

What's in a name?

Improving access and discoverability in New Zealand's sound archive of World War II radio recordings

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Information in any archive gains validity and mana through knowledge of who imparted that information. When the identity of the informant is obscured or unknown, the archival source is less authoritative and less likely to be used or cited by researchers. This problem is amplified when that archive is stored on an aging medium that is technologically hard to access. In the past, these two obstacles have hindered access to New Zealand's sound archive of World War II radio recordings, recorded in the battle zones of North Africa, the Middle East, Italy and the Pacific between 1940-1945.

The National Broadcasting Service Mobile Units travelled overseas with the New Zealand Division, using portable disc recorders to record the troops. The Mobile Unit broadcasters captured interviews, commentaries on military action, greetings to whānau back home and descriptions of daily life in "The Div." These were cut on 12-inch lacquer discs, which were shipped back to New Zealand for broadcasting on radio. Today, around 1600 of those discs survive in the Radio New Zealand sound archive collection, held in Lower Hutt by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision, the national archive of film, television and sound.



Figure 01 Mobile Unit broadcasters using a portable disc recorder to capture messages from repatriated New Zealand prisoners of war, Helwan, Egypt. From left: Charles Goodwyn Lewis (with recording equipment), John William Proudfoot (holding microphone), Sergeant Harry A. Taituha, Private C.A. Petrie. Photograph taken by George Robert Bull circa 3 November 1943. Ref: DA-03223-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

In my research this year, funded by the Judith Binney Trust and the New Zealand History Research Fund, I am investigating the output of the Mobile Units and the home-front listener response to their broadcasts. I am also attempting to verify the identities of the hundreds of men and a handful of women, recorded on the discs. I am collaborating with Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision, which is providing access to the recordings (which are part of an on-going digitisation project) and Auckland War Memorial Museum, which maintains the comprehensive Online Cenotaph database of military service personnel. I am sharing my findings with both institutions to enhance discoverability of this collection and hopefully, facilitate greater use of New Zealand's World War II sound archive, as was intended by its creators.

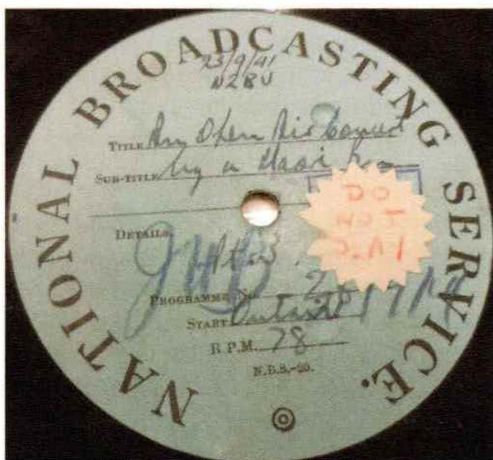
The origin of this collection was in February 1940, when James Shelley, the Director of the National Broadcasting Service, wrote to the Acting Minister of Broadcasting, proposing to send a mobile recording unit overseas with New Zealand forces. The unit's work, Shelley wrote, would have immediate value in maintaining the morale of the troops and the nation, and he listed among its proposed activities: "To make disc records of events, voices of personalities, eye-witness accounts etc., for sending to New Zealand to broadcast here and to form part of an historical library of the war for future use."¹

Some 80 years after it was created, digitisation means the potential of this "historical library of the war" is beginning to be fully realised, with digital projects such as the Ministry for Culture and Heritage's Māori Battalion website, which features extensive use of Mobile Unit recordings. For many years the collection has been used by broadcasters for Anzac Day documentaries for radio and television, however, the only in-depth, scholarly study of the Unit itself is a 1986 Honours thesis by Otago University's David Thomson. He noted that the Mobile Unit had been largely ignored by the War History Branch when New Zealand's official histories of the war were written, and that "half a century later, this bank of recorded material has hardly been noticed by historians."²

There are several reasons for this. Despite the production in 1996 of catalogues of the Units' output, the content of the recordings remained opaque. Due to the nature of the medium, accessing the recordings meant either a trip to the RNZ Sound Archives office (in Timaru and later, Christchurch) or requesting copies of items on cassette or CD, which could be costly. Without time-consuming transcription or easy listening access, using archival sound was cumbersome for researchers more comfortable with written primary source material. Current digitisation of this collection and the ability to upload the recordings to Ngā Taonga's online catalogue is a huge improvement in terms of access.

Another barrier, which I hope to help overcome, is that most of the discs carry only scant original metadata about their contents and the identities of the voices they contain. A 12-inch acetate or lacquer sound disc contains around four and a half minutes of audio per side. Some discs may only have one speaker, perhaps a leader such as General Bernard Freyberg giving a radio 'talk' about some aspect of the war. In such a case, the speaker's name was hand-written by the Mobile Unit broadcaster on the disc label at the time of recording, whether it was in a jungle camp in the remote Solomon Islands or in the deserts of Egypt, as in the case of the disc label pictured here.

Figure 2. Close-up of a typical Mobile Unit disclabel, showing the limited written metadata which accompanies the recordings. This reads "An open-air concert by a Māori Bn (Battalion) 23/9/41, Part 3." The homemade censor's label "Do Not Play" was added later, possibly because this part of the concert contains a performance of the waiata "E pari rā", a World War I lament for dead soldiers, which may have been considered unsuitable for morale-boosting war-time radio broadcasts. (You can hear this recording on Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision's website) Image: Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision collection.



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However, many of the discs feature multiple speakers. The Mobile Units' most popular production was recording simple, 20-30 second messages home from men who were chosen by ballot to send a greeting to their loved ones. Back in New Zealand, these were compiled and broadcast in a weekly radio programme "With the Boys Overseas," which aired nationwide twice a week between February 1941 and December 1945.³ The brevity of these messages means there can be as many as 20 different speakers per disc – far too many names to fit on a label.

There is evidence that lists of the names of speakers were sent back to New Zealand with the discs, but so far none of these lists have been located. Therefore, when the Mobile Unit recordings were described in print catalogues by RNZ Sound Archives in 1996, the absence of an easily-accessible verifying authority (it was still the early days of the internet), combined with the scant metadata, meant the spelling of speakers' names could be only a "best guess," and they were sometimes mis-heard or misspelled in the catalogues. This has the effect of making the recordings virtually undiscoverable to the speakers' descendants and a less-than-authoritative source for researchers.

To identify the speakers, like past cataloguers I still have to rely on my ears, listening closely to the voices of the Mobile Unit broadcasters who made the recordings. These were men like Arch Curry (of station 3YA Christchurch), pictured here holding the microphone to record a line of New Zealanders in Italy in April 1944. You can hear the messages home they were recording at www.ngataonga.org.nz/collections/catalogue/.

Arch introduces each speaker by name and hometown, and typically the men then sometimes give further identifying details, mentioning a street address or the names of wives and family members who they are greeting. Now, thanks to the development of Auckland War Memorial Museum's Online Cenotaph database, I can hunt for the speaker to verify his (or her) identity, creating an authoritative record and making the recording discoverable.

At a public presentation about this research in Christchurch earlier this year, I played the greetings by the six New Zealanders in the R.A.F., as an example of a typical 'messages home' recording. Afterwards I was approached by an elderly man with tears in his eyes. By sheer coincidence, one of the men who spoke was his elder brother who had passed away in 2010. The man and



Figure 3. Mobile Unit broadcaster Arch Curry (far right) records greetings from a group of New Zealanders serving with a Spitfire wing of the Royal Air Force, in the Cassino area. Photograph by George Bull, Venafrò, Italy 25 April 1944. DA-05600-F Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

his family never knew the recording existed - and even if they had, it might have been hard for them to discover. His brother Cedric, is identified by the nickname "Ced" in the recording. This had been mis-heard in previous cataloguing as "Ted", and that name had persisted in the description.

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I am sharing the enhanced metadata and verified identities with Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision who are using this to update their online database. A link to their catalogue entry for the recording can also be added to the speaker's page in Online Cenotaph, which has also created a new dataset of service personnel who have surviving recordings. This on-going work will not only make this collection of wartime sound recordings a more accessible and authoritative primary source for historians and researchers, but hopefully it will also reveal more of these voices of New Zealanders at war to their descendants.

Endnotes

1. Correspondence from James Shelley to the Hon. Acting Minister of Broadcasting, 7 February 1940 AADL 564 W2814 2/4/43 Part 1 ID R22011495, Accounts Broadcasting Unit - Middle East, Archives New Zealand, Wellington.
2. David Thomson, "Broadcasting at War: New Zealand's Mobile Recording Unit in the Middle East and Italy, 1940-1945" (B.A. Hons thesis, University of Otago, 1986) 8.
3. "An Hour with The Boys Overseas. New Programme Scheduled," *The New Zealand Listener*, February 7, 1941, 7