

AFTER 107 YEARS, NAIR SIGNS OFF

By Trice Denny, NAS Key West Public Affairs Officer

The dots and dashes of Morse code rang through the air at Naval Air Station Key West Sept. 21, signifying the end of Navy radio in Key West, FL, after 107 years.

Key West's Navy radio call sign, "NAR", was disestablished symbolically with the Morse code during the decommissioning ceremony of Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station (NCTS) Jacksonville Detachment Key West, thus ending a long chapter of radio in the southernmost city.

Improvements to high-frequency broadcasting require fewer stations. The Key West service will be consolidated with the Air Force to be stationed out of Puerto Rico and Maryland, said Key West Detachment Technical Director, David Flight.

The decommissioning ceremony featured remarks from CDR Matthew Lear, commanding officer NCTS Jacksonville. Lear and Flight presented plaques and certificates to the Sailors, civilians and contractors who worked there, followed by a playing of the Morse code and the final lowering of the flag at the Boca Chica Field receiver site. The sometimes emotional, sometimes humorous ceremony focused on two important aspects: the people and the history of radio station "NAR".

Official U.S. Navy Photo



From the Florida State Archives: A depiction of the Navy Wireless Telegraph Station circa 1915. The station and its antennas were located on what is now Naval Air Station Key West's Truman Annex.



ITC(SW/AW) Gregory Pope passes the ensign to Technical Director David W. Flight after the order was given to secure the colors during the decommissioning ceremony of NAVCOMTELSTA JAX Det. Key West Sept. 21. The communications station served the Navy and the Fleet for more than 100 years. (Photo by MASN Brandon Norman)

"Conch Communicators' - this crew here today - as well as every watch since 1905, has made sure that the mission of providing the absolute best telecommunications service has always been at the forefront of their

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focus,” said Flight. “Every Sailor, civilian and contractor to pass through the halls of this and all the various facilities which have comprised the various iterations of the name COMMSTA have given it their all.”

Flight’s reference to the various iterations of the communications station reflects the station’s long history, which began in 1905 at the Truman Naval Base as the Naval Wireless Telegraph Station. The purpose of the station was to form a link in a chain of Wireless Telegraph Stations in what was then known as the Coastal Signal Service of the Navy. This chain extended from Cape Elizabeth, ME, to New Orleans, and included Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; San Juan, Puerto Rico and the Isthmus of Panama. Much of the earliest broadcasting was public service information, including time signals and weather reports, transmitted in Morse code to ships at sea and other shore stations.

In those early days transmissions and shipboard receiver gear were still young and “buggy.” To ensure messages could still be delivered, carrier pigeons were kept as a backup source of communicating.

Between World Wars I and II, the Navy base was downsized and the Naval Radio Station remained the only operational organization in Key West. The “Conch Communicators” did double duty during that time - they watched over the station and kept the coal plant that provided electricity running.

During the 1960s the advent of the Cold War and developments in Cuba led to the largest expansion of personnel and mission requirements to the communications station. At one point the detachment employed 19 officers, 268 enlisted personnel and 31 civilians. Called Naval Communications Unit, those assigned provided high-frequency telecommunications to ships, submarines, aircraft squadrons and base operational units. In 1965 the Navy acquired the 640 acres of land on



Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station (NCTS) Jacksonville Detachment Key West

Saddlebunch Key to build a transmitter site.

From the 1970s until 2000, the communications station went through various phases of operations, including becoming a civilian-led and contractor-operated facility. In 2000, the former Navy Wireless Telegraph Station became NCTS Jacksonville Detachment Key West, its designation when it was officially decommissioned.

During the ceremony Lear spoke a little about each person who had been currently working at the station, calling them “a cast of characters.” When it came time to close the ceremony, Flight told all present that the history of the station would live on in them.

“In the near future, the antennas will be

down,” Flight said. “All the gear will be gone. All the plaques and pictures will have been sent to decorate the memorial halls of distant commands or the homes of past and present members. The doors will forever close on the mission. But they will remain open in the memories of those who have served. And it will be on those walls and in those memories that the mission will live on forever. And we can all be proud of the services rendered. I salute our predecessors and I salute each of you current crew members for those services rendered.”

In this era of ever-changing and instant communications, it may be hard to imagine 107 years of continuous communications support, but the memories of the men and women who provided NAR to the nation’s warfighters will live on.