Combined Headquarters was established in the town. The station played an important role in communications during the evacuation of the region and was in contact with retreating radio operators fleeing the Japanese in the wilds of Papua and New

Guinea. It was dismantled during hostilities, however, and commenced operations from a more sheltered position at Wonga, eight kilometres inland, where the staff lived and worked under great strain and in primitive conditions in the downstairs part of a house occupied by Naval Intelligence forces.

Port Moresby was heavily bombed by the Japanese in the early months of 1942, and became known as 'The Tobruk of the Pacific'. In February 1942, the whole of Papua fell under the administration of the Australian Army.

The station remained at Wonga until after OTC took control of the Coastal Radio Service in 1947.

(Right) AWA operator from the outstation at Popo in Papua assists native workers in pulling a steam engine to the top of the hill - the site for a new oil well, 1921.
(Opposite Page) Staff from Port Moresby radio station having a picnic at Gaili village, 50 kilometres from Port Moresby, Easter, 1916.
(Below) View of the Popo radio outstation taken from the road leading to the oil well. Native boys are cutting grass to keep down mosquitos, November 1921.







Samarai Radio (VIJ)

SAMARAI was often referred to by settlers as the 'Tropical Island Garden', a small island which was the port of entry for ships travelling to the eastern and south-eastern parts of Papua.

In 1935, its chief export trade was in copra which was produced extensively in the region, but other products such as trocas shell and dried coconut were also exported. Gold was mined on the island of Misima, 140 kilometres east of Samarai.

In 1931, there were about 120 European residents on the island and the main settlement sported three general stores, two modern residential hotels, two churches, two banks, a customs office, post office, court house and Government offices. The settlement had its own electric power supply.

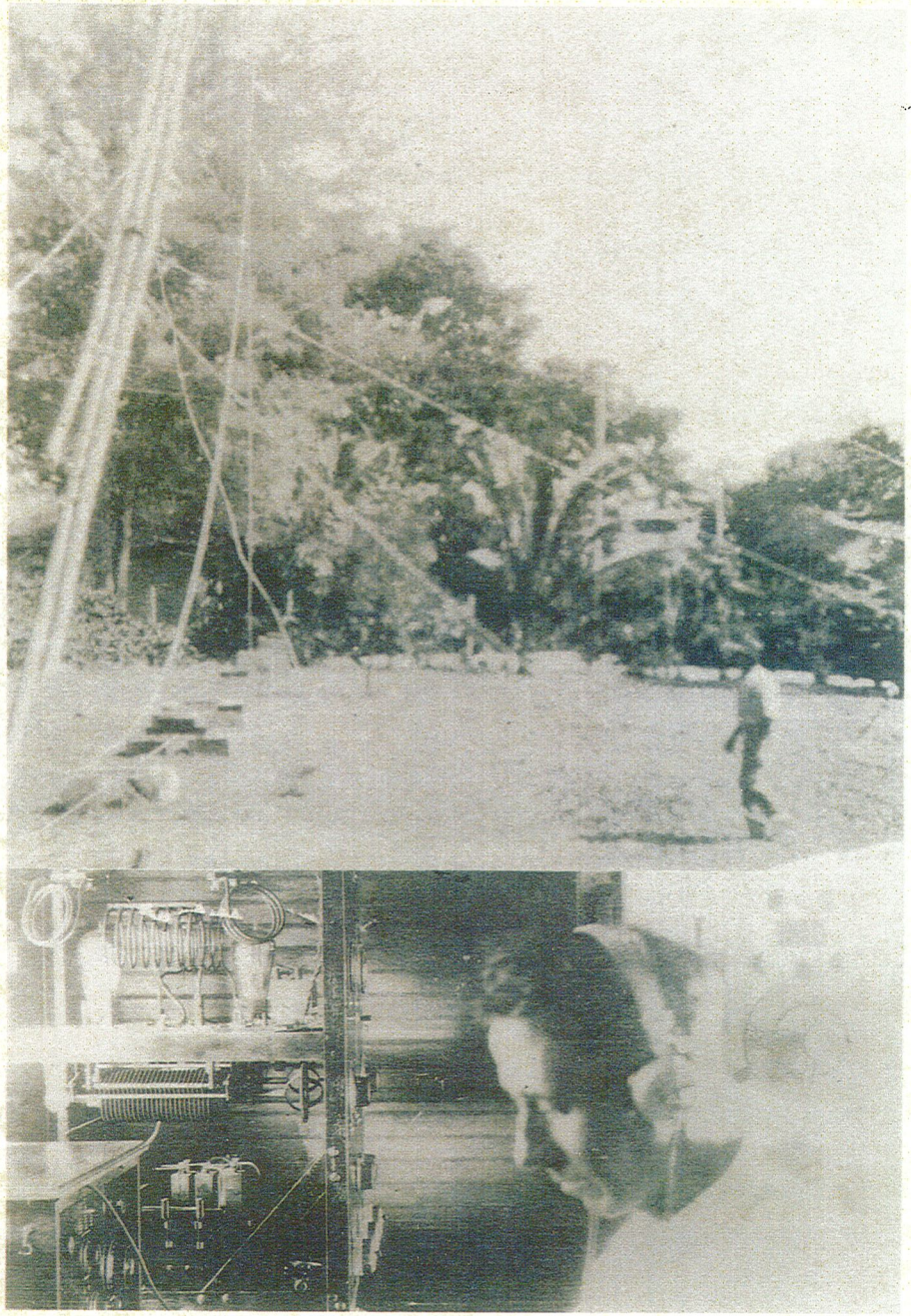
Samarai Radio was built by the Royal Australian Navy in 1917 on a sizeable block of land bounded on one side by the sea. By 1935, all traffic from Samarai to the Australian mainland was sent via Townsville, but the station maintained direct communication with Cooktown, Rabaul and Port Moresby. It was also used as a relay station for Misima radio station traffic.

The town was well-serviced by steamers. Food and supplies for the radio operator were brought by steamer every three weeks. In the early 1930s, the settlement offered various pastimes and recreational facilities including weekly silent movies, amateur shows, cricket, bowls, athletics, fishing, swimming and badminton. Books could be borrowed from the local library.

In January 1942, the administration in Papua issued a notice advising people in outlying regions to prepare for evacuation. Misima station was dismantled and the operator moved to Samarai.

Much of the radio equipment at Samarai was dismantled and shipped to Port Moresby. Teleradio stations were still in operation at various points around the island, but were manned by the military.

Samarai Radio was re-opened after the war by the Australian Government and was one of the stations taken over by OTC in 1947.



(Top) Erection of piping mast at Samarai, 1938. To prevent bending, it is lashed with bamboo.
(Bottom) Samarai Radio - operator at work, 1938.

Thursday Island Radio (VII)

THURSDAY ISLAND lies in the centre of a group of larger islands in the Torres Strait, approximately 25 kilometres north-west of Cape York Peninsula. The island has an area of only four kilometres and is relatively difficult to access.

In the early twentieth century, it was seen as the northern capital of the Australian pearling industry, but by the 1930s the pearling industry had declined because of the introduction of imitation pearls and pearl buttons.

The main town on the island is Port Kennedy. In the early 1900s, Port Kennedy had a cosmopolitan population of Australians, Japanese, Papuans, Aboriginals, Chinese, Negroes, Torres Strait Islanders and many other nationalities.

The Thursday Island radio station began transmitting on 26 February 1913, the same day as Port Moresby station.

One of the main benefits of a posting like Thursday Island was that staff could earn double the basic wage and incur little in the way of expenses. Port Kennedy also offered some social and sporting facilities.

The main disadvantage of the posting was the weather, hot and dry for half the year and wet the other half. This climate gave rise to a prevalence of mould, and the walls of the radio station would often be covered with a black growth which, even if scrubbed off, returned days later. The supply and storage of fresh food was also a problem.

During World War II, Thursday Island was one of the radio stations taking part in the Navy's Coast Watching Scheme, gathering reports from several Torres Strait islands and other locations around Cape York Peninsula.

The station also played an integral role in the evacuation of radio and military staff and civilians from Papua New Guinea during the Japanese invasions of 1942, by maintaining radio communication with retreating operators and relaying the times and arrivals of rescue aircraft.

During this time, radio station staff were given naval rank, even though they remained on the AWA staff payroll.

Thursday Island was one of the stations participating in aeradio services from the mid-1930s and continued this function until 1977.

The station closed 1 February 1992, its Safety of Life at Sea operations being technologically superceded by the newly-introduced satellite-based Global Maritime Distress and Safety System.

(Upper) Panoramic view of Thursday Island, 1912.
(Lower) Thursday Island radio station staff, 1936.



Willis Island Radio Station

IN 1921, the Australian post office established a radio station on remote Willis Island, 430 kilometres east of Cairns, to serve as a communications link between a planned meteorological station and the Australian mainland. The meteorological station was established to monitor cyclonic activity which could affect the Queensland coast.

Postings to Willis Island were on a voluntary basis. In the early days, service on the island was for a term of six months only; in 1931, AWA changed this policy and the term for radio operators was extended to a full year.

The staff comprised two radio operators and, for one of the six-month periods, a meteorologist.

Operators on the island faced difficult conditions. There was no fresh food, only enough tinned stores to last out the term of service, and a water supply dependent on rainfall. Sufficient food and water had to be stowed in a dug-out which could be used as living quarters if the station was destroyed in a storm.

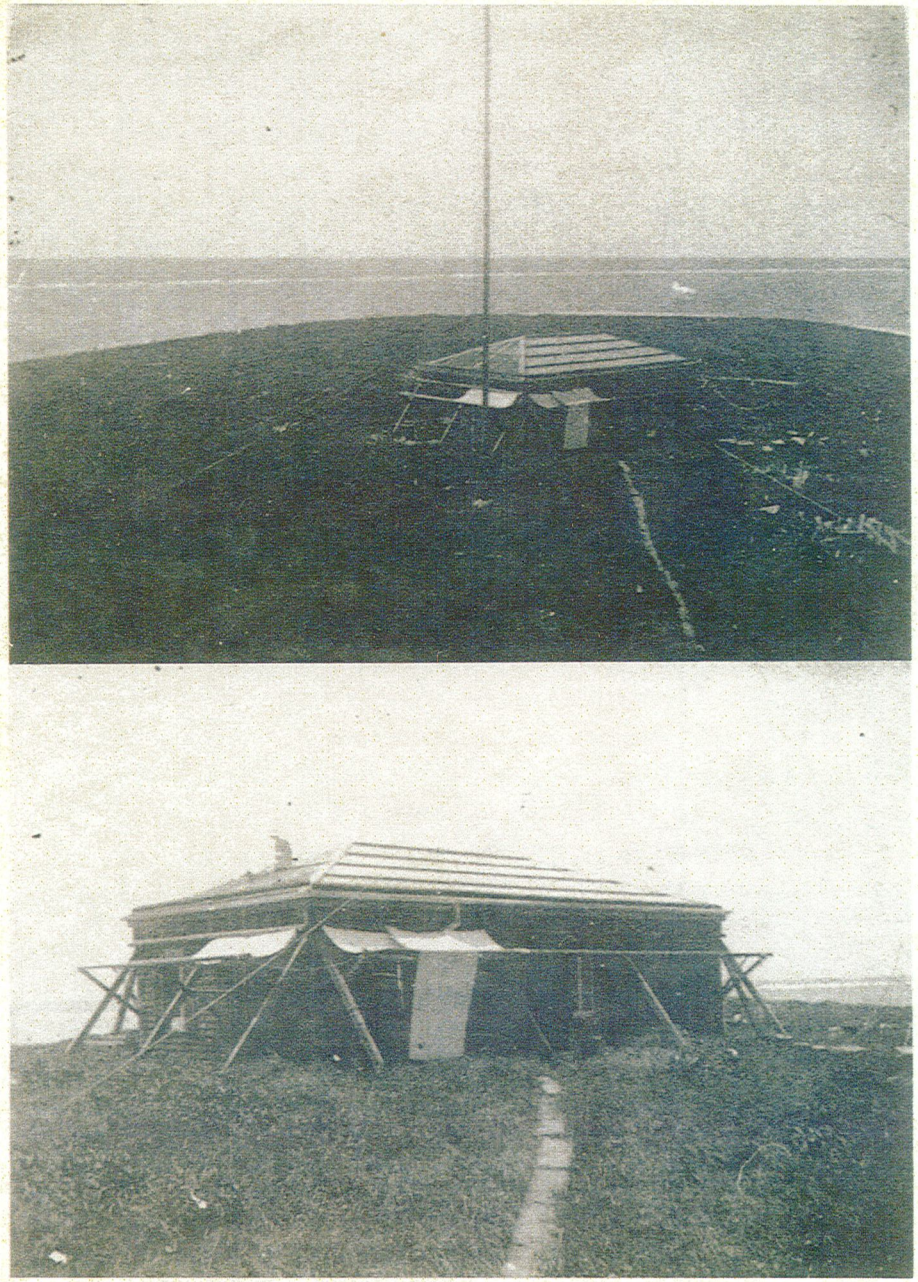
The tropical weather was merciless; the only vegetation was low scrub and there were no trees to break the sun's glare. The other inhabitants of the island were millions of sea birds and greenback turtles which came ashore to lay their eggs.

However, the radio operators seemed to keep busy. Meteorological readings were taken every three hours from 6 am to 9 pm, and this information was transmitted twice daily to Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne Bureaus of Meteorology and to the Postmaster in Townsville. Meteorological information was broadcast three times a day to all ships and coastal radio stations within range.

After work, or during slow periods during the day, the men pursued their own pastimes. Bathing was the principal activity, although fishing was also popular. Others used the time to study. Some played chess, enjoyed reading, listening to radio broadcasts and writing and transmitting letters via Townsville Radio and passing ships.

In later years, some enterprising operators established a garden and kept goats and chickens, so the men were able to supplement their tinned rations with fresh meat, chicken and eggs.

Despite the loneliness and isolation of Willis Island, some operators applied for extra postings to the station. For most, however, one term was enough.



Series of photos of Willis Island radio station, 1922.

The Island Radio Service

SHORTLY after World War I began, Australian forces were sent to the Territory of New Guinea; they encountered their first casualties when an expeditionary force was ordered to take a German wireless station at Bita Paka near Rabaul.

Soon, other stations were established in New Guinea at Aitape, Madang and Morobe on the north and eastern coasts of the mainland and at Manus, Kavieng, Kieta and Woodlark Islands. The operators and equipment were provided by AWA.

Another station was opened on King Island in Bass Strait in 1916 to replace that operated by Australian radio pioneer, Father Shaw.

In 1922, when AWA took control of the Coastal Radio Service, 27 stations were operating. AWA then divided the coastal radio stations into two distinct groups, both being part of the overall radio service.

The first group included the stations of mainland Australia and those at Port Moresby and Samarai in Papua; the second group comprised the seven stations located in the Territory of New Guinea. This second group became known as the Island Radio Service, and staff worked under a separate agreement to those working in mainland stations.

The main function of the Island Radio Service was to communicate with shipping, but it also provided public telegram services between isolated communities in the Territory and acted as a communication link with Australia.

The station at Bita Paka coordinated the operations of outlying stations and was the main link to Australia — communicating directly to Cooktown and later Townsville. By 1928, Rabaul had direct links with Sydney and with the Gilbert and Ellis Islands, the Solomon Islands and Santa Cruz Islands. Port Moresby had a similar function in Papua.

The Island Radio Service assisted local administrators of the Territories of Papua and New Guinea in the difficult task of controlling these remote and primitive regions.

Several new stations opened in New Guinea in the late 1920s and early 1930s, mainly due to the gold boom and the influx of oil explorers. The stations at Bulolo, Salamoa and Wau were established to service the goldfields at Edie Creek, and Marienburg station was built to service oil explorers on the Sepik River.

In 1939, the Royal Australian Navy assumed control of the coastal radio stations, including the 10 stations of the Island Radio Service network. Aitape, Morobe and Marienburg stations had closed but others remained at Rabaul, Kavieng, Kieta, Manus, Wewak, Madang, Lae, Salamoa, Wau and Bulolo.

Although many of the regular services handled by the coastal radio stations ceased after the outbreak of World War II, the stations assumed military functions, including coordinating the Navy's Coast Watching Scheme for the region. Similar functions were also carried out by the stations in Papua.

In the latter part of 1940 and 1941, Australia began preparing for the possible outbreak of war in the Pacific. Troops were dispatched to Port Moresby in Papua and to Rabaul, but the native population and settlers, including the radio operators, could only be spared a minimal defence force.

On 9 December 1941, Australia declared war on Japan and, early in 1942, the first wave of Japanese attacks hit Papua and New Guinea. One by one the coastal radio stations went off the air; only Port Moresby operated for the duration of the war. Many radio operators worked until the very last minute, abandoning their radio sets when the enemy was literally on the doorstep.

Later, some operators recounted remarkable stories of daring and difficult escapes, many of which are included in Lawrence Durrant's book *'The Seawatchers'**.

Several stations were re-established after WWII. Some, notably Port Moresby and Rabaul, remained in their war-time locations for a number of years; as OTC embarked on its process of renewal and restoration, those stations that were re-opened were re-housed and re-equipped.

The following section traces the history of the stations in the Island Radio Service until they were acquired by OTC in 1947.

After OTC took control of the coastal stations, a distinction was no longer drawn between mainland stations and those in outlying regions.

**Available by contacting OTC Australia.*

Aitape Radio (VZX)

AITAPE RADIO opened in 1914. It was first staffed by three operators and one mechanic, but by 1931 there was only one operator and a native engine boy.

Aitape is situated on a rocky headland overlooking the islands of Tumleo and Seleo, halfway along the 400 kilometre coastline between what was then the border of New Guinea and the Sepik River.

In 1931, the town had only six buildings and two Chinese trade stores. The radio station was built on a flat area between the muddy river and the beach, but the huge surf which raged from November to March meant the station was always damp. Operators also had to contend with plagues of mosquitos during the humid 'wet' season.

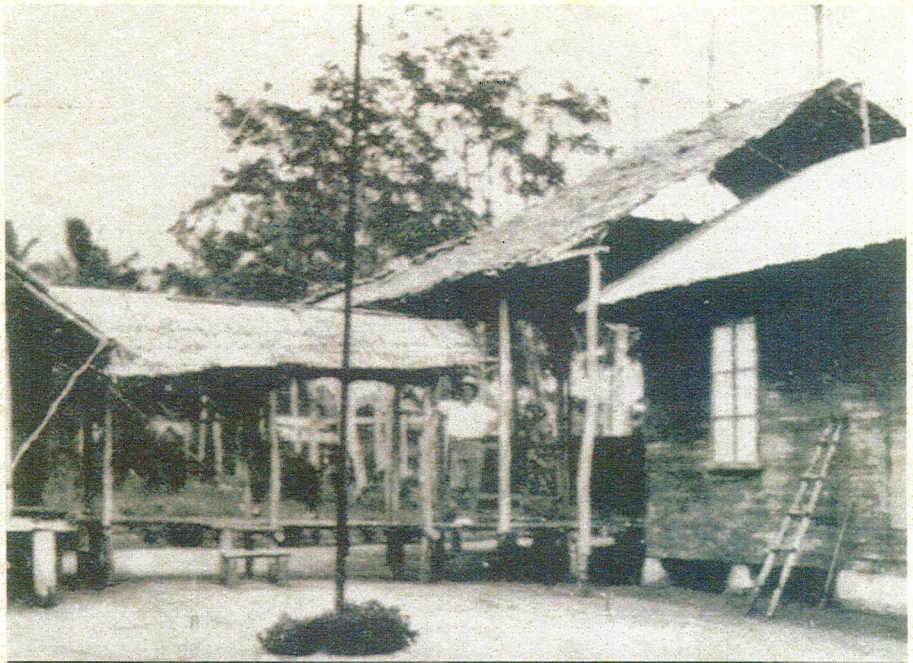
The station at Aitape was originally built to keep local administrators in touch with Government headquarters in Rabaul, but it later served as a communications centre for prospectors, outlying plantations and police outposts.

Early traffic was relayed to Rabaul via Manus Island, but in 1930 the equipment was updated and the station could communicate directly with Rabaul.

For station staff, life could be monotonous. The local administrators would often be away on Government business, but the radio operator was confined to base with little to do.

When the full contingent of settlers was in town, games of tennis could be played, but otherwise the main activities were bushwalking and oyster gathering. Stores were delivered from Sydney every three months.

When the local administration moved its headquarters to Wewak in 1936, the station at Aitape closed.





(Above) Aitape radio station and officers' dwelling quarters, 1931. (From the AWA magazine, The Radiogram, Vol II, No 11, October 1931, p7.)

(Below) Operating room at Aitape Radio, 1931. (Photograph from the AWA magazine, The Radiogram, Vol II, No 11, October 1931, p6.)

Bita Paka - Rabaul (VJZ)

AT THE OUTBREAK of World War I, the German South Seas Wireless Company was in the process of erecting a high-powered radio station at Bita Paka near Rabaul in the Territory of New Guinea.

When war broke out, the plan for a high-powered station was abandoned, and the Germans hastily erected a low-powered station to communicate with German naval vessels in the region.

Shortly after Bita Paka started transmitting, Australian troops were sent to capture the radio station. Although overpowering the German forces, the Australians discovered that the Germans had felled the radio mast and destroyed much of the equipment.

Several days later, an Australian expeditionary force captured Rabaul and set up a temporary radio station at Government House using an ordinary Marconi 1.5 kw ships' radio, which made communication possible with vessels of the Royal Australian Navy and the Allied fleet.

On returning to Bita Paka, Australian troops found a large quantity of radio equipment buried in trenches and tanks, enabling them to construct a fully operational radio station. The Australian Government used much of this equipment, and the radio station at Bita Paka opened for operations in 1916 with the call sign VJZ.

Until 1928, communication from Bita Paka to Australia was either via Woodlark Island, Cooktown or Townsville. Several outstations had been built around New Guinea by this time, and the traffic load on Bita Paka had greatly increased.

Although new equipment had been installed by both the RAN and the Postmaster General's Department, the station was in need of modernisation by the time AWA took over in 1922. Further upgrading took place, but by 1928 it was decided that the traffic levels warranted a remote control station.

A new building, housing three complete receiving offices, was erected near the staff quarters, less than a kilometre from the old engine and transmitter buildings. The office of the land-line to Rabaul was also housed in this new building which handled shipping traffic and was the centre of communications from all outstations. A receiving and delivery office was situated at Rabaul. A direct communications link between Rabaul and Sydney was now complete.

In 1936, a new transmitting station was built at Malaguna, about three kilometres from the centre of Rabaul, and during 1935-36 a new duplex station was built at Blanche Bay in Rabaul itself.

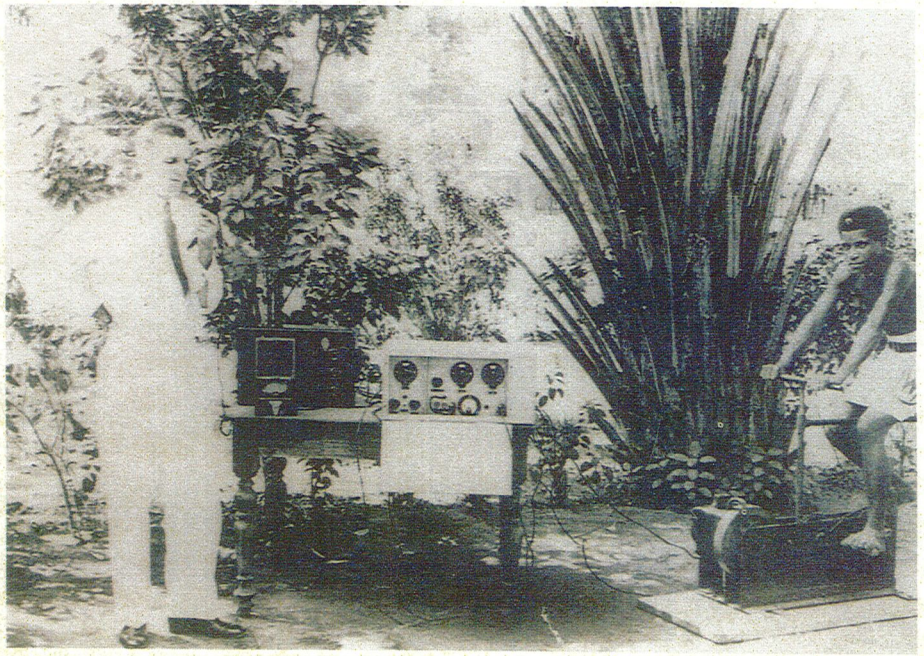
The land-line to Bita Paka was abandoned, and the whole of Rabaul operations were centralised where they could be economically operated.

Rabaul lies on the north-east shore of Simpson Harbour on the island of New Britain and, in the early 1900s, was the largest port in New Guinea with much of its trade in copra and cocoa.

For radio operators in the early days, Bita Paka was seen as preferable to Rabaul because of its more moderate climate; in Rabaul, residents had to battle the hot and humid conditions. Conditions improved by the 1930s, however, with better housing and the installation of electric power.

In May 1937, Rabaul experienced one of the biggest natural disasters in its history when nearby Vulcan Island erupted, showering the town with ash and pumice

AWA operator Ted Bishton and native friend demonstrating two-way pedal-powered wireless, Rabaul, 1933.

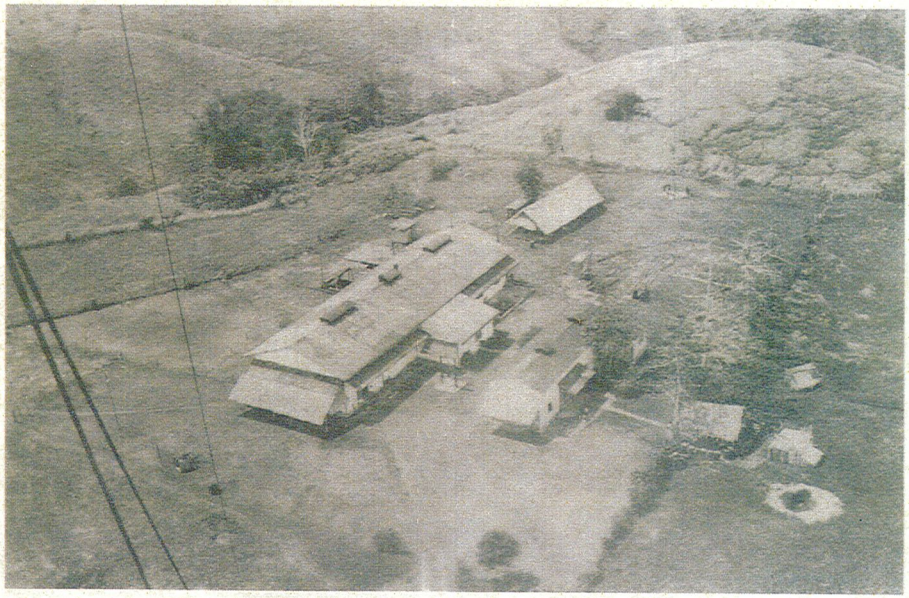


and later with torrential rain and a tidal wave. This was followed by another explosion near Mount Mother.

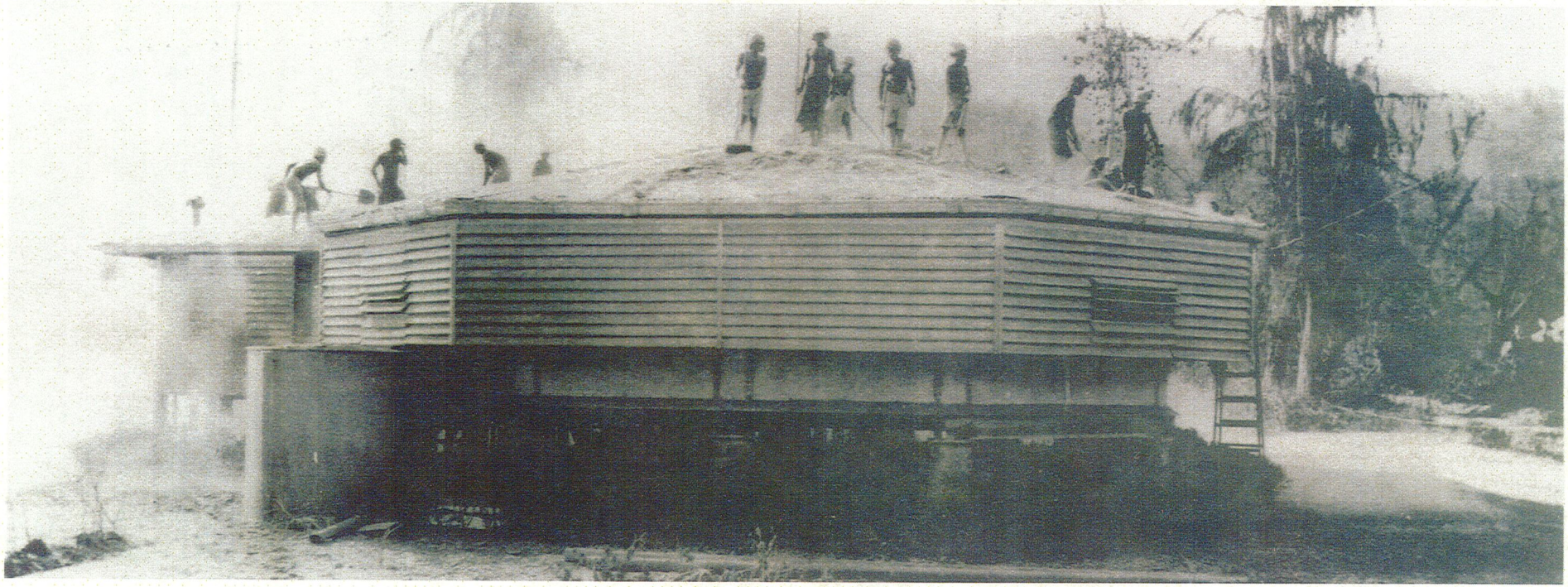
Administrators frantically called for an evacuation of the town but, miraculously, the radio station only suffered minor damage and managed to contact Sydney. For the first few days after the eruption, the staff of Rabaul Radio worked 18-hour days trying to cope with the flow of traffic.

This natural disaster was followed a few years later by the tragedy of World War II. During the war, Rabaul became the centre of the Naval Coast Watching Scheme for the Territory of New Guinea, but had to be abandoned following the Japanese invasion in 1942.

The station at Rabaul was re-opened by the Commonwealth Government in February 1946.



(Right) View of the engine, transmitters and battery room of the Bita Paka radio station taken from 90 metres up the transmitter mast, 1936.
(Below) Natives cleaning pumice from the roof of a staff cottage, Rabaul, 1937.



Bulolo Radio (VJX)

MOROBE RADIO STATION was one of the earliest stations to operate in New Guinea. Following the influx of gold prospectors in the mid-1920s, it became extremely busy.

All business from the goldfields at Bulolo and Edie Creek was sent by a native runner to Salamoa, then by sea to Morobe, and then to Rabaul. AWA was asked to set up a radio station to make communication easier for the new mining community at Edie Creek; thus Bulolo Radio was established.

Bulolo is situated approximately 2000 metres above sea level, inland from Salamoa and Lae, in the highlands of New Guinea. The native population had rarely seen Europeans and cannibalism was still rife, with some prospectors and many native carriers being killed in their attempts to reach the goldfields.

Even seasoned miners, who had been working in the tropics for long periods, found the trail to Bulolo an exhausting and wearisome trip. Many of the new prospectors were not even seasoned miners, but had been sent from their office desks by gold prospecting companies. They hired native labour to carry heavy loads through the jungle; some labourers died on the way, many got sick, and even more deserted.

One radio operator described the conditions these early prospectors faced: 'The climate was damnable, not a dry spot to pitch camp — rain, rain, incessant rain, never a sight of sun through the heavy scrub and the only means of communication being per boot to Salamoa over a rough mountain pad, up and down mountains, fording icy cold creeks, days when one's feet never touched solid ground, always walking on roots and decayed vegetation three to six feet in depth, dysentery, tropical sores, scanty food supplies'.

Setting up a radio station in such an inhospitable location was a difficult task. The wireless equipment had to be stored in 17 kilogram packs for the trek to Bulolo; the larger items were carried, slung on poles, by two natives. The wireless set required 74 carriers alone.

Four police boys accompanied the radio operator and a prospector on the long trek into the Highlands. During the arduous journey many native carriers deserted, many more had sore feet or were sick, and a relay system of carriers had to be set



C C Beckett relaxing at Bulolo Radio, c. 1928-30.

up to carry the supplies and equipment.

After months of toil, the party finally reached Edie Creek.

The original station was established in a small tent and began operating on 18 November, 1926. Traffic was routed to Morobe Radio but, because of local storms and atmospheric interference, much of the work had to be done from 6.30-8.30 am. When Salamoa station opened in July 1927, communication from Bulolo was redirected to Salamoa.

In 1928, a new transmitter was installed at Bulolo and a new building constructed. The original site was found to be an alluvial flat, so the radio station was sited on higher ground above the goldfield. Direct communication was now possible from Bulolo to Rabaul, but the payment for messages sent by prospectors was still in gold dust.

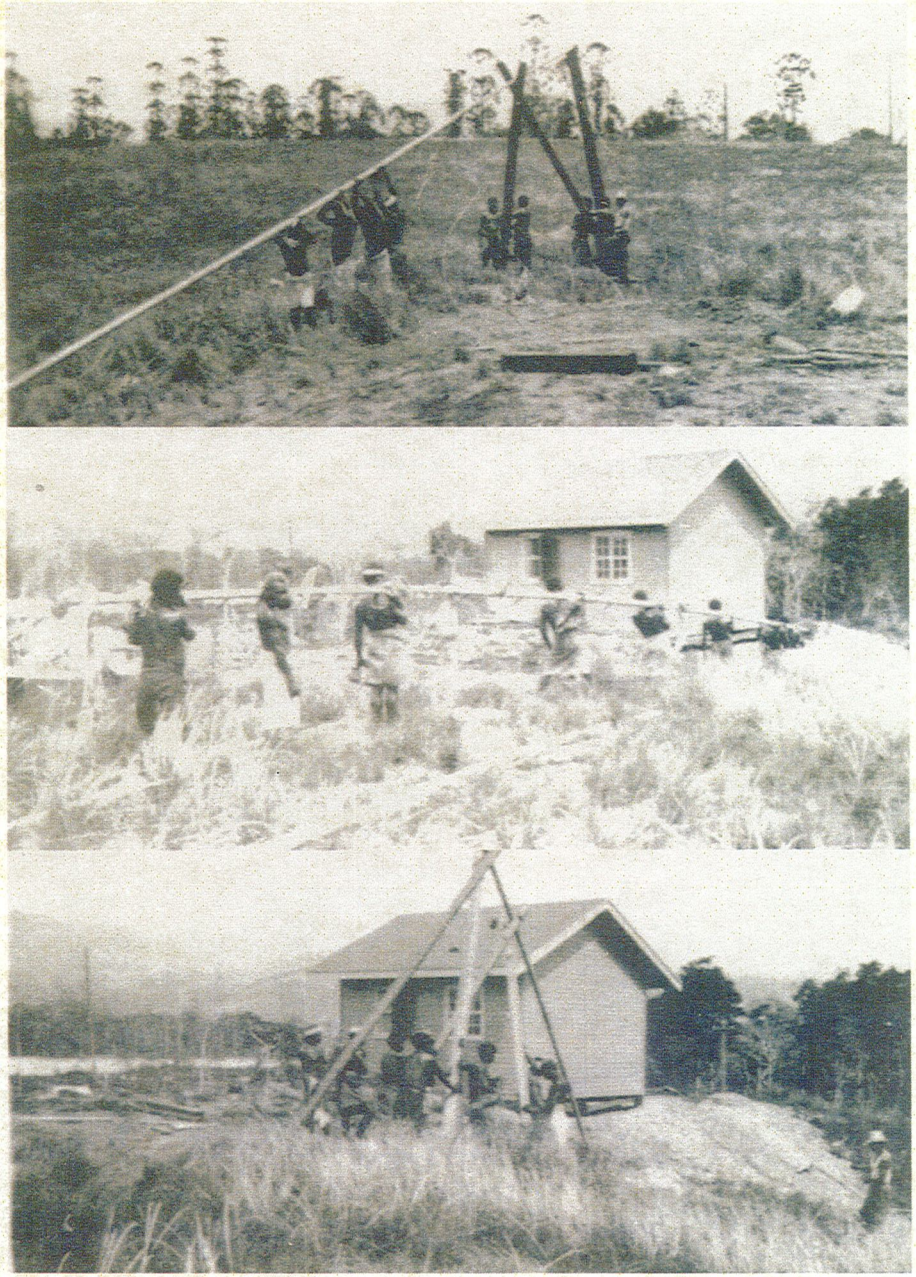
In January 1932, a new station was erected at Wau, only a day's walk from Edie Creek. When an airfield opened in Wau during 1927, the government administration and mining companies moved their offices to the town. Bulolo Radio remained as an outstation.

Despite the rough and ready nature of Bulolo in the early days, it had become quite civilised by the 1930s. A tennis club had opened, there was less of the brawling and drunkenness of earlier times, and the climate had become more tolerable following extensive tree clearing in the area.

There is, however, no doubt that Bulolo was an exceptional posting; the men who worked there were more than radio operators, they were pioneers and adventure-seekers.

Bulolo was evacuated in January 1942, when the Japanese invaded New Guinea; it did not re-open.





Erecting new wireless hut at Bulolo, 1928.

Kavieng Radio (VZR)

KAVIENG RADIO was classified as an outstation and was one of the earlier stations to be opened in New Guinea. It worked with all the stations in the Territory of New Guinea, and was located on the northern end of the island of New Ireland.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Kavieng had about 80 inhabitants, including local administrators and plantation owners. (Some of the radio operators themselves became plantation owners.) The local population welcomed the staff of the radio station and their families into the tiny community and, for many, Kavieng was almost a paradise.

The housing was excellent; one house had originally been a hotel during German occupation of the Territory and was situated opposite a small sandy bay with its own private beach.

One advantage of Kavieng was that it was a suitable place for operators to bring their families. The education was considered to be quite good, the school being administered by the Queensland Government. Only after age 14 were children sent to boarding school.

Fresh food was plentiful and cheap, a great improvement to relying on infrequent supply ships.

In December 1941, the impending invasion by the Japanese meant that wives and children were evacuated from Kavieng and, early in 1942, the station was bombed.

After the station was abandoned in 1942, it remained closed until re-established by OTC in 1948.

Kieta Radio (VIU)

THE RADIO STATION on Bougainville Island, east of New Guinea, was established at Kieta, a small town with only a few permanent residents: government officials, planters and the occasional Burns Philp trading company guest or representative.

The station was a one man operation — an outstation — one of the earlier stations to be established by the Royal Australian Navy in New Guinea during World War I.

In July 1930, AWA upgraded Kieta station, building a prefabricated bungalow which was a vast improvement on the one wooden shack with leaf roof.

Prior to this, the station had also been equipped with a short-wave receiver and transmitter, and telephonic communications were established between the radio station and the district offices and residents in Kieta.

There was little social life at Kieta. A steamer visited the island every six weeks bringing mail and supplies. There was one shop/hotel in the town and a tennis court.

During World War II, Kieta was abandoned. The station was destroyed and put to the torch on 23 January 1942, when the local District Officer gave orders for the island to be evacuated.

Kieta radio station, 1930. (Photograph from the AWA magazine, The Radiogram, Vol II, No 1, December 1930.)



Madang Radio (VIV)

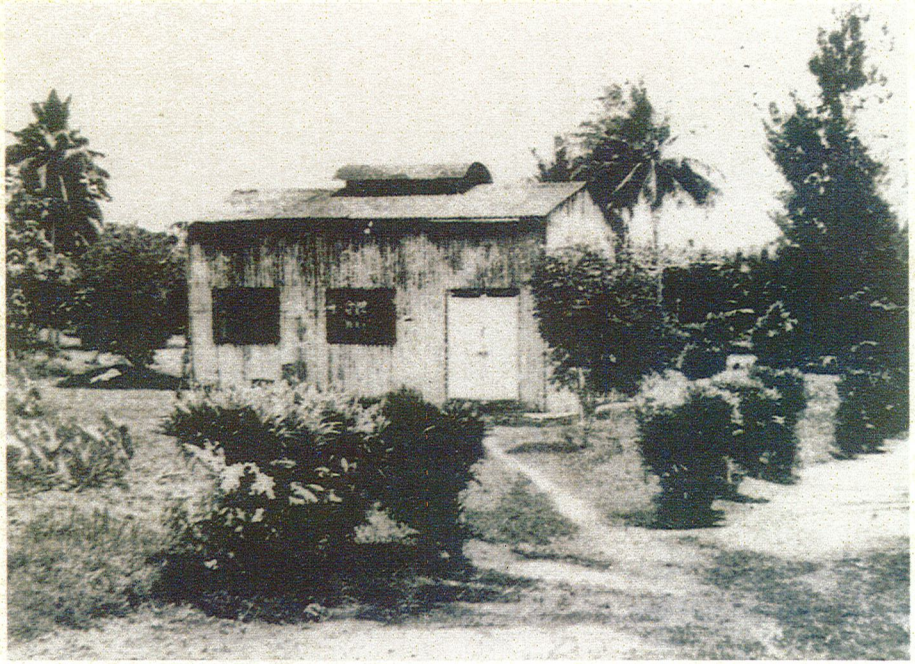
MADANG RADIO opened in 1916. The station kept regular schedules with Rabaul and, by the 1930s, was a centre of communications from more remote outposts.

Madang is situated on the north-east coast of mainland New Guinea. It was originally settled in 1884 by the Germans, who drained most of the swamps; by 1904 it was a habitable malaria-free area, considered by many to be a 'jewel of a place'.

The settlement of Madang, located on a peninsula surrounded by two beautiful harbours, was dotted with parks and waterways and lush tropical growth.

Madang was bombed by the Japanese in January 1942, and all except one radio operator abandoned the station. The remaining operator destroyed most of the equipment, including confidential documents, keeping a few essential items to take with him when he, too, left. A few days later, the masts were demolished by members of the New Guinea Volunteer Regiment.

Madang radio station was re-established by OTC after it took control of the Coastal Radio Service in 1947.



The radio shack at Madang, 1938.



Staff quarters at Madang radio station 1936.

Manus Island Radio (VZO)

MANUS ISLAND was the smallest district in the Territory of New Guinea, the Admiralty Islands. Manus lies two degrees south of the Equator and is the largest of the group. In 1932, its main exports were copra, trocas shell, green snail shell and beche de mer. The local population mainly comprised ex-servicemen, who operated small plantations on the island.

Manus Island Radio, in the small settlement of Lorengau, was built during the occupation of New Guinea by Australian forces in World War I, primarily as a communications post to Australian military headquarters in Rabaul. For many years, Lorengau was a relay station for communications between Aitape and Rabaul.

Lorengau was the site of the district government headquarters, and by the mid-1920s the region was considered safe enough for Australian wives to join their husbands who held administrative postings or who had been sent to this most northerly of radio stations.

Food and mail for the settlement was brought by boat every six weeks. Fresh food lasted only a few days as there was no refrigeration, so most food was canned, and supplemented by occasional fresh vegetables grown in the area.

The wireless building was a one-roomed native-type hut, located on a flat near the beach. It was built with a sacsac leaf room which, although providing coolness in the summer months, leaked badly during the wet season.

This hut had a sleep-out verandah at the back which overlooked a crocodile infested river. Fortunately, by 1932, the bush along the river bank had been cleared; this substantially reduced the population of malaria-bearing mosquitos.

The main work of the radio station was contact between local administration and Rabaul, and some public traffic from the settlers.

Manus Island was attacked by the Japanese in January 1942. The operator abandoned the station shortly afterwards and took to the bush with the radio set, finally sailing to the mainland to be rescued in May that year.

The station was re-opened by OTC in 1950, but was staffed and operated by the Royal Australian Navy.



(Above right) The verandah of the radio house at Lorengau, Manus Island, 1939.

Salamoa Radio (VJQ)

SALAMOA RADIO was established in 1927 upon the closure of Morobe Radio. Salamoa is situated in the north-east corner of New Guinea, and was the nearest seaport to the Bulolo and Edie Creek goldfields. Just after the station opened, a regular air service was established between Lae and Wau.

The settlement of Salamoa is built on a narrow sand-spit and, in 1927, consisted of only a few native shacks which, by 1932, had been replaced by sawn timber buildings.

The local hotel, which had been built by the Salamoa Trading Company in the early years, welcomed resident guests; a change from the days when it had been used by prospectors as a place to drink and brawl.

The radio station maintained direct communication with Rabaul, but after a new radio set had been installed at Bulolo in 1928, Salamoa was no longer needed as a relay station between the goldfields and Rabaul.

Salamoa Radio was abandoned in the early weeks of 1942, when the area was bombed by the Japanese.

Wau Radio (VJX)

IN 1932, AWA established a radio station at Wau, only a day's walk away from the goldfields of Bulolo and Edie Creek.

Wau, situated some 1200 metres above sea level in the New Guinea highlands, was the major centre for the goldfields. Many mining companies established offices in the town, and the local seat of government moved its headquarters to this more central location. In 1927, a commercial air service had been established between Lae and Wau, which further boosted the settlement's importance.

Wau Radio was the main communications centre for the goldfields area, having a direct link with Rabaul and Salamoa. The station also provided a communications point for lonely outposts.

Boxing day celebrations at Wau in the 1930s.



When the station was established, there was one operator and two native messenger boys. By 1936, there were two operators.

In 1936, the settlement at Wau had 80-100 residents and the radio operators had quite a good social life. Swimming in the mountain rivers was too cold, but trips were made by air to Salamoa for ocean swimming. The operators could play tennis or prospect for gold in the unpegged areas around the township.

Wau was severely bombed by the Japanese in February 1942. The radio equipment was moved to a safer location at Edie Creek, but by March the Japanese had landed at Lae and Salamoa. It was decided to destroy all but some portable radio equipment for use by the military, and leave Edie Creek and travel overland to Port Moresby.

Wewak Radio (VJN)

WEWAK RADIO was opened in 1936, when the town became the administrative centre of the largest district in New Guinea — the Sepik district. The station at Aitape closed once Wewak opened.

Wewak is located about 120 kilometres south of Aitape, on the north-eastern coast of New Guinea. The station operated as a communications point for lonely outstations in the region and had direct contact with Rabaul.

The station was the last of the Island Radio Stations to be in operation during World War II. After all the other stations had gone off the air, Wewak still managed to get messages through. Although the Japanese did not bomb Wewak, the District Officer ordered the evacuation of the town during the first weeks of 1942.

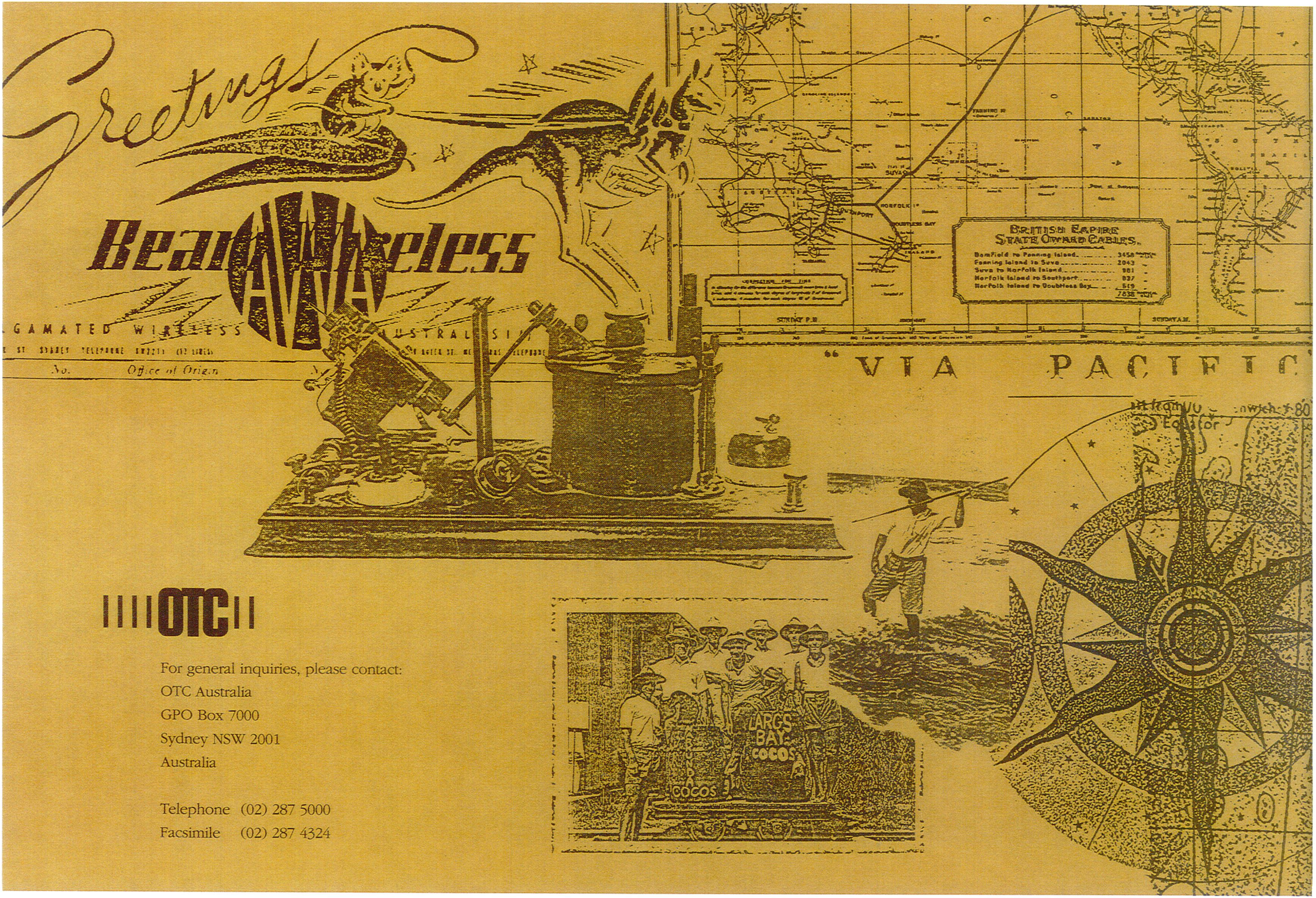
For six months, the radio operator and other evacuees wandered from village to village in the highlands of New Guinea, constantly sending messages. They then returned to Wewak, but again abandoned the town, only to return yet again until they were forced to leave once more with the arrival of a Japanese convoy in December 1942.

Wewak Radio was re-opened by OTC shortly after it took over the Coastal Radio Service in 1947.

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All queries relating to this book can be directed to:

AOTC Archivist
GPO Box 7000
Sydney NSW 2001
Australia



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For general inquiries, please contact:
OTC Australia
GPO Box 7000
Sydney NSW 2001
Australia

Telephone (02) 287 5000
Facsimile (02) 287 4324