With the Boys Overseas: radio listening during World War II and New Zealand's first broadcast war correspondents

The following is a transcript of a talk given by Sarah Johnston and recorded live on Zoom on 1 June 2022. A question and answer session that followed the talk is also included.

Transcript

Sarah Burgess: Kia ora, and welcome to the New Zealand History podcast channel, where you'll find talks on Aotearoa New Zealand history, culture and society. These talks are organised by Manatū Taonga, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage with the support of the Alexander Turnbull Library. They're recorded live either via Zoom or in person at Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, the National Library of New Zealand.

Steve Watters: Kia ora tātou katoa. Ko Steve Watters toku ingoa. I'd like to thank you all for joining us this afternoon. These sessions have proven to be really fantastic this year, and I'm sure this afternoon we're in for another absolute treat as we continue with our series of Public History Talks, our collaboration between the Alexander Turnbull Library and Manatū Taonga.

I'm sure today's presenter sound historian Sarah Johnston is a very familiar voice to many of you. A former radio journalist, broadcaster and sound archivist, Sarah is passionate about sharing the sounds of our past. In 2021, she was the recipient of a grant from Whiria Te Mahara New Zealand History Grants and the Judith Binney Trust to research and write about the New Zealand, about New Zealand radio during World War Two more of which you can read about in her current, about her current work on the blog, 'World War Voices'.

In the 1940s radio played a central role in the life of the New Zealand household as a source of news and entertainment. Sarah's researching radio during this era and is exploring the role of our first radio war correspondents during this period, who travelled with the New Zealand forces in North Africa, the Middle East, Italy and the Pacific as mobile broadcasting units. Today she will talk about her research including the way demand from listeners back home shaped the work of the broadcasting units. Her talk will include archive radio recordings from the era, courtesy of Radio New Zealand and Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision. So at this stage, I'd like to hand over to Sarah.

Sarah Johnston: Kia ora koutou kātoa – ka nui te mihi ki a koutou. Thank you for joining us today. Ko Sarah Johnston toku ingoa. He uri ō Ngāti Rākaipaaka, Ngāti Kahungunu me Ngāti Pākehā ahau, coming to you from Ōtautahi, Christchurch, which is my hometown. And thank you for coming along wherever you are.

What I might just launch into really is just a quick bit of background about the mobile broadcasting units. I have talked a little bit over the past year - 18 months on RNZ and other and a few other platforms about this project. But in case it's brand new to you, the New Zealand broadcasting units during World War Two were operated by the National Broadcasting Service. So that was a forerunner of RNZ, and radio in New Zealand began in the 1920s. It was largely nationalised by the first Labour government in the 1930s. And by 1940 85% of households had a radio.

So I just want to quickly thank, as Steve mentioned, these organisations for their support of this project. The funding I received last year really helped get it off the ground and Ngā Taonga and RNZ have been ongoing in their support and thank you, of course to our hosts today.

So radio listening during World War Two, 85% of households had a radio, the National Broadcasting Service, the sort of proto RNZ had 16 stations. And then there was also a commercial network which was set up in 1936 and they had four stations, the ZB stations in the main centres. But the output of the mobile broadcasting units, at this stage in my research, I feel it was largely confined to the National Broadcasting Service, it doesn't appear to have been used as much on the ZB stations. The listenership, radio listenership in New Zealand was really significant. The proportion of radio licences to our population was higher in New Zealand in 1940 than any other country in the British Empire. And we were third in the world in radio ownership behind Denmark and Sweden.

So radio was a dominant medium at this time, a source of entertainment in the household primarily but the war saw it becoming increasingly important as a source of news, especially from overseas. Many people had the large shortwave capable radios, which allowed you to tune into the BBC and other shortwave broadcasters and hear the war, the war news direct. And this was, this meant that the mobile unit, some of their reports were broadcast by the BBC shortwave and that was a huge leap forward in immediacy for New Zealand radio listeners. You could hear a New Zealand reporter on the other side of the world, talking about what the New Zealand Division were doing, sometimes within 24 hours, 48 hours of that action taking place. So that was a really big leap forward.

The broadcasting unit was a small team, the one, one team was only two members. The larger one was three or four staff depending on the different periods of time. They were all employees of the NBS and the first unit went to Egypt, North Africa, the Middle East, and then in 1943, it moved across to Italy, and a second unit went to the Pacific that same year. They were embedded in the army, the men, they were all men, the broadcasters who went. They were subject to military discipline and censorship.

They wore uniforms, they had the rank of officers, but they remained the employees of the Broadcasting Service, which continued to pay their salaries. When they went overseas, their position titles were, were either commentators or engineers, the role of a radio journalist or a reporter, really didn't exist.

It was very early days of, of radio journalism at this point. There was some crossover though by the staff out of necessity. There are some examples of radio engineers doing some on air work. And the role of commentator they actually changed and started calling themselves war correspondents within the first year of arriving in Egypt. And I think that's indicative of how their perception of their work changed.

So the first unit sailed from New Zealand in August 1940, with the third echelon of New Zealand forces, and the intention in sending it was very broad. It was to maintain the morale of the troops in the nation by keeping New Zealanders in touch with their men overseas. Those were the words of the director of the National Broadcasting Service, James Shelley, and his proposal to the government to send this unit overseas. They were tasked with making disc recordings of New Zealanders and the activities they were taking part in as their part of the war effort and those were going to be sent back here for broadcast on radio. So discs were the sound recording medium of the time. After the war in the late 1940s, early 1950s, they were replaced increasingly by a magnetic tape. But the broadcasting units were taking this disc recording technology into a new field.

Radio broadcasting had had never been to war before and there seems to have been some degree of uncertainty on all sides as exactly how this was going to work. The unit arrived in Maadi camp on the outskirts of Cairo in Egypt in October 1940. And the men discovered that the military authorities had

not been notified, in fact, that they were coming. In fact, the unit's officer in charge who was engineer, Noel Palmer, he recalled the greeting they received from, from the military authorities at Maadi was 'Good God, whatever they're going to send us next'.

So the New Zealand unit had sailed for Egypt equipped with a specially-built 16-foot long recording caravan body. This was built out of kauri, by the Petone railway workshops and it was kitted out by NBS engineers. Eventually, it would be mounted on the back of a truck chassis, but the chassis they had ordered from Britain didn't arrive at Maadi until some eight months later in July 1941. And eventually, when it did, and they mounted the caravan on the back, they found it was a bit too cumbersome and slow for travelling the long distances and often long distances at speed, which were required to keep up with the New Zealand Division once it started moving through North Africa and the Middle East. So increasingly, the unit ended up using a car which they purchased in Egypt, and sometimes they used smaller, faster trucks which they borrowed from the army. They also had army drivers, and they used these to carry portable disk recorders. The caravan and the truck, which they named Esmeralda (which I rather like) that, they remained at Maadi largely and was used as a studio for editing although they did actually make some trips to Palestine and Syria using the truck.

Once they arrived in Egypt, they - even though that was only October - they still, they had to start thinking about content for a special Christmas day broadcast. This was because the discs they recorded could take several weeks to make their way back to New Zealand by air and by sea. And because they were quite limited in terms of travel - they didn't yet have this truck chassis and they didn't have their car - they recorded some messages home from New Zealanders to help fill the programme. General Bernard Freyburg, the commander of the 2NZDF came to listen to the Christmas programme before

the discs were sent home. The unit noted how much he disliked publicity generally, but he appeared to be quite pleased with their work and he agreed to record a Christmas greeting himself for radio listeners. So to give you a feel of the early work, this is the opening of the Christmas 1940 programme, and it's introduced by the unit's first commentator announcer Doug Laurenson.

Doug Laurenson: Christmas Day 1940. And over here on the other side of the world, many thousands of miles away from you at home, there are New Zealanders serving throughout the whole of the Middle East command. A way out in the western desert, men from your town, possibly from your own household, are serving in the outpost of our territory, and on the lines of communication leading up to the front. Scattered along the Nile Valley you will find other New Zealanders, many of whom have come down from the line for a well-earned rest.

Over in Palestine, where the first Christmas Day was celebrated nearly 2000 years ago, you will see the familiar peaked hat of our men. On the Mediterranean sail the ships of the Royal Navy and there is hardly a ship out there that does not carry at least one naval rating who hails from New Zealand. And up above, the machines of the Royal Airforce fly overhead and at the controls, at the navigating or wireless instruments, or in the air gunners cockpit, you'll find many a young man who now knows the Middle East as once he knew Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin and scores of other New Zealand towns.

And so today New Zealanders from the three fighting services, army, navy and air force, combine to send to you at home, the best of Christmas wishes, from us all. And now from Alexandria, on the shores of the Mediterranean, we hear a greeting from a New Zealander serving with the Royal Navy.

Sarah Johnston: One of their first major broadcasts sounded – I just remembered I meant to say in my introduction, that of course this presentation does contain voices of people who have passed away. So I would like to pay tribute to all the people that were hear today and also to all the radio broadcasters and archivists who cared for these recordings over the past 80 years and made it possible for us to hear these taonga today.

So that was Doug Laurenson in Christmas 1940 and the reception to that programme was very favourable, the *Listener* magazine the next month in January 1941 noted 'for most listeners the Christmas morning broadcast of personal messages from New Zealand soldiers in Egypt was the highlight of the work of the overseas broadcasting unit. By far the most popular job they do was the personal messages feature. Popular with mothers, wives and sweethearts who are able to hear in the familiar surroundings of their own homes, the voices of boys who have been away from home for months.'

So they had begun this new programme to give airtime to the mobile unit's output. It was two week night sessions, but they quickly discovered this was not going to meet listener demand. By February 1941, this had expanded and they'd created this new dedicated hour-long programme on Sunday mornings called 'With the boys overseas'. And this would feature recordings from the mobile unit in Egypt, as well as material that the BBC supplied recorded from New Zealanders who were based in England.

So the messages home were generally only about 30 seconds long. The men who were going to speak were chosen by ballot by their units, there was nothing to do with the broadcasters who actually got to speak and they had to write out their message and submit it for checking by sensors or by the officers before it was recorded. They couldn't mention any place names or any action they were involved in that might be of advantage to the enemy if they were listening in. Generally I think the message was probably expected to be fairly upbeat, fairly reassuring for listeners at home. So this means they all tend to sound fairly generic. 'With the boys overseas' was supplied on these discs and then it was edited once it got back in Wellington.

There are no surviving recordings of the full compiled programme as it was broadcast in New Zealand, but we can get a good idea of how it sounded by listening to its components. So first of all, there's the theme music. It took, they used a newly popular song of the war, 'We are the boys from way down under', also sometimes called 'Sons of the Anzacs. Here's a little burst of it performed by the Trentham Army Band.

Trentham Army Band: [singing]

Sarah Johnston: That was the theme music and then initially in the first few programmes, the men who recorded a greeting were able to request a song, and then that piece of music would be edited into the programme back in Wellington. So, here are two typical greetings from that era. These are from November 1940. The man you're hear introduced this song requests but we don't actually hear the music.

Doug Laurenson: This time Alan Sutherland of Christchurch has a call and a special request.

Alan Sutherland: Well, this is a message for me to the mum and dad at 25 Peel Street, St Andrews Square, Christchurch. You have been writing a lot about green peas and new potatoes and prime Canterbury and it wouldn't be a bad idea if you're able to send the lads over here a few samples as we have almost forgotten what lamb and mint sauce tastes like. After being up in the desert for the last few months it was just okay to get a decent bath while on holiday in Palestine.

However, cheerio to Jack and Nelson at Greymouth and I hope that dad has given you plenty of hints for the garden. Cheerio also to Bruce at the Ranfurly post office. I hope you are behaving yourself. Best regards to 13 Seaview Terrace, Tīmaru and I still have the pipes in good working order. So here is my favourite tune, 'Highland laddie'.

Doug Laurenson: And here we have Jimmy Spencer from Rotorua.

Jimmy Spencer: And I'm calling 69 [unclear] Street, Ponsonby. How am I doing Nell? Pretty good as a radio announcer, aye? I've fully recovered now and quite fit, so don't worry about me. My love to yourself and the folks at home. And just a word or two to the folks in Rotorua: no fishing over in these parts friends, not so good. But we can take it. So long just now, I'll be seeing you. Oh, and by the way, I hope you liked the song I picked out for you. It's 'Eb Tide'. So I hope you enjoy it.

Sarah Johnston: So the content of those messages. It doesn't really say very much. It's a greeting. It's a few little generic kind of comments. And those two, those two speakers were particularly relaxed and chatty. You know, the messages from some men are very stilted. They're quite tongue tied. They've got

microphone fright, and some of them literally reading their messages. But the NBS learned it was not really the content of the messages that mattered so much.

It could take several weeks for a disk to arrive in Wellington, as I said, and one of the first tasks that they had to do in Wellington was to check the list of the names of the men who'd been recorded against the lists of men who had been killed or missing in action, were missing in action at Army Headquarters. Broadcaster Peter Harcourt was in charge of checking those lists of men and of compiling the programme to go to air. He was based in Wellington. He later wrote about his work during the war, saying he came to realise that was not what was said, but the sound of the voice itself that really mattered.

He also had the task of contacting the families of the deceased men to tell them that a recording of their loved one existed. It would in most cases it would not be played on air. But the family were invited to come and listen to it in private at their local radio station. And dealing with so many grief stricken families took quite an emotional toll on him. His story was powerfully told by his daughter, the actor and filmmaker Miranda Harcourt in her 1996 short film 'Voice over' and you can watch that on NZ On Screen. I'll share the link with that later on.

I think it's hard for us today, you know we're so hyper connected via the Internet and telephones to appreciate the impact of hearing these voices and what it must have meant for families back home when your only other means of contact was a letter, or very occasionally and at great expense or telegram. And when this might be the only time or the last time that you would ever hear that beloved voice, it makes these recordings incredibly poignant. So Doug Laurenson, the first commentator with

the unit, he recalled the poignancy of these messages, and occasionally the light, the odd light moment. This is from a radio interview he recorded on his retirement in 1964.

Doug Laurenson: In Egypt I travelled the length and the breadth of the country and the desert, not only collecting dispatches and odd programmes, but recording those messages home broadcasts, which were played back in New Zealand on Sunday mornings. Remember them? I shall never forget those long, long lines of troops stretching across the blazing sands. All intent on what they were going to say in the precious minutes of broadcasting time. Hello, mum. How are you? Are you there love, I'm feeling as fit as a fiddle. How are you son? Being a good boy and looking after mummy, that's the chap, keep it up. And by way of comic relief, because basically, there was an infinite sadness in these pitifully brief messages, I'll never forget the bloke who called of all things Old Blossom, the pride of his dairy herd. How are you old girl, he called cheerfully. Keep at it Blossom and don't let up. Mum's written and told me that you're still milking on all four cylinders. Bless your honest Jersey heart.

Sarah Johnston: So I would love to say that I'm now going to play that recording of the message to the cow. But we don't have that. As I increasingly research these recordings, it's clear that at least a third, possibly as much as a half, I don't know at this stage of all the discs they recorded did not survive. There's various reasons for that which I could go on into. A lot of it's still speculation by me, I need to confirm it. But we do know that, due to the shortage of aluminium, which was the core centre of these discs that they were using, there was wartime shortage of aluminium. A lot of disks had to be reused or sent back to the manufacturer to be recoated and reused. So I'm assuming that many discs after broadcast were reused that way and the messages were lost.

The music request part of the programme was quickly dropped in favour of being able to fit in more messages from more men as the programme became appointment listening. It was repeated on Tuesday nights, but by May 1941, the *Listener* published an article which has a slightly desparate tone to it, I think, reading between the lines. This was a quote 'no single feature ever presented by radio in New Zealand has been the cause of so many letters to the NBS as the Sunday morning programme 'With the boys overseas'. Mothers, sisters, sweethearts, cousins, wives and friends have been writing to the service for repetitions of messages, enquiring for further details or offering appreciation of the programme. So many letters in fact that if the volume continues, extra members of staff may be required to cater for them.'

So it became a bit of a runaway train for the Broadcasting Service. People wanted to know why their loved one hadn't been recorded and if he had and they had missed it, how they could hear it again, it was just a bit of a logistics nightmare. Noel Palmer, the initial head of the unit, later recalled that it was a case of a spinoff, which was initially imagined as something of a sideline. But once it started, it became a roaring success. In an attempt to make sure that people would hear the messages, every week they would read out the list of the names of the men who would be heard in that week's programme that would be read out ahead of time to give listeners time to notify their friends and family that they should tune in.

The public demand meant that the unit's broadcasters had to split their work. One person focused on recording messages to keep up this continual flow of discs back to New Zealand, while another tried to cover the activities of the New Zealand Division. Announcer Doug Laurenson, who we've heard, left the unit in July 1941 to work with British Forces Radio in Cairo, and he was replaced by Arch Curry. He was

a seasoned Christchurch NBS announcer and he would make a name for himself with his coverage of the war. And I think more than anyone he's entitled to be called our first broadcast war correspondent. He arrived in Egypt in October 1941 and soon found himself out in the Western Desert covering the Crusader Offensive.

Arch produced some really first class reports on fighting around to Tobruk and later Alamein, and many of these were carried by the BBC and were heard back in New Zealand that way. But the unit also had to keep feeding this demand for greetings and it wasn't possible to arrange to record men unless they were away from the front lines.

So as the fighting moved further and further away from Cairo, heading west into Libya, this meant continual long trips back and forth over the desert between Maadi and the forward areas. The correspondence I've read from the unit shows that they were operating almost as a tag team, one group's out in the desert, one's back processing messages in camp and then they swap over. The unit's Ford Mercury sedan car racked up over 80,000 miles and wore through three engines during its two and a half years in North Africa, with all this desert travel. And then they took it to Italy and it managed to go through another two engines in Italy.

The National Broadcasting Service Director James Shelley wrote to the mobile unit broadcasters about the messages. He said, we quite realise the pressure that must have been brought to bear upon you to have this service instituted. And we would say quite frankly, that of all the matter you are sending us there's nothing of greater goodwill value than these messages. They more than anything else bring home to our listeners here the value of having a broadcasting unit with the troops. At the same time as the service becomes more widely known, we expect there will be more pressure to extend the service

to include a greater number of soldiers. And certainly the pressure for listeners for more messages continued, at one point in January 1942, rumours did the rounds that the New Zealand man had to pay the broadcasters to be able to record a message. A flurry of correspondence backwards and forwards between the NBS and the unit confirming of course that this absolutely wasn't the case.

And then we had Māori communities, they were of course naturally keen to hear recordings of their men. There's letters to newspapers in strongly Māori districts, such as the East Coast, asking for more recordings of the Māori Battalion. There you find small articles and newspapers and Northland, Ōpōtiki, Gisborne, noting when local Māori men had been heard on air, which I think speaks to the strongly communal nature of rural life at this time. They wanted everyone to know that a local man had been heard, that he was okay.

The Honourable Paraire Paikea, who was the Minister responsible for coordinating the Māori war effort, wrote to the Minister of Broadcasting in February 1942, saying he was being inundated with letters from Māori who wanted to hear their men more often. The NBS responded by asking the mobile units to record the Māori Battalion whenever possible. And so they made special broadcasts of the Māori Battalion in concert and managed to include a few messages in those and I think this was their way of trying to meet this demand, but outside of the standard rotation, because of course, they had to get to all the other battalions and units as well.

So I'll just play here a recording of a wartime waiata, it's 'Aue mama aue papa', made by the mobile unit at a YMCA concert in Egypt on Christmas day in 1940. The main body of the Māori Battalion was still in England at this time so these performers were most likely an advanced party or perhaps they are Māori men who were serving in other units and were already in Egypt.

[Māori men singing]

So recording's like that one helped meet some of the Māori listener demand for more content from their men in the Middle East. But as I said, the trick was the unit could only record men when they were nearby, and they had to make sure they covered everybody in rotation, so it was an ongoing juggling act. Messages home in te reo Māori were subjected to the same censorship as those in English and the censoring was carried out by a Māori officer who spoke te reo and who also understood the restrictions of wartime broadcasting. In many cases, this would have been Charles Bennett of Te Arawa, who had also been a broadcaster with the NBS before the war. Captain Bennett, who eventually became commander of the Māori Battalion, and was then knighted after the war was recorded several times by the mobile unit, reporting on the battalion's actions, and he was also used by the BBC in broadcasts from England when the Māori Battalion was there.

In late 1944, by now Lieutenant Colonel Charles Bennett was interviewed for the *Listener* while he was recuperating from some wounds received in North Africa. And he commented on the work of the broadcasting unit, and the significance of being able to send these messages home for his men. He said, and this is a quote, 'it means a good deal for Māori soldiers to be able to speak to their people more I think, than it does to Pākehā troops'. Bennett went on to observe that Māori soldiers themselves chose the man who would make the recordings and would speak on behalf of their unit, and that this was often done along tribal lines. He explained that the messages home were highly valued by his people because they were a continuation of Māori oral traditions. He said, 'As far back as traditions go, we've been moved by the human voice. We don't write our thoughts, we utter them. Broadcasting makes our past live again.'

I don't feel that the significance that the Māori broadcasts carried for the audience and for the speakers themselves was really understood or appreciated by the broadcasting unit at the time, sadly. The requirements of Pākehā culture were absolutely dominant in broadcasting during this era. So here's the part of one of Charles Bennett's own messages home from January 1942, and rather than a personal greeting to his whānau, he addresses Sir Apirana Ngata and Ngāti Porou and offers them condolences on the loss of C Company officers who had died fighting in Libya, late in 1941.

Charles Bennett: E Api, tēnā koe i a Ngāti Porou, hoatu te aroha me te tangi ki a Ngāti Porou nui tonu. Kāhore taea te kōrero a te toa me te manawanui o ā koutou tamariki mokopuna. Kōre rawa i wehi, kore rawa i hoki whakamuri. Ngā mea i hinga, i hinga whakamua, te hinga rangatira, te hinga a ō tātou tūpuna. Te aroha, ngā tangi kei ngā pouaru, kei ngā pani. Haere Pare, haere kōrua ko John Green me tā kōrua whānau. Kāhore he aroha i nui atu i tēnā, kia tuku koutou i a koutou kia mate mō te iwi, mō te ao. Haere ki te Atua.

Sarah Johnston: So recordings like that one of the Māori Battalion were actually my introduction to the World War Two mobile unit collection, this is back in 2012. I had just started working for the RNZ sound archives, and we were helping the Ministry for Culture and Heritage and Dr Monty Soutar identify content for the Maori Battalion website. Almost all of the broadcasting unit's recordings of the battalion are available to listen to on the website. If you go to the media library, you can hear that one by Charles Bennett in full and many others. It's a fantastic resource.

Positive response from the public, perhaps the overwhelmingly positive response from the public to the material the Middle Eastern unit producing means in March 1943, the Minister of Broadcasting announced a second unit would be sent into the Pacific with the New Zealand Third Division. So this

was the smaller team. They'd learnt from the Middle East experience it was much better to travel light, so just two men went. Vivian Spencer was the commentator/correspondent and Don Cameron was the engineer and they took portable Presto disk recorders with them.

Recording very much similar material as the Middle East unit, they were based in New Caledonia, they travelled widely through the western Pacific lugging this heavy equipment through the Solomon Islands up to places like Bougainville, Buka, Nissan Island, which was part of New Guinea, wherever New Zealanders were fighting. They even recorded New Zealand troops in Fiji and then actually recorded some of the Fiji battalion in the Solomon Islands and sent that back for broadcasting in Suva.

With the two mobile units now sending discs back, the NBS added further airtime to this output. There was another addition of 'With the boys overseas' dedicated to Pacific messages. And for about a year, at its height, the mobile units were filling somewhere between six and eight hours a week of airtime, although some of it was those repeat broadcasts on Tuesday nights. And the NBS, of course, by now had realised that hearing the voices of the men themselves was what was of prime importance to their audience. And they made a conscious effort to get the Pacific unit as far forward to the men who were doing the fighting, as far as it was safe to do so. Don Cameron and Viv Spencer travelled in barges around the remote Treasury Islands in the Solomon Islands in October and November 1943. And that was while the territory was still being secured from Japanese forces. Here's just a quick example of two messages from the Pacific just to show that pretty much the messages are what we're very similar sort of flavour.

Vivian Spencer: Next message from Reg Clarkson goes to Auckland.

Reg Clarkson: Calling on the Clarksons, Mum, Paul, Joyce, Peter, Gloria, Claude, Albie and Lois. I hope you're all well and looking after those fellows of mine. Calling all my friends at the Auckland Motorcycle Club, I'm looking forward to a reunion before long and some more good riding together. I'm doing pretty well, have gained some weight and also a good tan but have yet to discover the romance of the islands we are told about. Cheerio all.

Vivian Spencer: Ken Mex calling Mairangi Bay, Auckland.

Ken Mex: Hello to Mum and Dad at Mairangi Bay. Hope you are both well. This is Ken calling from the swinging palms. If you are listening, Catherine, keep your chin up honey. And I still think you're the swellist little lady. My regards to your dad in Epsom. Hello Marian, Jim and Barry and the two Bettys I know, with Keith, and Avril, Peter John. All the best, cheerio.

Sarah Johnston: While the Pacific unit was an action, the Maadi broadcasters were on the move. Their two original engineers were furloughed back to New Zealand in late '43. And commentator Arch Curry and three new staff made their way through Italy as the New Zealand Division moved up through Italy in that campaign. I haven't spoken a lot and as I said, there isn't going to be time to talk about the other material the unit produced beside the messages. But yes, it can be divided really into kind of three categories, I feel.

There's Arch Curry, largely it was Arch Curry, who was producing these news reports or action dispatches, as they were called in the day, which were broadcast by the BBC, there were the interviews with service personnel about their role in the war. And this was everybody from officers, generals

through to guys who are working in the army postal service or working in the kitchens. And it included a few nurses, we do get to hear a few women, not many, but it was very much with the boys overseas. And then there was also coverage of non-conflict events such as the concerts, the sport matches, medal parades and other social occasions. And they're all fields for further research and I'll be exploring them as the project is ongoing.

So to finish up, I just wanted to talk about how listening to 'With the boys overseas' became such a well-known feature of wartime radio. And I think it can be illustrated by the programme making its way into advertising. Talking about here an advertisement from the *Listener* from 1944. The advertisement is for victory loans which were a government war bond. And the drawing depicts two older parents, mum's with her knitting, dad's got this pipe. They've got one of these fabulous mantelpiece radio sets between them. And they're listening to their boy over the wireless. A copy reads 'that's your boy talking, your boy. Hello, Mum. Hello, Dad, he says with all the love in the world and the proud, cheery greeting just for a moment obliterates time and distance and stalls troubling fear'.

So I think this is evidence of how 'With the boys overseas', those repetitive messages, repetitive though they may have been really worked their way into the national consciousness. Journalist Alan Mulgen, who was the Broadcasting Service Director of Talks during the war. He called the messages home 'our most personal intimate service'. So Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision are digitising the 1,600 of surviving discs that the mobile units recorded. Many of them can be listened to already online. If you want to hear more, you can head to Ngā Taonga's website. There's also my blog where I just write about aspects of this project and interesting recordings that I come across and put some context around them. And that pretty much wraps things up. So I'm happy to take any questions. Kia ora.

Steve Watters: Kia ora Sarah, that was absolutely fantastic. Absolutely fantastic. And I - just looking at some of the comments in the chat, you know, there's a lot of people talking about how moved they were to hear those voices from the past and just what an incredible project and I think, clearly the making for another talk there. So, no doubt, we'll be in touch again, but yes so as Sarah said, now we've got time for some questions, and just looking in the Q&A at the moment, I've got one here from Troy, who said, I'm sure you've listened to countless recordings, do you have a personal favourite that stands out from the crowd?

Sarah Johnston: That is a tough one. I mean, I think just referring back to what you're saying about how poignant those recordings are, if anyone's in Auckland at the moment at the Navy Museum, they've got a display, featuring the recordings that the mobile unit made in Alexandria of the New Zealand men who were serving on board a Royal Navy vessel, the HMS Neptune, and they were recorded by the unit, literally a month before they were hit by, they hit mines and sunk and were all killed and those are incredibly poignant, because the messages are all like the ones we're heard today. They're all upbeat. They're all you know, oh, it's, we're going great, we'll soon be home. And, you know, with hindsight, it's just you know, unbearably poignant to listen to those. But otherwise, I really enjoy listening to the language that the men use, I mean, there's so many cheerios, cheerio is used all the time, doesn't just mean goodbye, it means hello, how are you? It's, it's a bit like 'kia ora', it's one of these kind of multi purpose greetings, and I find that's really interesting aspect, just the language change. Yeah.

Steve Watters: Fantastic. And I just, when I was listening to you talk about the recordings with 28 Māori Battalion, I just thought I'd quickly mentioned that today, Robert Bom Gillies who's the last surviving member, 97-year-old of the Māori Battalion was, I think will have already have received his knighthood this morning. I know that there was a luncheon for him and there's a reception tonight. And he was only willing to accept that knighthood on the basis that it was basically being awarded to the entire battalion. So quite a nice little bit of, a nice segue there with the fact that as long ago as it seems, we still have those connections with those moments from our past. I've got a technical question here from Emma Jean, who's asking, what were they using for pop socks back then. And I must admit, I don't even know what a pop sock is, so this could be a good learning experience for all of us.

Sarah Johnston: We're in some of the photos, I'm looking at the equivalent of a pop sock right now. And it's a fascinating one. So a pop sock is usually the foam or the fluffy cover to stop the wind noise and try and reduce people's voices popping when they say Ps and Bs can often sound a bit distorted. It looks like a bit of hessian or sacking and it almost looks like it's got a tag or something, looks like a piece of paper. But yeah, I think they used whatever. I'm sure they went off with perfectly respectable Broadcasting Service pop socks, but probably by the end of the war, they're using whatever they could find.

Steve Watters: A bit of kiwi ingenuity. Hey, I've got a question here also from Rosemary, who's asked who's just saying, brilliant, thank you so interesting. Did other countries have a similar concept or have similar broadcasting units?

Sarah Johnston: Yes, that's a really interesting aspect that I'm really keen to explore further. So the BBC, obviously, were forerunners in this field, although only just I mean, the first person to take a microphone into a conflict zone and make reports, did so in late 1939. So not too far ahead of the BBC - of the New Zealand broadcasters. When they got to Egypt, the BBC was there already and they met up with their - he was already a bit of a legend and they seem quite starstruck. They met up with Richard Dimbleby, who was the famous BBC war correspondent, and then the Australians arrived with their unit as well and they all formed an empire broadcasting coordinating committee, because they felt that they could, that way they could have a bit more clout with the military authorities when it came to getting permission to move forward with the forces or record various events. So that's something I'm really keen to explore.

Steve Watters: Fantastic. So I'm just going through the Q&A, that seems to be... There was a lot of luck for the camouflaged - I'm just trying to remember the name of the vehicle. There was a close up photo. And I loved that idea of the kind of way in which we sort of carting things around on the back of a track and all the rest of it. What was the model of the car again, I'm just trying to find -

Sarah Johnston: A Ford Mercury sedan.

Steve Watters: A Ford Mercury, that's right.

Sarah Johnston: Which was purchased at great expense. It was second-hand and apparently cars were very difficult to get hold of and Egypt because of the war, but they - once they finally got permission from Wellington to make this purchase, they eventually got hold of it and they thrashed it, the poor vehicle. By the end of the war, I think in Italy, it had gone through five engines. But yes, that

camouflage in the desert, I've only just discovered that photograph that was uploaded to Online Cenotaph, which is a fantastic resource, Auckland War Memorial Museum, give them a shout out. So they're the entry, that was the entry for one of the drivers so that the mobile unit was assigned army drivers. And two or three of their drivers really became members of the unit, they became incredibly useful and vital to them. One guy in particular seems to have almost become a radio technician, an engineer. And one of the drivers' families that uploaded that photo of him with his prized Mercury, Ford Mercury.

Steve Watters: Fantastic. Just a question in from Roger asking, do the unedited recordings still exist? Or do we only have excerpts from the edited programmes?

Sarah Johnston: No, no, they're absolutely unedited. I mean, I've just edited them down for the presentation today. But yeah, if you go to Ngā Taonga's web catalogue, we've shared a link, created a link to recordings that have online content already and more is being uploaded as they get digitised. You can listen to those and they are, I mean, often, occasionally you will hear the broadcast bit at the start, there's a bit of some recordings that are obviously not for on air, they're just sending messages. The broadcasters themselves have made recordings sending messages back to Wellington, about you know technical issues they're having and did you get our telegram, we need new batteries, pop socks, whatever. So there's a lot of there's a lot of other stuff besides what actually made the, made it on here in New Zealand.

Steve Watters: And Joan was just asking, were there any moving images or moving image recordings done as well or just sound?

Sarah Johnston: There's no ah - well, I won't say there's no. So far I have not found any moving images of the mobile unit in action. So there was the National Film Unit cinematographers were there and they made those those great news reels. And I have come across a newspaper article, which says that Arch Curry of the mobile unit narrated one of - put a soundtrack with his narration to one of the National Film units films, which was made when they first - when they came back from Crete, from the Crete campaign, because the broadcasting unit I should say, didn't - were not allowed to go to Greece and Crete, which was a good thing, because with the evacuation, they would have had to leave all their gear behind and that would have been the end of that. But when the men got back to Egypt from that campaign, there was some footage that a press correspondent had filmed and apparently that was edited together with, I think it's called 'Return to battle' or 'Return to the fray', something like that. And that film reel was narrated by Arch Curry, but I haven't managed to hear it yet. I'm not sure if it's been digitised, I need to get back to Archives New Zealand about that one.

Steve Watters: Okay, we're just about running out of time. But I've just got a couple here. Well, one in particular, just asking if maybe you could say something about the photos that you've found to, kind of I guess, they were really telling part of the presentation as well.

Sarah Johnston: We're so lucky to have those photos. So they largely, I mean, the ones that I credited as being supplied by the families of broadcasters, aside from those, everything's from the Turnbull Library's collections, and they're largely by the official war photographers. And I've discovered that - so the mobile broadcasting unit, the National Film Unit cinematographers, the war photographers, the press correspondents, and Peter McIntyre, the war artist, were all grouped together as the public

relations office, and they all - they tended to hang out together quite a bit. They all shared an apartment once they got to Italy in Naples. And so I think, you know, and I guess it was something a bit different, a bit interesting. It made some good content for a photograph or two and the photographs that really tell a story. And yeah, I'm so grateful for them.

Steve Watters: They're fantastic. Listen, I was just about to sort of wrap up with a few comments, but I want to read something that is in the chats, because I think it sort of sums it up beautifully. And they just, from Emma Jean just pointing out how great it is having someone like you dedicated to exploring and researching these sound recordings. And that Sarah you're a taonga too. So I think most of us would agree, what a great presentation. And as I said at the start, and it's reflected in the comments, also, people are really captured by the, just how moving it is to hear those voices and to capture that experience. So I just like to once again, thank you for making the time to come and present. Certainly in the sort of challenging times of trying to put presentations like this together. So I would just like to take this opportunity to, on behalf of everyone who attended today, Sarah thank you so much for a wonderful presentation.

Sarah Johnston: I feel privileged. I mean, right back from 2012, when I first listened to the recordings of the Māori Battalion with Monty Souter, I was just, I was blown away and I was like, wow, this is an amazing collection and needs more work, it needs more research, it needs to be more widely known. And I'm just really grateful that I'm finally getting to do that work.

Steve Watters: I couldn't agree more.

Sarah Burgess: Thanks for listening to this New Zealand History podcast from Manatū Taonga. Don't forget to subscribe. And if you're looking for other content about New Zealand history, check out earlier talks in the series. You can find them on your favourite podcast channels. Just search for New Zealand history. Mā te wā.