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THE FANTASTIC FLIGHT OF THE BLUE EAGLE



*A memorable EI Special Report
proving that in Washington
you always color the tape red
and the tax money gone.*

IF ALL started in the early summer. There was unexpected music from the sky and unaccountable voices were heard on radio. "This is the Voice of the Blue Eagle relaying the Blue Eagle Radio Network," said the mystery station. Then came jazz music it called the Blue Eagle Blues.

The strange transmissions were interfering with commercial broadcast stations. Scores of people who heard the signals wondered about them, a few were worried and some even were alarmed. Were these the voices of an unseen enemy? Of a foreign power plotting against the country? Of the saucer people from outer space?

Though the Blue Eagle's voices and music were heard in many communities

they seemed to center on Baltimore, a location that would appear grimly suitable since, more than a century before, it had seen part of the life and the macabre death of master haunter Edgar Allan Poe. And, just three decades back, the phantom invaders from Mars had been landed not far away by Orson Wells. It was spook territory, all right.

What does an aroused citizen do when he's being haunted by a radio spook that has no rational explanation? In the case of at least one Baltimorean, a young DX radio enthusiast, you write to the Federal Communications Commission. Are they not the police of the airwaves, the masters of the ether? Who is the Blue Eagle, this chap asked the FCC, and what's going on?

Back came the answer on official FCC stationery: "The station which you intercepted was unlicensed. Engineers from field offices of our Field Engineering Bureau located the station and while not actually observing the station in operation, contacted the suspected operator and warned him of the possible results and penalties of such unlicensed operation."

It was a straight enough answer and seemingly explained away the mystery. An unlicensed operator. Probably somebody getting his kicks out of knowing people were hearing his voice. Certainly not an unheard-of event. So the embarrassing episode was buried.

Only it wouldn't stay buried. Within days after the letter arrived in Baltimore the Blue Eagle was on the air again, sounding just as mysterious as ever and causing just as much interference.

And, in view of later developments, the content of the letter was odd, indeed.

It was not until late last fall that anyone was able to piece together even a major part of the Blue Eagle story, though the episode had begun in June. The whole story still is not known and no official account of what really happened ever has been released. The nearest thing to an official explanation is a second FCC letter, written two months later in response to a query about the Blue Eagle from a Canadian: "Regarding 'The Voice of the Blue Eagle,' what has been observed [heard by you] was U.S. Government intermittent testing of broadcasting operations and related facilities for world-wide use. Because it is a Government operation, it is not licensed by the Commission and the identification 'The Voice of the Blue Eagle' is used in lieu of a call sign."

A comparison of the two letters might make one wonder whether the FCC really did know what was going on. Especially in view of the fact that both were signed by the same member of the FCC staff.

To make things trebly confusing, the Baltimore DXer, after receiving the first letter, called the FCC field engineer in his city and told him what had happened. Reported he: "Though I was engaged in conversation for about ten minutes I didn't find out much. He told me that the person who first wrote me at the time was not aware that the Blue Eagle was authorized."

Since when does an engineer in the field have more up-to-date information on a policy matter than a member high on the FCC staff (he was that) at ground-zero in Washington? The answer, it appears, is when eagles turn blue.

As with most mysteries, there was a rational explanation of the Blue Eagle phenomenon.

The story, to be sure, starts in Washington, where good, dedicated public servants sometimes appear to be spending most of their time coloring the tape red. And the eagles blue. The idea evidently originated in the Pentagon—the idea of taking a large aircraft and outfitting it with generators and broadcast, short-wave and television transmitting equipment. The result would be a truly mobile radio-TV station that could become an instant Radio City anywhere in the world. The exact mission would depend on what missions might be available. If the need arose it could be met immediately. A somewhat similar plan had been used successfully by the Voice of America when it equipped



a Coast Guard cutter, the *Courier*, with broadcast gear and anchored it in the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey.

The scheme in time was farmed out to the Navy, which rounded up one of its available Constellations, a four-engine semi-antique with three tails, and set about converting it into a Radio-TV Central with wings. Two broadcast transmitters, two short-wave rigs and a UHF television station went into the fuselage. It was quite a load, as tests proved in short order.

Though the Navy and the others in the Defense Department and other government departments that became involved in the project presumably had no desire to bamboozle the FCC, the possibility probably didn't cause them to lose any sleep. The FCC has charge of radio and television frequencies and of licensing stations to operate on them but, it develops, the agency does not license other government departments under the theory that, as one FCC staffer put it, "we're all working for the same Uncle, anyway." The agency does try to establish frequencies for other government departments and also tries to keep their stations in the slots they're supposed to be in. As a courtesy, or perhaps just in theory, other departments let the FCC know about which frequencies they are using or intend to use. Trouble is, bureaucrats sometimes are jealous of others of a feather and guard their independence zealously.

Once the Navy got its prize project together it had a problem of giving it an identification. A licensed station would have a call sign. But this one wouldn't be licensed. It had to have a name. To some unknown and unheralded worker came the idea of calling it the Blue Eagle, presumably because there is a bird of that description in the Navy's seal. One could assume it had nothing to do with the only other famous blue eagle, the one flown by the National Recovery Act of the Depression.

Now the fun began. Testing was required and, since the various stations would be transmitting on the wing, that was where the tests would have to be conducted. Up went the Blue Eagle. And up and down the East Coast it flew, transmitting all the while. The programs may have been put together before the plane took off but, from the way things went, it seems doubtful—more like material improvised high in the sky. Crewmen evidently took turns making like disc jockeys. There was jazz, popular songs, country and western ditties, even relays of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the programs of two nearby commercial radio stations, WLDB and WMID, in Atlantic City, N.J. Signals from the latter apparently were picked up off the air and simply retransmitted.

The Blue Eagle first was heard at 19.1 mc, usually fixed-station territory. The signals were of fair strength in the Washington-Baltimore area, though they tended to fade from time to time and the so-called programs had a maddening way of disappearing right in the middle of a musical selection. The 19-mc signals were a puzzle to short-wave listeners but caused no trouble. The trouble started when the Blue Eagle began squawking in a new place in the spectrum. This second signal came on at 532 kc, just 3 kc below the bottom edge of the broadcast band, and it was what made the Blue Eagle into an outlaw station because it caused interference with commercial stations, mainly those in Baltimore. (The role of Baltimore in the flights of the Blue Eagle apparently was just that of innocent bystander; the *Connie*, based in the Washington area, simply happened to fly toward Maryland.)

It was after these instances of interference (due to harmonics) that the FCC was queried and, having been told little, could explain little. The exact meaning of that account wherein FCC field engineers located the station, contacted the suspected operator and warned

[Continued on page 117]

The Blue Eagle

Continued from page 29

him of the possible results and penalties is known only to the staffer who wrote the letter. It is easy to see, however, why the engineers failed when it came to "observing the station in operation."

As the summer and the tests wore on the Blue Eagle was reported next on 9530 kc and then 13680 kc. Then it disappeared, later to turn up in Santo Domingo during the thwarted revolution there. Communications on the ground were in a sad state at the time and the airborne station could fill many needs. From there the plane presumably headed west for it soon was being picked up by DXers in California and Washington State.

Despite the measured success the Blue Eagle had achieved in Santo Domingo, the project was not wholly accepted. The Connie, it turned out, was badly overloaded. Such a plane normally has a service ceiling of about 24,000 ft. but that's with a normal load. All that radio and television equipment held it to a much lower altitude. With a mighty grunt the Blue Eagle was able to top 10,000 ft. It was not sufficient to gain a really commanding range for the equipment aboard, particularly for the UHF TV transmitter. The bird started turning into a white elephant. According to one report, the Voice of America was asked whether it had a use for the plane. It declined.

The Blue Eagle next turned up on a Pacific island, reported variously as being either Wake or Okinawa. And there it rested. One rumor that seeped back to the States had the Blue Eagle carrying a small band of nurses to Southeast Asia for a week end. What started out as a lark turned to near tragedy when the plane lost an engine on take-off. It did limp home, however, and settled down for another snooze.

At that point many who knew officially or unofficially of the Blue Eagle considered the project permanently asleep. But the big bird seemingly was playing possum.

At the turn of the year came an announcement out of official American circles in Saigon that revealed the presence in Vietnam of a plane outfitted with, amongst other things, two UHF television transmitters. The

[Continued on page 120]

The Blue Eagle

Continued from page 117

plane, a Navy Super Constellation, would circle above Saigon, said the announcement, and would transmit programs simultaneously in Vietnamese and in English.

As might be expected, there was one slight hitch. No one amongst the Vietnamese populace owned a TV set, no store in the country could sell one and the Americans had failed to bring sets with them. Naturally, plans were afoot to rectify this situation. A thousand TV sets, it was said, had been ordered by the U.S. aid mission for distribution to groups of Vietnamese, and the American military command planned to bring in 500 receivers. There was one more surprise: the one flying TV station suddenly had turned into two. Now there was a Son of Blue Eagle.

But that would be another story. . . 