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Asiatic Broadcasts For Asiatic Listeners

Written for "The Listener"
By
F. ANTHONY SAMPSON

SHORTWAVE listeners in New Zealand must often wonder what some of the strange words mean as they listen around the dial; what language they are in, and where they come from. Until a few months ago some of these broadcasts went out from Singapore. For a brief period some of the Singapore news came from the "ghost" station in Java. But now one of the major centres of Asiatic language programmes, which would shortly have grown into a very large organisation, exists no more.

The Malaya Broadcasting Corporation had a big job on hand last year. Not yet granted a government charter, it had to carry on and expand programmes with the existing Singapore transmitters. It had to construct a new station, which would probably have been one of the finest in the world, and install high-power transmitters there. It had at the same time to instruct many additional engineers in the operating of the new station, while the only training facilities were on the existing low-power transmitters. Additional staff had to be recruited for other departments, and the most important of these was the newsroom.

Opening a Newsroom

There wasn't a newsroom at the beginning of March last year. Singapore's news bulletins in English were just

Reuter's news summary, compiled for the edification of government departments. In Asiatic languages, they were provided by the Malaya Department of Information, whose system was sufficiently clumsy to make the news many hours late when it got on the air.

I came into the picture when the MBC chairman asked my boss, the acting Director of the Far Eastern Bureau of the British Ministry of Information, if he had anybody who could write radio news. My boss had been the editor under whom I served on the *North-China Daily News* in Shanghai from 1929 to 1935. I had written the paper's radio news bulletin as far back as 1934. So that was that. I started writing news for the MBC the next day. The Singapore style of bulletin soon took shape. Much shorter bulletins, for one thing. We ultimately got down to a maximum twelve minutes as our ideal. But chiefly we laid emphasis on Far East news, as being in the Pacific zone. One reason for this was that people in other countries were not getting sufficient Pacific news, and any excitement in Europe would draw their attention away from the Pacific. From our experience we

realised the importance of Far Eastern doings and the prominence they deserved. I might add that our news key-men consisted of one man from Japan, myself from Shanghai, and a third with experience in North China. Too close to the end, we were joined by two men from Australia.

In Thirteen Languages

So we took over the Asiatic broadcasts from the Department of Information, and it wasn't long before we were broadcasting in twelve languages or dialects besides English: Malay, Tamil, Hindustani, Malayalam, Japanese, Siamese, Arabic, Kuo Yue (Mandarin), Cantonese and Hokkien, French, and Dutch, with an occasional German talk. We planned for 22 languages in a few extra months. Our English bulletins were also augmented.

Until the Pacific war began. That meant extra bulletins. English news opened at 6 a.m. and ended at midnight. It meant extra Asiatic broadcasts. They went on the air. There was no five-day week or extra pay for overtime. The job was done, without any fuss, seven days and seven nights a week.

Transfer to Java

Then came the transfer. The overseas unit was sent to Batavia. Others of the MBC stayed behind to run the Singa-

(Continued on next page)

Life Was Not Dull In The East

THE Malaya Broadcasting Corporation has been disbanded, and the 250 members of its staff have scattered to the corners of the earth. Some are in Chungking, some have returned to England, some are in India, Australia and New Zealand, some did not choose to leave Singapore. F. A. Sampson, writer of the article on this page, left Singapore for Batavia after the Johore Causeway was breached and a fortnight before the island fell. He left Batavia four days before the Japanese arrived there. He worked voluntarily in Australia for several weeks, assisting the Government with shortwave Eastern language broadcasts. Then he came to New Zealand.

The staff of the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation mushroomed from 20 to 250 in a year. Mr. Sampson, who had a wide experience of newspaper work in Shanghai, opened the news department, which in a few months expanded its broadcasts in Asiatic languages to a point where the MBC was sending out 33 news bulletins a day in twelve languages besides English.

As the Japanese advanced down the peninsula late in January, the MBC, in accordance with pre-



F. ANTHONY SAMPSON

arranged plans to operate transmitters elsewhere, prepared to send a unit overseas to supply news and information in the event of Singapore's transmitters being damaged by enemy action. As things turned out they

had to be blown up, and the overseas unit took over the complete service for a few days. Accordingly, on February 1, Mr. Sampson left Singapore in a party of 43 to set up a "ghost station" in Batavia.

His ship, jam-packed with evacuees, was bombed, but the party arrived intact, and borrowing transmitters from the Dutch, set to work at feverish pace to get the unit on the air. (Mr. Sampson's winter clothes were in Shanghai, his summer clothes in India, and he landed in Batavia with two shirts, six pairs of shorts, and a steel helmet which he had borrowed from the Singapore Naval Police and neglected to return).

Before joining the MBC, Mr. Sampson was six years with "The North China Daily News," later working on "The Shanghai Evening Post," the city's American paper, as city editor. For a newspaperman in Shanghai life was never dull. During one stormy period of three and a-half months, Mr. Sampson recalls, seven members of his paper's staff resigned, two were assassinated, one was kidnapped, and several were injured on one of four occasions when bombs were thrown into the office.