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Interview with Larry Suid

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Lawrence H. Suid is the author of a history of the Armed Forces Radio and Television Network. He also wrote Guts and Glory, a book about the image of the Armed Forces in Hollywood movies. He lives in Washington, D.C.

(I introduce myself before recording, and tell him about my project; tell him he was referred to me by someone at the Library of Congress when I asked for information about the Armed Forces Radio, and government policy about dealing with the Tokyo Rose broadcasts.)

LS: To be honest the book was written, the manuscript was completed two years ago, and that part was written almost three years ago. So I'm just, as you're asking, I'm trying to think back. Because they had the same issue in Germany, in the European war, a little bit more because Germany would sometimes imitate Armed Forces Network, and give false information, etc. etc. And if there was jamming it would not have been done through Armed Forces Radio, it would have been done through the Signal Corps, through the Office of War Information, or the OSS. My inclination is to say, and I'd have to go back and look a little bit, that the Armed Forces Radio in its mission was simply concerned to provide information for the troops, and entertainment, and it was not their role whatsoever to get involved with the propaganda part.

CK: Who was involved with the propaganda part?

LS: That would be the OSS and Donovan's group, plus I would think Army Intelligence, or of course Navy

Intelligence, and in the Pacific the Marines. I am almost certain that Armed Forces radio itself had no involvement in those kinds of decisions, they did not have jamming equipment whatsoever. They were limited to very small portable transmitters in most places except in Europe where Armed Forces Network and the BBC had rather large generators coming out of England right after the invasion. And so ...Armed Forces radio itself would not have gotten involved with that and Tom Lewis, who ran Armed Forces Radio operations out of Los Angeles, had as his mandate simply to provide the material. He was not a military person and in fact was not listened to in any sense, he had wanted to set up American Forces Network to go onto the Continent, right after the invasion, and Eisenhower overruled him and made it a joint operation with the BBC. So he had no military standing and was not consulted in any way.

CK: What kinds of programming did he have?

LS: Well, OK, I'm sorry, I keep assuming people know. (Laughs.) I don't know if you heard (discusses NPR show on Armed Forces propaganda in Vietnam. We talk about that for a while.)

In all honesty I have grave reservations about what they said vis a vis Armed Forces radio and television and censorship. They claim that Armed Forces radio and television in Vietnam was heavily censored. To the extent that...the military command and even the embassy did try to

do this I'm not going to question it. Armed Forces radio and television itself did not censor its programs. It was from the outside. To the layman that may be a very insignificant distinction. But if I'm writing a history of Armed Forces radio and television and I say they never have censored their own programs except for military needs, that's not the same thing as to say the U.S. Government may not have insisted. The U.S. Government owns it. You go back - Edward R. Murrow, who everyone thinks is a good liberal, when he ran the USIA, got President Kennedy and MacNamara to approve five-minute propaganda broadcasts every day on Armed Forces radio and television. Propaganda is certainly against the 40-year-old mission of Armed Forces radio and television, but if the President of the United States says you do it, you do it.

Back to your question however. From the very beginning, this is in June, July, August of '42, Armed Forces Radio broadcast without advertisements, they put in their own, ultimately, their own spot announcements. Broadcast all the leading American radio shows from the networks, they had arrangements with each of the networks. Took the top shows off, took the ads out, put in spot announcements, for help, whatever, information, and then these were put on discs and sent overseas to wherever there was a station. There were ultimately two to three hundred, something like that. They also, and this is I suppose an anomaly, produced five or six

or seven or eight of their own programs out of their own headquarters using the top Hollywood and New York radio entertainers. They had writers who would write the scripts and then they would call up and get entertainers, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, whatever, they'd come in and do the shows, and these would be sent out also.

I say it's an anomaly because the mission was to provide troops overseas with, and it still is, the same information, entertainment, as they get back home. And since these programs that they produced were not available at all to the domestic audience, they - it goes against their prime mission, but since they could get 'em at all they decided to produce these shows. But these were standard entertainment shows, they were not ...I would say they were not propaganda.

Some of the shows they did put together were education, information, you know, "know your enemy" sort of thing. Which I suppose you could argue border on propaganda. But it was General George Marshall who set up Armed Forces Radio, same thing that set up the Frank Capra film unit, to provide education and information. Capra's films are clearly propaganda. There were undoubtedly shows saying the enemy is bad, you gotta fight, etc. etc. But whatever jamming is done, and I really have no information about that, the point of Marshall is to provide your own version of events, and your own things, and that will take care of

itself. And to the extent that it was, I always say a necessary war rather than a good war, there wasn't much need to present out and out propaganda. There were very few people that were going to be at all susceptible to Tokyo Rose and Axis Sally. We think that's a primary thing. By first showing them the "Why We Fight" series in basic training, and then giving them the programming over Armed Forces radio, I don't think there was ever much need to jam.

CK: A lot of jamming would be - well, not jamming, but there would be a lot of contradictory news, because the Japanese would be telling them about military losses at sea, and...in fact there was one ship...I interviewed a veteran who said his ship was sunk three times by the Japanese according to the radio.

LS: Well, on this Vietnam program, for what it's worth, they... even the soldiers who knew that the war was wrong, said that Hanoi Hannah had very little impact on them despite her very extensive propaganda.

CK: (I ask for a lead for a historian or a source for Signal Corps.) (He tells me the Signal Corps has probably been defunct since the 1960s.)

LS: During the war the Signal Corps did on occasion provide equipment and set up generators for Armed Forces Radio, they did that particularly in England in '43. They set up the original transmitters because initially Armed Forces Radio did not have that expertise. By '43, early '44

they started to train their own people to take little stations out in the Pacific.

I think, my empirical conclusion, is that they never really worried about Axis Sally or Tokyo Rose, particularly Tokyo Rose, that... it wasn't like in Europe or even in Vietnam where there was an opportunity for the soldiers to desert, you know, you landed on an island and you took the island and the Japanese were gone. And so there was really no concern about that. And if they - to the extent that they listened to her, it was one, to laugh, and two, simply for the music. The more Armed Forces radio went on, with all the stars that they had, and the baseball games and whatever else they could do with short wave broadcast, that Axis Sally and Tokyo Rose had rather a small audience. My guess is they didn't even think it was worth the effort.

CK: (I ask him how he came to write the book)

LS: I had a contract with the Armed Forces Radio and Television to write their history. Armed Forces Radio and Television Service is one of the components of American Forces Information Service, which also does "Yank" and "Stars and Stripes." There is an overall head for each of these organizations and I was essentially contracted to the deputy director of Armed Forces Information.

CK: Is that part of USIA?

LS: Armed Forces Information has never been involved with Voice of America or USIA, except in Europe they use

some of the same transmitter towers. Conversely VOA and USIA were very anxious to get on Armed Forces Radio and Television because of what they call their shadow audience, eastern Europe, and they had a very large audience. The USIA and Edward R. Murrow had this idea that since no one was listening to the Voice of America, because it was propaganda, they could put in their two five-minute programs a day which they did for three or four or five years.

CK: Is it still propaganda?

LS: No, when Nixon came in one of the first things he did was eliminate these two programs. What was happening was USIA was writing the...writing...I don't remember, it's not a secret, I just don't remember how the material was delivered, I believe it was delivered in script to the short wave people who had to then put it on the air. And the gentleman who ran the Armed Forces Information Service at the time said it was sometimes so badly written they had to rewrite it to make it even understandable, and they were adamantly opposed to these programs. But as I said, if the President and the Secretary of Defense and the Director of the USIA mandate it, you do it. But it was taken off the air I think in '69, something like that, not any sooner, I think it was under Nixon. The Armed Forces Radio and Television Service as far as possible sees itself as a broadcast network, world-wide, totally free of propaganda, and there were always controversies in Vietnam about the



news. If you see "Good Morning Vietnam" there was an indication of censorship -

CK: There certainly was. It was stated.

LS: They were wrong. That movie bears no resemblance to Armed Forces Radio and Television in Vietnam.

CK: I'm glad to hear it.

LS: I've written a book on the image of the military in Hollywood war movies. From that point of view, it is a bad movie, it is inaccurate, etc. etc. But there were contentions by young troops - the current director of Armed Forces Information on one of these tapes said he never heard of one of the major incidents where a broadcaster got on and said he was censored.

(Talks about today's Armed Forces R-TV programming - that it's exactly what you get here and that it's pre-recorded with their own spot announcements.)

(Talks about Tom Lewis's group of writers not being connected with Armed Forces policy, but writing because they were drafted to do so. Said Tom Lewis was made the Commander of Armed Forces Radio and reported to General Osborne, same as Frank Capra.)

The military believe they win the war with bullets, I will always argue that it's the support agencies that win or lose a war. Now Tom Lewis himself and his boys often implied they won the war because they boosted morale. Well, we would have won the war without them, to be sure,

and probably won it at exactly the same time, however it made the conditions of the men more enjoyable to the extent that they heard music and entertainment from home. Their biggest job was right after the war, the transition from war to peace, where they had special programming that they'd already put together, one to help prepare the troops for occupation and two, to explain to them how they would be rotated back home and what their benefits would be and all that. That was the information side of it. And I've always indicated that if Edward R. Murrow, for example, had been given control of the Armed Forces Radio at the beginning of the war, it would have been purely education, information and news. It happened that they brought in Tom Lewis who was an advertising man, who decided that the way to create an audience was to bribe them with entertainment and then you will slip in the message. So that was a basic policy and philosophic decision.

(Talks about before the war, when all the radio programs were put together by ad agencies and then sold to the networks.) Armed Forces Radio had its beginnings in Kodiak, Alaska at the end of 1941. In fact it was unofficial but it became part of Armed Forces Radio in the middle of 1942. In fact the first station was in Panama in 1940. And by that I mean military radio stations which were created purely to relieve the boredom of troops in the field. And they were spontaneously created by the men

themselves. General Marshall brought in Capra and Tom Lewis, not in response to Tokyo Rose, because when this was started the troops with a few exceptions were not fighting. There were troops in Guadalcanal, and they were fighting in Wake Island. But the idea was domestic. Domestic in the sense of "whatever they throw at us this is what were going to do." It wasn't a reaction to Tokyo Rose that Armed Forces Radio was created. If you - see you go back, and ... there had been studies during and after World War I, about the morale of the troops. And the bottom line conclusion was that in the next war the United States Army should provide its own entertainment-recreation internally, not rely on the Red Cross, the neighboring Knights of Columbus, Salvation Army, whatever. So that this idea of providing your own entertainment...was not in reaction to the efforts of Tokyo Rose. That's another reason why I say that Lewis would have nothing to do with jamming. Besides they were probably arrogant enough to believe that their programs were so much better no one would listen to anyone else.

CK: Right.

LS: And they were. Command Performance, which was their weekly program, which started before Armed Forces Radio and Television, in March of '42 before it was taken over in August, was probably the greatest radio program ever put together.

CK: Command Performance?

LS: Command Performance. Because they had access to every entertainer, no advertiser could afford all the stars that they brought in, and besides, the individual advertisers tied up - one would have Bob Hope and one would have Bing Crosby, so you couldn't put them on the air at the same time.

CK: Who produced it?

LS: It was Armed Forces Radio.

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