

AJ's Log, from: March, 1980 Hi-Q

A True Story from WWII

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Back in World War II days most of the ships carrying war supplies and food etc. to Great Britain were escorted by warships of the Allied Navies. There were exceptions to this which included some of the faster passenger liners which carried high priority items and depended on their higher speed and secrecy of operation to foil the efforts of the German submarines. One of these ships was the Empress of Scotland. She carried a staff of wireless operators who maintained a continuous watch but did very little transmitting for safety reasons.

The ship's whereabouts were known to very few and her mail was very carefully censored. This latter precaution made it difficult for the WIT operators to maintain a supply of spare material for their work. The Chief Operator devised a method of doing this by writing personal letters to the Assistant Super. of the Marine Department of Marconi in Montreal, containing more or less the hidden words indicating the next port of call. For instance he might complain of not feeling well and would say he intended to have his liver checked at the next port of call, or that he expected there would be a good crowd at the "pig and whistle" in about ten days time. The Montreal contact, being an old operator himself, would then immediately know that he would be going to Liverpool in the first case and Avonmouth (near the Port of London) in the second.

I do not know how long this (*practice*) was carried on, but eventually there appeared in the office of the Marine Super. one morning a large constable in the red uniform of the RCMP. He enquired for a Mr. H. Turner, Chief W/T operator of the "SS Empress of Scotland". He had a letter with him signed "Bass and Worthington" two of the best known ales in Great Britain. I don't know how they translated this into Harold Turner, but they had. To make a long story a little shorter, Turner was charged by the Admiralty Court with some breach of the Secrecy Act and stood so charged in the Halifax Naval Court. It so happened that the captain of the Empress of Scotland was present. The judge asked him if he would continue to employ Turner as a member of the crew. The reply was "Yes." Turner was discharged and had to pay the cost of the court. Harold Turner, now a silent key, was a shop operator with the Canadian Marconi Co. for 51 years. He was probably the first Canadian ship operator to carry amateur gear and was the hero in one of my "log extracts" a few years ago.