VOICES FROM THE WAR: IMPROVING ACCESS TO THE RECORDINGS OF NEW ZEALAND'S WORLD WAR II MOBILE BROADCASTING UNITS

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Abstract

In August 1940, three New Zealand radio broadcasters set sail on an army troop ship from Wellington. They were bound for Egypt, where the New Zealand armed forces were part of the British Empire's push to drive the German and Italian armies out of North Africa and the Middle East. With them was a mobile recording van, equipped to capture on lacquer discs the voices and sounds of New Zealanders at war, and send those recordings back home for radio broadcasts on the other side of the world.

For the next five years, the Mobile Broadcasting Unit recorded interviews and reports about the fighting and the day-to-day business of war, as well as thousands of simple messages home from servicemen, and a few women. Today, the 1600 surviving Mobile Unit discs form part of the sound archives of Radio New Zealand, held by audiovisual archive Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.

In this article the author will outline the history of the Mobile Units and the context in which they worked. She will also describe on-going work to identify the speakers heard in their recordings and make this collection more discoverable and accessible to researchers. Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision is currently digitising the collection and preservation archivist Sandy Ditchburn will describe some of the challenges she has encountered in capturing sound from the 80-year-old lacquer discs.

Keywords: World War 1939-1945, lacquer discs, transcription discs, field recordings, digitisation, Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision, Radio New Zealand

Background and context

New Zealand declared war on Germany at the same time as Great Britain, in September 1939. Although colonised in the 19th century, at the start of the war many white New Zealanders still referred to Britain as 'home' and were proud to call themselves members of the British Empire. 'Where she [Britain] goes, we go; where she stands, we stand,' intoned Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage in a famous radio address to New Zealanders on the outbreak of war (National Broadcasting Service, 1939, ID31615). Radio broadcasting in the country at the time was almost entirely controlled by two government-owned networks: the National Broadcasting Service (NBS), a non-commercial series of radio stations modelled on the British Broadcasting Corporation, and the National Commercial Broadcasting Service, which was financed through the sale of advertising.

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The Director of the NBS, Professor James Shelley, proposed in February 1940 that a mobile broadcasting unit be sent overseas with New Zealand service personnel. In an outline plan sent to the Acting Minister of Broadcasting, he noted the functions of the proposed unit, including, 'To make disc records of events, voices of personalities, eye-witness accounts etc. for sending to New Zealand to broadcast here and to form part of an historical library of the war for future use.' He added that as well as future historical value, the output of such a unit would also 'be of immediate value in maintaining the morale of the troops and of the nation' (Shelley, 1940).

The staff of the unit would remain NBS employees, but would wear army uniforms and be accorded the privileges of the rank of officers. Eventually the Broadcasting Unit staff would be classed as 'war correspondents' and fall under the army's Public Relations Office, together with press correspondents, cinematographers of the National Film Unit and official war artists and photographers.

The New Zealand government approved the proposal on 13 March 1940 and NBS engineers spent several months designing and building the necessary equipment, including a custom-built recording van fitted with disc cutting lathes. The Mobile Broadcasting Unit sailed for the war with the Third New Zealand Echelon of troops in August of that year.

Over the next five years, the men and equipment of the Unit would follow fighting from Egypt, across North Africa, through the Middle East and in the Italian campaign. It was initially envisaged by James Shelley and the NBS that the Unit would also be able to broadcast news and programmes sent from New Zealand to the men stationed overseas. For a variety of reasons this function was never successfully realized, and the Unit's main role became recording the voices and experiences of New Zealanders at war and sending those recordings back home for broadcast.

Although radio broadcasts began in New Zealand in 1921, the NBS did not acquire disc recording equipment from overseas until 1935, so the formation of the Mobile Unit represented an opportunity to take recording technology out of the studio and into a conflict zone for the first time. Outside broadcasts had also been made since the 1920s, covering events such as horse races and rugby games, but sending broadcasters to war and making disc recordings in the field presented a new level of technological challenges for NBS engineers.

The custom-built van body built in Wellington was fitted out as a recording studio, the plan being that when the Unit arrived in Egypt it could be mounted on a truck chassis, allowing it to follow the troops. It would tow its own power generator on a separate trailer. The 16-foot-long van was kitted out with two disc cutting lathes, as well as radio receivers and a 'Presto' portable disc recorder (Figure 1), which was eventually to prove to be the most useful piece of equipment. A three-man team was assembled from existing staff: NBS engineer Noel Palmer was officer-in-charge and Norman Johnston served as the young assistant engineer. Doug Laurenson, a World War I veteran and the Unit's 'commentator' was seconded from the National Commercial Broadcasting Service (Figure 2). Over the course of the war they would all be rotated out and replaced by other NBS staff, with the Unit finally returning home from Italy in December 1945.

Figure 1. Noel Palmer and disc cutters inside the Mobile Unit recording van in Egypt, 1942. [Photograph by M.D. Elias. Ref: DA-02474-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand]

Figure 2. The initial staff of the New Zealand Mobile Broadcasting Unit in 1940: (L-R) Norman Johnston, Noel Palmer and Doug Laurenson [*The New Zealand Listener*, 13 December 1940].

In March 1943 a smaller two-man Mobile Unit was sent with New Zealand troops into the Pacific war, where it recorded men and their experiences over an 18-month period in New Caledonia, the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands.

The staff of these units were not radio journalists in the modern sense. As war correspondents they were assigned the military rank of officers and provided with Army uniforms and assistance in the form of Army drivers, batmen, and occasionally, loaned vehicles. As government employees, embedded with the forces of the New Zealand Division and operating under wartime censorship, their outputs were heavily constrained in terms of objectivity. However, the material they recorded signaled several new developments in terms of New Zealand's media and social histories, and it is these that will be explored further in this article.

The Mobile Unit collection contains a wide variety of radio programme material: action reports and eye witness accounts of military engagements; 'talks' by and interviews with service personnel on their part in the war or action they had been involved in; coverage of non-conflict events such as concerts, sports matches, and other social occasions, and hundreds of simple 'messages home' recorded by servicemen who were selected by ballot to record greetings to loved ones.

These messages were then sent home, compiled, edited, and broadcast in a weekly programme called *With the Boys Overseas*. Everything the Units recorded had to be passed by military censors. No place names or descriptions of action could be mentioned in case these could be used as intelligence by the enemy. Similarly, the tone of all wartime broadcasts was expected to be morale-boosting—mentions of high casualties were edited out, and a recording of men singing a World War I Māori *waiata* (song) with lyrics that lamented dead soldiers was marked 'Not to be Played.'

These constraints meant the content of the messages home tended to be fairly formulaic: 'Hello Mum and Dad and all at home in Auckland, I'm doing well. Send mail,' 'Hello darling, hope all is well with you and the kiddies. Lots of love and hope to be with you soon,' etc. The men (and the few women recorded) sound resolutely upbeat and optimistic about the war and their part in it. Beginning on Sunday mornings in February 1941, *With the Boys Overseas* swiftly became very popular with New Zealand radio listeners, with demand seeing the programme extended to an hour and then repeated later in the week. 'No single feature ever presented by radio in New Zealand has been the cause of so many letters to the NBS, 'reported *The New Zealand Listener* magazine in May that year, 'So great has been the public interest in the messages from the New Zealand Broadcasting Unit in the Middle East, expressed in telephone calls, letters and telegrams after every broadcast' (*The New Zealand Listener*, 1941). Extra staff had to be hired by the NBS to cope with the mail from listeners wanting to hear messages repeated or to know when their loved ones' messages could be heard.

Wartime broadcaster Peter Harcourt, who compiled the programme from the discs once they arrived in Wellington, realised the generic nature of the messages was not important to listeners: 'It is often not what is said that matters, but merely the sound of the voice itself,' he wrote (Downes and Harcourt, 1976).

It could take many weeks for the recorded discs to make their way back from the Mobile Unit in the Middle East or Europe to New Zealand. After the fall of Singapore to Japan in February 1942, air routes to New Zealand were disrupted and sometimes months could pass between a message being recorded and it eventually making it back to NBS studios in Wellington by sea.

There, Peter Harcourt had the grim task of checking the names of the men recorded against military casualty lists. If a man had been killed or was missing in action, in most cases his message would not be broadcast. The NBS would notify his next of kin and they were able to come and listen to his message in private at the radio station, although there is evidence that some messages from deceased men were still broadcast—presumably as a tribute and with the agreement of their families (*The Northern Advocate*, 1942).

At the height of the Mobile Units' operation, in the year to 31 March 1944, the NBS reported that it had broadcast some 6,750 messages on *With the Boys Overseas*, occupying five hours per week on the main national radio stations (Shelley, 1944). This was a formidable output for a programme which was originally intended as something of a side-show to more substantive war correspondent work. As Noel Palmer recalled, the messages were 'a spin-off, which somehow or other became conjured up as an idea and once started, was a roaring success' (Downes and Harcourt, 1976).

Actuality, immediacy and democratisation

Aside from the hugely popular messages home, the staff of the Mobile Units recorded first-hand accounts of military action or 'action despatches', which today would be called voice reports.

The Units' commentators were the first broadcasters to accompany New Zealand forces into conflict and their despatches provided important eye-witness records of historic events such as the battles of El Alamein and Cassino, and the liberation of the cities of Florence and Tripoli. Using the Units' portable disc recorders (which offered greater manoeuvrability than the cumbersome recording van), they demonstrated what could be achieved in terms of recording actuality in a conflict zone and brought the sounds of war into New Zealand living rooms.

Experienced broadcaster Arch Curry (Figure 3) replaced Doug Laurenson as the North African unit's main commentator in October 1941, and he acquired a reputation for the standard of his reports which were often broadcast to New Zealand (and the world) via the BBC's shortwave service. Ahead of the start of the second Battle of El Alamein in October 1942, having been briefed on when the opening barrage could be expected, he timed the recording of his report so that he could also capture the actuality of the artillery pounding in the background. Fellow commentator John Proudfoot recalled the disc was then rushed from the front by an army motorcycle despatch rider, over 260 kilometres to Cairo, where it was transmitted by radio telephone to the BBC in London, the morning after the opening of the battle. It was then broadcast worldwide by the BBC in conjunction with the official War Office communiques (Radio New Zealand,1988).

Figure 3. Arch Curry of the Mobile Unit recording a message home from Flight Sgt. Pat Newman, Italy 1944 [Photograph by George Robert Bull, 1910-1996, Ref: DA-05602-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand].

This co-operation with the BBC meant a new immediacy in international news coverage for New Zealand radio listeners. Their daily war news came via shortwave radio from the BBC Overseas Service transmitters in Daventry, England. News bulletins and any items of particular interest to New Zealanders were recorded as they were received in Wellington by the NBS 'listening watch' (Figure 4), which monitored the BBC and other international broadcasters 24 hours a day during the war. Any notable or New Zealand-related items were recorded via a series of disc cutters for re-broadcast to the domestic radio audience (or for transcription, if the shortwave reception was particularly bad).

Figure 4. National Broadcasting Service 'listening watch' during World War II. Basil Clarke records an incoming shortwave news bulletin in Wellington for re-broadcast [The New Zealand Listener, 11 May 1945].

When the Mobile Unit broadcasters produced a report on newsworthy New Zealand action (such as the Alamein despatch) it could be heard back home within 24 hours via the BBC, overcoming the country's geographic remoteness and allowing listeners to hear familiar New Zealand radio voices such as Arch Curry, telling them what their men were up to in the fighting on the other side of the world. In broadcasts such as the reports on the bombardment of Cassino, Italy in February 1944, the Mobile Unit broadcasters brought the sound of the war into New Zealand homes. Over the background roar of bomber aircraft and artillery fire, Arch Curry describes the historic hill-top town as 'seeming to bulge and heave, as scores of shells tear simultaneously at a hundred points' (National Broadcasting Service, 1944, ID18883).

The preserved output of the Mobile Units also represents a development in the democratisation of New Zealand's broadcast media and media libraries. Prior to the war (possibly largely due to the expense of imported blank discs in the economically depressed 1930s), broadcasters tended to only record and keep significant events or the voices of 'the great and the good'—interiews with leaders in the country's political, sporting or cultural spheres. We know from newspaper radio listings that everyday New Zealanders were appearing on radio—especially in live musical performances which were a major feature of the new commercial stations—but very few of these pre-war broadcasts were ever recorded or saved for posterity.

With the conflict of World War II came the need to ensure that a broad spectrum of New Zealand society supported the war effort. This saw the Mobile Unit microphones capture the involvement of hundreds of regular New Zealanders who were 'doing their bit' overseas. As well as interviews with generals, officers and decorated military heroes, they recorded infantrymen, army drivers, bakers, nurses, and clerical workers. The recordings feature a broad cross-section of New Zealanders, from all parts of the country: urban and rural, Māori and Pākēha (non-Māori), working class and elites. These recordings meant that for the first time a substantial sound library of the voices and experiences of everyday New Zealanders could be populated.

Creating 'an historical library of the war for future use' was one of the actitivities intended for the Unit from its conception, as outlined by James Shelley in his initial proposal to the government. (Shelley, 1940). This intention was conveyed in publicity about the Unit as it prepared to leave New Zealand in August 1940. Describing the newly built recording van, *The Listener* magazine noted: 'Such is the marvel of modern science that through this tiny travelling unit...future generations will hear the voices of their soldier heroes of the world war' (*The New Zealand Listener*, 1940). Further, in his annual report to New Zealand's Parliament for the year to 31 March 1941, Shelley noted the historic worth of recordings now being sent back to New Zealand by the Unit: 'It is impossible to overestimate the future value of these recordings for programmes, anniversary celebrations, historical, and educational purposes' (Shelley, 1941).

One limitation in the breadth of this collection of wartime New Zealand voices is the small number of women recorded. This is due to the fact that roles for women near the Allied frontlines in World War II were very limited. But some women were captured by the unit's microphones: we hear from nurses in New Zealand military hospitals, volunteers in forces' canteens or service clubs, and the wives of generals and other dignitaries, such as Lady Barbara Freyberg, wife of the New Zealand Division's commanding officer, Major-General Bernard Freyberg.

The recordings made by the Mobile Units also meant a substantial number of Māori voices were able to be kept. The recordings the Unit made of the men of the 28 (Māori) Battalion are especially treasured by descendants, and their *waiata* (songs) and *kōrero* (speech) in *te reo Māori* (the Māori language) have become an intrinsic part of the legacy of this highly-decorated unit. An example is the *Concert by the Māori Battalion at Taranto, Italy,* recorded in November 1943. These musical recordings continued to find an audience post-war, regularly featured in broadcasts marking Anzac Day (New Zealand's national day of military remembrance), and were released on CD by the National Library of New Zealand in 2006. Additionally, some of the Battalion's men who recorded their radio talks or messages home in Māori were native, first-language speakers of ***te reo***, making their recordings a valuable source for studying changes in language and dialect (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Repatriated New Zealand prisoners of war recording a message for family back home, Egypt, 1943. L-R: Mobile Unit staff Charles Goodwyn Lewis (with a portable recorder) and John Proudfoot; Sergeant Harry Taituha and Private C.A. Pearce. Photograph by George Robert Bull [Ref: DA-03223-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand].

Access and discovery

For the reasons outlined above, the World War II Mobile Broadcasting Unit recordings were nominated for inscription in UNESCO's Memory of the World programme. The Memory of the World Aotearoa New Zealand Register is one of 60 such UNESCO programmes worldwide that aim to recognise significant documentary heritage.

The nomination was successful and the wartime Mobile Unit recordings were inscribed in February 2020, joining other significant New Zealand audiovisual heritage items such as the National Film Unit's newsreel collections and the post-war oral history recordings made by another Mobile Broadcasting Unit between 1946 and 1948. In order to facilitate access, a project to fully digitise the wartime collection was begun, along with plans to enhance description and metadata.

In 1993, the 12-inch lacquer discs were transferred to digital audio tape by the Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, according to preservation best practices of the time. Although much of the specific data on the transfer of these discs to digital audio tape (and subsequent transfer to CD-R) was not recorded, there is ample evidence to show that the methods used have been superceded by our current standards.

During the 1993 transfer, the discs were cleaned manually with a soft, soapy brush whilst lying on a towel, with another towel used to dry them. The discs were recorded using a range of custom styli which captured the audio directly onto digital audio tape at 16

bit 44.1 kHz. Some were also played wet, but it was not noted which specific discs this applied to. Access copies were then made from digital audio tape onto CD-R in the early 2000s. The same sample rate and bit rate was used for this transfer. Unfortunately, the durability of both of these formats was less than expected. The digital audio tapes contained a significant number of errors. This was, in part, due to poorly understood processes of this new technology. A misaligned machine would inevitably cause transient clicks or dropouts in the audio. The media was also a particularly vulnerable format due to its thin, narrow tape and mechanically fragile nature. These digital audio tape errors were then transferred to the CD-R copies.

In addition, the recording standards and limitations of bit and sample rate set by the media of this time were below what is now considered as best practice, and therefore inferior to the original lacquer discs which are now able to be captured at a higher quality. IASA's *Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects* (2009, p.8) states 'When producing digital copies of analogue material IASA recommends a minimum sampling rate of 48 kHz for any material. However, higher sampling rates are readily available and may be advantageous for many content types... IASA recommends an encoding rate of at least 24 bit to capture all analogue materials.'

A print catalogue of the Mobile Unit recordings was produced in 1996. Virtually no original documentation or descriptive metadata survived with the discs from the time of recording, and apart from scant notes on handwritten disc labels, the only way of knowing who is speaking in the recordings is by listening—and hoping a correct spelling of the speaker's name can be guessed. Earlier cataloguers tried to verify the identities of some speakers through correspondence with military archives, but resourcing meant this was only feasible for a limited number of discs, and there was no easy way to verify the names of the speakers via any online database.

Each disc side contains around four minutes of audio, and when there is only one speaker per side, the speaker's name is sometimes written on the label. However, some of the discs of messages home can contain up to a dozen speakers per side, each with a 20-second message, with no written metadata at all as to their identity.

In the absence of any easily accessible verifying authority, the names of speakers listed in the 1996 catalogue were sometimes mis-heard, mis-spelled or are simply missing altogether. In order to improve discoverability of this collection and to establish it as an authoritative primary source for researchers and historians, names of speakers need to be verified and descriptive metadata improved.

New Zealand's World War II military service records are not yet fully digitised or available online, but enlistment details for most of those who served have been uploaded to Auckland War Memorial Museum's Online Cenotaph database. Online Cenotaph describes itself as 'a living memorial to those who served Aotearoa New Zealand on active service during times of international conflict' (About Online Cenotaph, 2021). Covering conflicts from New Zealand's 19th-century colonial land wars, to Afghanistan and Iraq, it collates information relating to an individual's service from official military and government records, as well as crowd-sourced contributions by families and private researchers.

This database had proved invaluable during the World War I centenary period from 2014-2018, when Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision experienced increased client demand for archival recordings of World War I veterans for use in commemorative projects. Online

Cenotaph was used to verify the identity of interviewees, making World War I archival material more discoverable and useful for clients.

When a speaker recorded by the World War II Mobile Units has an unusual name, it is relatively easy to find them in Cenotaph. However, verifying a 'Bill Wilson' or 'Jack Brown' is more complicated. Using Cenotaph data taken from a man's enlistment record, we can cross-reference this with information in his recording to identify him. The date a man enlisted, the address of his next-of-kin, names and places he mentions in his recorded greeting, or even his pre-war occupation can all be useful clues.

As part of on-going research into this collection, speakers are being identified and details are progressively being added to the Online Cenotaph entries of those found in the Mobile Unit recordings. This will eventually link to their digitised audio uploaded to Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision's online database. The copyright in most of the Mobile Unit recordings has expired and Radio New Zealand is keen to see its historic sound collection made accessible. The current projects to digitise and identify these voices mean the Mobile Unit recordings will eventually be accessible to all New Zealanders, revealing more of our wartime experience.

At its most fundamental, this project will allow New Zealand families to discover and hear the voices of their relatives on recordings which many never knew existed. Beyond this, increased access will also allow analysis of a step-change in New Zealand media history. It is hoped that listening to these recordings, historians and scholars will gain new insights into the development of broadcast journalism in this country and the part played by wartime radio in New Zealand's growing sense of national identity.

Figure 6. A New Zealand soldier in the Pacific records a message home with E.V. Spencer (left) of the New Zealand Broadcasting Unit based in New Caledonia, c.1943 [Photograph courtesy of the Spencer family].