This is a short history of Cape Hatteras Radio Direction Finder station, NDW.

I was a member of the Coast Guard crew that took over operation of the station from the Navy in 1941. Cape Hatteras Radio was located about two miles north of the famous Cape Hatteras Lighthouse.

In those early days of radio the Navy selected Cape Hatteras as the location for a traffic station.

As years passed, radio equipment for ship to shore communications was improved. Cape Hatteras Radio was discontinued by the Navy as a traffic station.

Radio direction finders were developed and became an important aid to navigation. The Navy then installed the direction finder equipment.

Cape Hatteras D/F (NDW) was a control station for the group which included Virginia Beach D/F (NCE) to the north and Cape Lookout D/F (NAN) to the south.

There was no commercial electric power on the Outer Banks.

Cape Hatteras Radio had two, horizontal Fairbanks/Morse diesel engines, each engine was single cylinder with two flywheels. The flywheels were five feet in diameter.

Each engine had a belt drive to its DC generator.

There were two banks of batteries, one bank being discharged while the second bank was in use.

When the weather was bad and visibility limited around the Cape, the transmitter was on continuously, and the diesel would run 24 hours per day for several days.

All the radio equipment, lighting, refrigeration on the station were powered from the batteries.

A motor/generator supplied power to the transmitter.

The transmitter was an MOPA, 200 watt, shipboard model (Western Electric?).

The D/F receiver was a large desk model, which tuned from about 100 kc thru the broadcast band. It was a sensitive and smooth operating receiver.

There was also a rack mounted National HRO receiver with speaker to keep continuous watch on 500 kc.

DC voltage to the receiver plates was supplied by the 120 VDC station voltage.

The radioman in charge had a small apartment on the second floor of the barracks building.

Each of the four watch standers had his own room on the first floor.

The cook also had his own room.

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Water for drinking and cooking was rain water collected in two cisterns. The cook used a “pitcher pump” in the galley to bring water up from the cisterns.

The water tank on the tower supplied water for sanitation and most important, for fire protection. We were our own fire department and had frequent fire drills.

A one cylinder, make and break, gas engine had a belt drive to the pump to get the well water up into the tank.

Before WW II and radio silence we enjoyed working the ships in the coastwise shipping lanes as they approached the Cape, sailed by Diamond Shoals and continued on their voyages. Many were repeat “customers”.

After the German submarines started to attack Allied shipping along the coast we were deluged with distress traffic.

The nearby torpedo attacks could be heard and the windows of the buildings on the station would rattle. It was a sad sight to see the black smoke out on the horizon from a drifting, burning vessel which had been torpedoed.

Cape Hatteras became known as “Torpedo Junction”.

After WW II and the development of loran the D/F stations were considered obsolete and were discontinued.

After removal of radio equipment the Cape Hatteras Radio Station was sold to a civilian physician. He maintained a medical there for a short time.

On a trip to Cape Hatteras in 1966 I looked for the station. All the buildings had been destroyed. The sand had drifted and covered all concrete foundations. All evidence of the old radio station had disappeared.

An important era for coastwise shipping communications and aids to navigation has come to an end.

I was stationed at NM, 1941-42-43.

EDITOR’S NOTE:

DR. KENNETH RATHBON who now lives in South Miami Beach Fla. took these pictures while assigned “NM” back in 1942. He was assigned this Hatteras facility for about 3 years. This was during the most active period of U-BOAT sinkings at or near “TORPEDO JUNCTION” as Cape Hatteras was called. Pictured is wreckage washed up on the Hatteras Beaches. This was result of submarine warfare before the United States formed convoys to be protected by escort vessels.