

Ladyville Journal

Listen! In Belize's Jungles, It's the Voice of Britain

By DAVID GONZALEZ

LADYVILLE, Belize — The sun may have set on the British Empire, but a touch of it still shines on the radio dial each day in Belize. From a cramped studio inside an army base, the British Forces Broadcasting Service tends to the morale of the British troops who come to this former colony each year for jungle warfare training.

After surviving oven-hot days and bug-filled nights, the soldiers return to their barracks, where the cadences of drill time are replaced by the strains of the Human League, Wyclef Jean, Dexy's Midnight Runners and maybe even that rare bit of Engelbert Humperdinck.

The broadcasting service's tradition started in 1943, when a radio station was set up in what had been a harem in Algeria. It has grown ever since, from the Falkland Islands to Gibraltar and from Canada to Belize, once called British Honduras.

"Good Morning, Vietnam" it isn't, and "Good Morning, Ladyville" doesn't exactly have the same frantic promise. With a little more than 120 British troops permanently stationed here, the audience is perhaps the smallest anywhere. Yet this echo of empire in music and news is important to its listeners.

"It's a connection to home, whether the prime minister of the day has resigned or the U.K. has suffered the worst disaster in 20 years," said Lt. Col. David Leigh, the commander of the British Army Training Support Unit Belize. "There's that feeling when you get home that you could be putting around listening to radio having a cup of tea, with the voices of Scotland, Wales or the North Country. I'm 5,000 miles away, but I'm listening to something millions of people at home are listening to."

Usually, the station, in the army base that is shared with the Belize Defense Force, actually comprises two radio channels and a television station, all of which receive programs by satellite from headquarters in England. One of the radio stations carries more highbrow fare straight from the BBC; the other, more popular one, features rock 'n' roll and several shows whose hosts are Belize-based employees.

The announcers are civilians, but they are as apt to head to another post as any soldier. Richard Hatch, the station manager, morning show host and everything else, has already worked in Germany, Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands.

"I loved Germany since it was a much bigger audience at about 100,000," he said. "The hardest was the Falklands. Here, you're so far



Holly Hatch

The morale of British troops in Belize is helped by the British Forces Broadcasting Service radio station there. Richard Hatch, who is the station manager and an announcer, talked to an aircraft technician.



The New York Times

The British forces' radio station operates from a base in Ladyville.

away, but the sun shines. In the Falklands, you're so far away and the sun doesn't shine. It's the moon. The moon with grass. But that's why our job is doubly important in places like that."

He sees himself as part morale-meister, part guide to those young men who come through here on short training missions. For some who never go exploring the country, he tries to encourage them with "The B Files," a compilation of radio shorts

that delve into topics not usually covered in jungle warfare training.

"The Belizeans are a very superstitious lot," began one such piece. "They believe in myths and omens. From the weeping woman who lures drunken men to their death, to the bearded bushman who has his feet back to front so you think he's going when he's really coming."

The music is a mix of oldies, one-hit wonders and the latest chart-toppers from Britain, as well as special requests. Among the most popular songs are "Leaving on a Jet Plane."

"Everyone asks for that when it's time to go," Mr. Hatch said. "That's the only one they know. It's the only song that says leaving, as in jet plane."

It's a good thing that many of the troops who rotate through here leave after a short while, especially when some have musical tastes not shared by their comrades in arms. Not long ago, one soldier fairly drove the others mad with his requests for Juan Gabriel, a Latin American crooner ("The Neil Diamond of Central America" scoffed one announcer) while another prompted his comrades to pay the station to silence his request — "Life is a Roller Coaster" by Ronan Keating.

The small audience is a challenge

for the hosts, who know they cannot expect dozens of callers to respond to contests. Often, the hosts said, they have to make competitions a little easier, and those who do call are instantly recognized by announcers and listeners alike.

The radio is a focus of life here, even drawing listeners among civilians and expatriates in Belize who fail to appreciate the appeal of the local radio stations — like one that was recently playing a soca hit (from soul-calypso) whose only intelligible lyrics were "Viagra! Viagra!"

"BFBS keeps me in touch," said Katie Valk, the manager of a local travel agency who used to work in the music business in New York. "I found out about the Verve that way. You ever listen to the local stations? You can hear Patsy Cline five times a day. They're still playing Ray Price. BFBS is a godsend. Patsy's great, but enough. I hear enough of her during, what do you call that, when you sing? The karaoke thing."

But the core audience remains the troops, for whom the radio shows are as big a part of their day as mail call or mealtime.

"BFBS is very personal to us," said Warrant Officer First Class Kevin Anthony-Percioe, who is host on an American-style rock show. "It's about here and now. They talk about people I know."

And since the announcers also live on base, they get feedback that is better than any ratings report.

"It's not rocket science; you're just trying to cheer them up," Mr. Hatch said. "This is funny, there are about 100 people here. If you do a bad show they will call you. They see you at lunch. You are right in the audience's face."

That is fine with Hermina Campbell, the host of the breakfast show, when she remembers her first radio job at a British hospital.

"You were broadcasting to patients who were probably sleeping after an operation," she said. "It takes willpower to continue broadcasting when half of your listeners are deaf or asleep. This is community radio. It is interactive."

Brazil Aide Pledges Care in Amazon Plans

BRASÍLIA, Jan. 24 (Reuters) — In a move intended to meet environmentalists' concerns, Brazil said today that it would assess the impact of an economic development plan on the Amazon. Some scientists have warned that up to 42 percent of the Amazon rain forest could be destroyed by the project.

João Paulo Silveira, the development ministry official in charge of the \$40 billion plan, said the government would study the probable environmental impact of all projects envisaged. The study, to be carried out over 12 months, is expected to cost \$400,000. He promised that if environ-

mental damage is feared, projects will be altered.

The Amazon, a forest area seven times the size of France, is home to up to 30 percent of the planet's animal and plant life. It already loses 4.7 million acres, an area the size of Rhode Island, each year to loggers and other destruction, a recent article in Science magazine said.

But Mr. Silveira said the Science article had "no technical foundations." He said its projections were faulty because it did not consider recent developments like much more stringent environmental laws than in the 1980's.

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