



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

“THE COAST GUARD, IT BECAME MY LIFE FOR THREE YEARS”

The Memoir of Radioman First Class Ralph M. Servadio

Radioman First Class (RM1) Ralph M. Servadio served as a radio operator during World War II in a covert Coast Guard operation to intercept clandestine Nazi radio messages in South America. His memoir describes his path from boot camp to his amazing service at a remote radio monitoring station at Quintero, Chile.

Servadio was born in Herkimer, New York in 1925, one of five sons of proud Italian immigrants. Ralph and his older brother Dominic enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1943. Both became radiomen. However, Dominic served aboard the cutter USS Taney; while Ralph served south of the equator to support the Coast Guard's intelligence operations. Dominic earned four battle stars aboard Taney, while Ralph was awarded a Distinguished Service Medal for his duties in Chile.

After the war's end, Ralph was honorably discharged, and worked his way to becoming an executive at General Electric Corporation, in Utica, New York. He is now retired and lives with his wife Mamie and nearby his daughter Rosemarie, in Clermont Florida.

Manhattan Beach for three months of “Boot Training:” March 19th 1943 – June 1943

It was tough at first. Our barracks was a wooden structure no bigger than a townhouse where approximately 50 recruits were cramped together. Our bunks were lined up against the wall, and at night before racking in, every other bunk was pulled out so we could get into our racks. Each item of issued clothing had to be stenciled with our names in a specific place so that when the item was rolled up you could see them. We were also issued a sea bag and a sack about two inches thick. Every item of clothing had to fit into the sea bag and the sack was rolled around the bag when traveling. We marched everywhere, to classes and to chow, often at double-time. We were also taught how to take guns apart and put them back together while blindfolded.

Our company was chosen to march down 6th Avenue in New York City for the Memorial Day Parade of 1943, and I was one of the few chosen for shore patrol duty at Coney Island. These two events were the highlights of boot camp.

Beach Patrol: June 1943

After boot camp, I was shipped off to Hilton Head Island to serve in the beach patrol. I didn't like the horse patrols. One time my horse took the bit in his teeth and ran away with me hanging on for dear life. I told the Chief that I didn't want to ride horses anymore, but he knew I was just scared, so he issued me a nice gentle horse who responded with the slightest movement of the reins or body. I became very comfortable and competent riding. I got to the point that, when on patrol, I would race my partner on the beach. At night two men would patrol, one by the water's edge and one by the sand dunes. During the war there was a real threat that Nazi submarines were landing saboteurs on our shores. One night we got the hell scared out of us when the horses alerted us. It sounded as if someone was dragging a rubber boat up the beach. When we investigated, we found a giant sea turtle crawling up the beach. To verify this was the source of the alert we flipped the turtle over and went on to the next telephone to ring in "all clear." Once we were sure that it was clear we returned the turtle to the water. There were a number of telephones strung along the beach and you had to "ring in" on each one of them to make a report at specific times. If you failed to do this, you were considered compromised and an armed patrol would be dispatched.

One night in September of 1943, they asked for volunteers for sea duty. I was second in line. I just wanted to get away from the horses. We spent more time caring for the horses than ourselves. The volunteering got me shipped to Charleston, South Carolina, on duty called Port Security. We spent our duty hours aboard a liberty ship that was being loaded with defense equipment for overseas. We had to wear our white uniforms with leggings and carry a .38 caliber revolver in a holster. At about this time, I was promoted to seaman first class. I could now wear three stripes on my dress blue uniform cuffs.

Becoming a Radioman

While I was in Charleston, my brother Dominic, who was also in the Coast Guard, was stationed in Atlantic City, New Jersey, attending Radioman School. This probably is why I observed the notice on the bulletin board that they were looking for people to go to Radioman School in Atlantic City. To qualify, you had to be a high school graduate and have typing skills. I had neither. My friend Max, who was the Old Man's (The Commanding Officer) yeoman, encouraged me to apply. He convinced me that it was a great opportunity, and he had a way of getting me qualified. He told me to see the commander and request permission to apply for Radioman School. Max said that the Old Man would ask him to check my records, and Max would tell him that I met all the requirements. Max's magic worked, and I was ordered to attend Radioman School.

The Hotel Morton served as our barracks while attending Radioman School. It was just 500 feet off of the boardwalk, and our classrooms were in various buildings, also along the boardwalk. Consequently, we marched to all of our classes along the boardwalk. This would be our home for six months – not bad. When we checked in, my seabag was piled in the lobby along with all the other incoming student's seabags. One of my brother Dom's roommates saw my last name on my bag and asked my brother if he was shipping out. At this point, Dom didn't know that I had been accepted into Radioman School. He saw my bag and proceeded to track to me down. He found me having dinner in the dining room. After 11 months we were so glad to see each other! Dom and I were together for approximately one month, because he went to Radioman School right out of boot camp, and I did only after serving on beach patrol in Hilton Head for several months. I never really liked Radioman School, but I was living in a hotel and there were only six guys to a room. The bunks were tripled and we had one fairly nice bathroom with a hot water shower. My roommates and I would study together, which was a great help. The one thing we couldn't help each other with was the Morse code translations. We would put headphones on and listen for the dots and dashes. They were sent out real slow and we learned to print each letter with as few strokes as possible. After gaining proficiency, you were allowed to use a portable typewriter and use the touch-type method. You had to really hit those keys as the typewriters were well worn from being pounded on, class after class. At first you could hear the class typing each letter at different times as we hunted and pecked for the keys. By the end of Radioman School, it sounded like a single key was being punched for each letter.

Dom graduated as a Striker, as you had to be able to code 20 words per minute to get your Third Class Petty Officer Stripes. He was shipped out to the USCGC *Taney*, a 325-foot cutter, then the largest ship in the Coast Guard's fleet, and there he tacked on his Third Class stripes. He also was awarded four battle stars for the *Taney's* service in the Pacific.

In June 1944, I graduated from Radioman School as a Third Class Petty Officer, thanks to my passing the code test owning 22 words per minute. I also earned a 10-day leave. This was my fourth promotion and my first leave since my enlistment, just over a year ago.

After leave, I was shipped out to U.S. Coast Guard Station New Smyrna Beach, where working out of the radio shack was more like an 8-to-5 civilian job than military duty. There were about 35 to 40 radiomen stationed at New Smyrna, and we changed watches every week to provide 24 hour coverage. Our barracks consisted of this big house, the kind you see on plantations in the movies. The sleeping quarters were tight though; we still had to double bunk. We also had to do our own laundry. A former civilian, a short-order cook turned Coast Guard cook provided our

chow at the house. Usually breakfast was made to order, but lunch and dinner were single entrée meals.

Our radio shack was a small wooden building filled with equipment. We each had three receivers, a Teletype, and hand keys to transmit coded messages to Washington. We had plenty of free time after our 8-hour monitoring shift. I spent most of mine on the beach. I would put on my trunks and jog about a mile to the shore, bringing only my wallet and cigarettes with me. I really enjoyed the surf and sun. There also was a casino that was built on a pier that extended over the water when the tide was in. The beer always tasted particularly good there on those hot summer days. When I got bored, I would walk the beach to look for New York license plates on the cars parked in the hard sand. However, there weren't many because of gas rationing. I also did a lot of fishing from the station's pier. Jigging for flounder at night was my favorite pastime. Usually a group of us would go fishing and if we got lucky, we'd convince the station's cook to prepare our catch, or even better, we'd cook our catch right on the beach.

All in all, duty in New Smyrna was great. I learned a lot about monitoring and became proficient at using the Teletype and hand keys. We were always searching for clandestine stations that were transmitting illegal messages. We were provided a hot list of call letters and frequencies, as well as the times when they would likely be most active. All of the messages were in code, so we never knew what the message contained; however if the message was on the hot list, we had to recode it and transmit it to Washington.

Since I was getting pretty good at my job, I had time to take a correspondence course for petty officer second class. Another stripe would raise my status and give me a pay raise, too. Eventually, with the help of my shipmates, I got my second stripe.

I made a lot of close friends while at New Smyrna; a few of them who were married lived in town. From time to time, I'd take the station truck and pick the married guys up for their watch. One day I ran over a rattlesnake while heading into town to pick up my buddy Louis. I threw the snake in the truck bed and didn't think anything more about it. When Louis jumped in the truck bed, he nearly crapped his pants when he saw the rattler! We had to pick up a few other guys along the route and Louis let them all have same experience that he did.

Florida had the worst atmosphere for copying code. There were numerous storms and thousands of lightning strikes. It was tough to not miss any letters with all the static and crackle from the electrical storms. However, once you became proficient, the Coast Guard would assign you to different stations all over the world. Some of my friends served in Lima, Peru and Santiago, Chile.

We'd keep in touch by sending messages via hand-key. Most of the chatter was just everyday gossip, because we couldn't talk about duties or location. Through this, I learned that one of my buddies, a guy named Joe, got into a serious Jeep accident while on the way to the radio shack in Quintero, Chile. For some reason they crashed through a barbed wire fence, breaking off one of the posts at the bottom, and apparently it swung on the attached top wire like a mace and struck Joe on the head. This misfortune rendered him unfit for duty and required that a replacement be sent as soon as possible.

I volunteered and was accepted.

Getting to Chile

I was given a 10-day leave with orders to take all my uniforms, dog tags and mattress home. I was also ordered to pack a suitcase with specific items of civilian clothes. After leave, I had to report to the 12th District Navy Headquarters in Miami, Florida. When I reported to the specific office in Navy Headquarters, the Officer-in-Charge (OIC) ordered me to go into the head and change into civilian clothes. He also issued me a cardboard box and told me to put my uniforms and all other military issued items including dog tags and ID in it, to be mailed home.

Because I was going overseas, I had to have several inoculations. Unfortunately these were given all at once, which made me sicker than a dog, complete with a high fever and the shakes. I found out later that these shots were supposed to be given a week apart. However, this was just the beginning of many issues to follow.

I was placed in a barracks with other uniformed Coast Guard men, and since I appeared to be a civilian, I wasn't appreciated very much. Without divulging my actual orders, I had to convince them that I was on a military secret mission so that I wouldn't get my butt kicked. After a while, I was accepted into the group and was asked to go to the movies with them. During the war, it was the patriotic custom to give military members a discount. When I approached the ticket counter the cashier said I had to pay full price because I was a 4F.

A 4F was the draft board designation for someone who was unfit for military service. Because of the nature of my mission, I couldn't contest the unfair allegation. This was the low point of my Coast Guard career.

At this time I was staying in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, awaiting travel orders. After about four days I was ordered to board a [Catalina] PBY airplane at Bonita Key. A PBY is a flying boat and can take off and land at sea or land. The plane was full of sailors and we were all headed for Panama.

When we landed at the naval base in Panama, I was immediately taken into custody by a Marine guard and delivered to the CO's (Commanding Officer) office. They had no idea what a civilian was doing on a military base. Again, I had to convince the CO that I was a military man on a classified mission. I did this by showing him my personnel record and the sealed envelope that wasn't to be opened until I arrived at the embassy in Santiago, Chile. I was getting good at this. Since there weren't any military flights to Chile, they put me up at the International Hotel with orders to stay there until they could figure out what to do with me. After several days, a gentleman in civilian clothes (perhaps the FBI?) came early one morning and put me on a commercial flight bound for Chile. The plane had a layover in Lima, Peru, where Customs officials asked me for my passport and visa, and since I didn't have either one, I was kicked off the plane. Additionally, since I didn't have these documents or military orders or a military ID (that I could show, they were probably in the sealed envelope), I couldn't board any other plane, especially to Chile. So I was stuck in a foreign country, whose language was foreign to me as well.

I took a bus that people were getting on to a hotel. When I got to the hotel I realized that I only had \$7 in my wallet, not enough for a room for even one night. So I asked the hotel clerk where the American embassy was, and since it was a short walk, I headed there. The embassy was surrounded by a steel fence complete with a gate and call button. I hit the call button and a Marine came out to ascertain my business.

I explained that I was a military member on a mission to Santiago, Chile, however I was kicked off the plane due to lack of documentation, which I was not at liberty to divulge. Additionally, I was stuck in a foreign country whose language I did not speak, and had no money. Furthermore, as a military man on a mission and as an American citizen, I demanded assistance. Overwhelmed with too much information, he took me in to see the Officer of the Day (OOD), who was a Navy lieutenant. The lieutenant directed me to sit down and asked what the hell I was doing here, and how the hell did I get here? I explained that my purpose in going to Chile was the same mission that the Coast Guard in Lima was performing – monitoring clandestine radio transmissions and reporting them to Washington Headquarters. I also told him that I knew some of the guys in Lima because I worked with them in New Smyrna. The lieutenant then called a guy by the name of Louis that I had mentioned, and ordered him to report to the embassy on the double. Louis had been in an accident with a young girl, and that investigation was the main reason he was ordered to the embassy. While waiting for Louis to arrive, I was interviewed about my duties as a second

class radioman, previous duty stations and why I was going to Chile. I really got the feeling that they thought I was a spy. As Louis arrived I was ordered to "just sit there and don't say a damn thing" and act as if I was part of the interrogation panel.

Louis arrived and the proceedings began.

As the interrogation came to a close, the lieutenant pointed to me and asked Louis, "Do you know this man?" Louis looked at me for a while, as I smiled as if to say, "Knock it off, you're taking too long!" Then Louis said something that almost made me crap my pants-- he said, "I've never seen him before." I saw the Marine place his hand on his holster, and the Lieutenant had this big "I gotcha!" grin. I requested permission to speak, which was graciously granted, kind of like giving a dying man a last wish. So I didn't waste time as I interviewed Louis, who apparently had a short memory. I walked him through the whole nine yards. I reminded him that while serving in New Smyrna, he was married and living off base. I also reminded him that often members of the Station picked up the married guys for their shift with a truck. Then I asked, "Do you ever remember crapping your pants because you found a rattlesnake in the back of the truck?" He burst out, "Ralph, that was you!" That did the trick; both the Marine and the lieutenant got a big laugh out of it. I was no longer a spy.

The lieutenant told Louis to take me to the house where the other Lima radio operators were and to keep me out of trouble (unlike Louis himself) until he could figure a way to get me to the American embassy. So again, after several days of wild partying with my counterparts, another government agent came for me and put my hung-over butt on a plane bound for Santiago, Chile. I was finally on my way.

When I arrived, I had a welcoming committee of embassy staff who promptly ushered me to the embassy and issued me a passport and a carnet. The carnet was an identification folder card that had my photo, thumbprint and signature. It also had the name of my employer, the U.S. Embassy.

While this was going on, I noticed there was a man waiting for me, and he was my new commanding officer: Chief Petty Officer Wildfong. The chief was driving me to the headquarters house in Quientero when, through our conversation, he discovered that my rank was that of a second class petty officer and not a first class, which was what the billet required. The next day, the Chief called the embassy and asked for guidance. He was advised that because of all the issues in bringing me in to Chile, he was under orders to make me a first class by any means necessary. So I was asked my name, age and serial number, and the paperwork was completed.

Not only did I get to sew on another stripe, I also got a pay raise and an overseas bonus! Getting to Chile may have been a pain, but it was worth it!

The headquarters house was located in the tiny hamlet of Quientero, which had no paved streets and donkey carts and horses were the main modes of transportation. The house had a pleasant stucco finish, a kitchen, a living room and three bedrooms in which we had to double bunk. The embassy hired a local lady and her nieces, Anna and Rosa, to perform the cooking and cleaning chores. This was no easy job, for in our group there were seven radiomen, first class and one chief, and we usually ate together.

We pulled duty at the radio shack, which was located a short distance up a hill (of course, always on top of a hill for reception) from the house. We had a Jeep to make the commute. We monitored 24 hours a day, so to keep from getting too much sleep we rotated watches every week. On watch we would monitor three receivers at one time. We accomplished this marvel by having one earphone from each of two receivers in each ear while listening to the overhead speaker of the third receiver. We were provided a hot list of clandestine or suspicious radio station frequencies and their likely times of transmission. When we intercepted one of these transmissions, we copied the coded message verbatim, and then recoded it and transmitted it directly to Washington if it was on the hot list. All other suspicious messages were copied in Teletype and delivered to the embassy. Each week, one of us would serve as courier and deliver the documents to the Santiago Embassy. The courier would also deliver our outgoing mail, pick up our incoming mail and pick up our hard-earned pay when it was due.

Our outgoing mail envelopes had to be left unsealed so the censors at the embassy could more easily inspect our letters. Every once in a while my fiancé would tell me that something was cut out of my romantic prose. Whenever I had courier duty I would stay at the Hotel Carrara in Santiago. During these stays, I would write my future wife using the hotel's stationary and send it sealed via airmail, believing this method would evade censorship. Consequently, I did a fair amount of griping about almost everything. Well, it turned out that this was a big mistake; because little did I know that every piece of mail headed for the States during wartime was censored. I found this out about 30 years later when my employer, General Electric, required me get a top secret security clearance for a new project that I was assigned.

Back to Duty

Speaking of Chile, the duty there was quite good. The embassy provided us with a Jeep and a command car for ground transportation. They were also kind enough to give us a boat with an

outboard motor for water sports. Moreover, the money exchange was favorable – about 30 pesos to the dollar, so we had plenty of money to spend. I even had a suit tailor-made from material that I picked out. It lasted over 10 years after I was discharged.

Even the radio monitoring was satisfying, for we were picking up a lot of clandestine stations. When the code copying got boring, I'd monitor an English news station for a while. One day, I was monitoring the Associated Press (AP) news and I copied a statement that a big bomb had been dropped that was equal to 10,000 tons of TNT. I thought that I was punching too many zeros, so I asked another radioman to monitor the AP news frequency and recopy what I believed to be my error. I was concerned because I didn't know which country had such a big bomb and I thought that maybe the U.S. had been the target. As the news continued, it came to pass that this was the atomic bomb that President Harry Truman ordered to be dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. President Truman asked Japan to surrender or suffer additional carnage. Japan refused to surrender, so about a week later the President ordered a second atomic bomb be dropped on Nagasaki.

War's End

After Nagasaki, Japan's Prime Minister realized that he had no choice but to surrender, which brought the war with Japan to an end. That made us all happy, not just because it ended the war, but it also gave us closure in the form of payback for the Pearl Harbor sneak attack of December 7, 1941. That attack killed thousands of sailors, soldiers and civilians; moreover, it nearly destroyed our Pacific Fleet, making us all feel vulnerable. Many years later I would take my wife to Hawaii to visit the Battleship *Arizona* Memorial, where over a thousand sailors are entombed.

With the war ending, the copying code of Nazi clandestine stations became less important. So to keep us busy, the U.S. Government wanted us to conduct surveillance of Russian ships by copying their coded transmissions. It was a routine to determine ports of call, departures and cargo of shipping, however we had a problem. The Russians would transmit their coded messages automatically and at such a high rate of speed that it was humanly impossible to copy it. We solved this problem by using good old American ingenuity. We recorded their transmissions and played them back at a slower speed so we could copy them. I don't think this was really important to the war effort, anyway. It was more like the embassy wanted to keep us busy so we'd be around to pack up the station when the order came, which it did in September of 1945.

Back in the USA

After we closed the station I was shipped back to New Smyrna Beach. All my old shipmates wondered how the hell I made radioman first class in just eight months. However, I had plenty of good war stories to back up the mystique of my new rank. I received my honorable discharge from the Coast Guard on April 8, 1946. Three exciting years went by in a flash!

About a month after I was discharged, I received a letter dated May 2, 1946 from Admiral J. F. Farley. The letter was a commendation for my service with the U.S. Naval Communication Intelligence Organization. Included with the letter was an award ribbon for distinguished service. The letter also stated that I was not to divulge any details of this mission, including location, methods or accomplishments. It went on to state that this mission was the result of a secret agreement between the U.S. and Chilean governments, and revealing any information could jeopardize Chile's neutral status. So this was a covert award for a covert mission – a fitting end.

About two months after I was discharged, I received a check from the government for the civilian clothes that I had to buy for the mission. I had forgotten all about the cost of the specific items of clothing that I was ordered to buy. I didn't complain about the found money though, for I used it on our honeymoon when I married the love of my life, Mamie, on June 8, 1946.

“SK” – RM1 Ralph M. Servadio

