D-Day Radio Broadcast--George Hicks (June 5 - 6, 1944)

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Essay by Christopher Sterling (guest post)*

George Hicks

The right man and the right technology were in the right place to make this gripping recording on June 6, 1944 of the Allied landing at Normandy, France. At least one newspaper called the material one of the best recordings to come out of the War. To that point, it was one of a relative handful of transcriptions to reach the broadcast airwaves in an era when radio networks generally banned the use of recordings (as opposed to live coverage) as "deceptive" for listeners.

Event: The Allied invasion of France in mid-1944 was a landmark event in the war against Nazi Germany. The planning and the logistical buildup of men and supplies in Britain had been going on for two years. Under the command of General Dwight Eisenhower, forces went ashore early on the morning of Tuesday, June 6, 1944. British and Canadian forces shared three landing sites while American troops used beaches denoted as "Omaha" and "Utah." Those names, especially Omaha, which was the more difficult landing, would become very well known in the hours to come.

Reporter: George Francis Hicks was born August 26, 1905 in Tacoma, Washington, and, after attending several colleges, graduated from George Washington University. Hicks went to work first for NBC and later for the Blue Network (which became the ABC network in 1945). Normally based in London working for Blue as their bureau chief, Hicks served as a "pool" reporter for this event, meaning that whatever he broadcast was cleared for public use by wartime censors and could also be aired by any network.

Hicks took a decided back seat in his recording, letting the wartime sounds around him carry the tale where they could. He was deliberately soft-spoken and measured in his delivery. The term "conversational" largely describes his approach.

Hicks was far from the only reporter covering the landings that day--and some of his competitors got on the air before his recording did. But the others were all describing what they'd seen and heard after the events had occurred.

(Hicks died in New York at age 59 on March 17, 1965.)

Equipment: Analog equipment of the wartime period was (to modern eyes) heavy and clumsy to use—barely even "portable." For the D-Day event, Hicks used a 75-pound ARC "Commando" model Recordgraph, a transportable (barely) film recording device loaned by the US Navy to allow for pool broadcasts. (In 2019, the apparent original 13 1/2-minute recording was donated to the D-Day Museum in Bristol, Virginia. The donation included a now-rare Recordgraph recorder/player, and other Hicks broadcasts before and after this one.)

Hicks broadcast from a signal tower aboard the *U.S.S. Ancon,* in position off the Omaha beachhead, which served as the chief communications vessel (not a destroyer as is sometimes reported) to help coordinate the water and land attacks. With the ship's forest of radio aerials, she was an obvious target though she carried few of her own guns, chiefly just anti-aircraft weapons. (A converted Caribbean passenger ship, the *Ancon* had played a similar role in the 1942 landings in North Africa, and in Italy in 1943.) After being carried by a far smaller boat back to England, the Hicks recordings were transmitted from London by the BBC using shortwave.

Broadcasts: NBC, Blue, CBS, and the Mutual networks had all been planning their D-Day coverage for weeks, though the planners didn't know where or when the event would actually take place. When obtained, all four American radio networks broadcast Hicks' recordings starting just before midnight on June 6th, by which time the invasion had been underway for some 18 hours.

The recording was--and is--sometimes frustrating to listen to as periods of it have no sound at all, or are of static, or there's just sounds of guns firing and men yelling. When combined with the additional radio static from its original London transmission, the effect can be jarring—just as war itself.

Still, the Hicks broadcast proved to be a sensation, no matter that it only eventually aired hours after the events. Today, we'd call this "live-on-tape" or something to that effect—meaning it was played as recorded, with no editing. The material was rebroadcast countless times—in 1944 and ever since. Hicks won just about every broadcast award that existed for this footage, more than any other radio journalist of the time.

The broadcast is important not only for the event it records, but for how it helped pioneer live news event coverage melding actual event sounds with occasional descriptive narrative. Today, we have come to expect nothing less.

Christopher H. Sterling served on the faculty of George Washington University for over three decades. Prior to that, he spent 10 years at Temple University and two years at the FCC. He has authored or edited over 25 books on telecommunications and the electronic media.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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