Limerick Marine Radio Schools

by Michael Kirwan

In 1900 the Marconi Wireless Corporation installed its first marine wireless station on the German ship SS Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse. In its day it was the largest and fastest ship in the world and had a regular service across the North Atlantic.

Marine wireless communications developed rapidly and wireless operators were needed to staff coast stations and ships. The first residential marine wireless training school was established in Frinton-on-Sea in Essex, England.

In 1909, the inextricable value of wireless communication, in saving life at sea, was first demonstrated when the ship Republic was in collision with an Italian liner Florida in thick fog about 180 miles west of Nantucket Island, USA. Jack Binns, the wireless operator, sent out a distress signal which was picked up by the Marconi coast station at Siasconset and four ships rescued 1,700 people. By 1910, Marconi Marine Company had established a network of coast based stations and 781 ships, both naval and merchant marine, carried wireless equipment.

In Ireland Maurice Fitzgerald formerly of the Direct United States Cable Company Ltd., opened a wireless school, known as Atlantic College, in Caherciveen, County Kerry in February 1912. Subsequently, he opened a second school at Henry Street, Dublin in 1919.

The sinking of the Titanic in April 1912 highlighted the importance of radio communications. The wireless operators, Jack Phillips and Harold Bride did heroic work in the radio room. Jack Phillips sent out the distress message in Morse code that alerted several ships in the vicinity. The following year the Volturno sank and over eight ships responded to a distress call from the wireless operator. As a result over 500 lives were saved.

Radio regulations were improved and 500 KHz became the established calling and distress frequency. All wireless operators were required to listen on this frequency for ships in distress. When they were not on watch, automatic alarm systems were switched on which could pick up the recognised distress signal of 12 by 4 seconds dashes in Morse code.

One of the recommendations of the ‘Lord Mersey’ report, following the sinking of the SS Titanic, was the requirement to fit wireless installations on all passenger ships and to have a 24 hour wireless watch on all ships, thus requiring more wireless operators.

In March 1913 the Northern Wireless Schools Ltd., of Dublin and Manchester opened a school at 11 Lower Sackville Street, [now O’Connell Street], Dublin.

At this time, 31 year old, J. J. Hobbins and his wife Mary had a school, at 2 Catherine Place, Limerick, teaching Morse code to men and women who wished to become Post Office clerks. Morse code was used in most of the larger towns in Ireland for sending and receiving telegrams between post offices. J. J.’s sons Joe and Frank also taught Morse code in the school. J.J. Hobbins saw the opportunity to expand his school to cater for sea-going wireless operators and on 7 November 1913 the advertisement below appeared in the Irish Independent newspaper.

While the school provided Morse code training students had to attend other wireless schools to complete their training in the maintenance and repair of radio equipment kept on board ship.

When World War 1 broke out in 1914, the Admiralty required all ships over 1,600 tons to be fitted with wireless telegraphy and this required an increase of over 3,000 radio officers. The school went from strength to strength and on 30 November 1915 John Hobbins received the following letter from Marconi Marine in London.

**ADVERTISEMENTS—Mr. Hobbins, of London

Telegraph Training College, highest distinctions obtainable, has now opened Wireless School, Catherine Place, Limerick; astounding low fees. Please write. 11690 Col**
Dear Sir,

In reply to your letter, I beg to say that Mr. Alexander Weir, your pupil, has passed our test and entered our training School.

Yours very truly,

S Cross,
Traffic Manager.

Eighty-seven year old John O’Sullivan from Galway remembers attending the school.

In midsummer 1942, I arrived at the radio school in Limerick, a large old Georgian house of three stories and a basement. It was owned by a Mr. Hobbins and his wife. They boarded 5 boys and also 2 girls who were training in telegraphy for the Post Office. In the first three months we were given a good knowledge of wireless theory and Morse code to 12-14 words per minute sending and receiving level and then we were transferred to Belfast Wireless College situated at North Street Arcade where we spent a further three months of intense training. We were now prepared to sit an exam at 16 words per minute code and 20 words at one minute plain language. We were also tested on direction finding to help detect the German U-boats. Then I was called up to Marconi’s.

**Limerick Marine Radio School (1957-2004)**

J.J. Hobbins’ school did not have the complete course for marine wireless operators/radio officers and the setting up of a marine radio officers’ course was discussed at a meeting of the City Vocational Educational Committee in September 1956. The committee was told that the Marconi International Marine Company was anxious to assist in setting up a course. The successful students would be guaranteed employment at £30 per month, rising to £70 per month. The course cost £7 per term and lasted 15 months. Meanwhile Hobbins’ school continued to teach typewriting skills and sadly the third floor of the building in Catherine Place caught fire during lunchtime in April 1959 and the school equipment and furniture were completely destroyed.

Marconi Marine maintained a world-wide organisation for supplying, operating and servicing of ships’ radio equipment. It also supplied radio officers to many shipping companies. In addition to an attractive salary, the radio officer had officer status with his own private accommodation, steward service, food and the choice to travel all over the world. On 12 January 1957 the following advertisement (below) was published in the Limerick Leader newspaper.

The first school in Limerick, catering exclusively for the training of marine radio officers, opened on 11 March 1957 at 2 The Crescent. It was under the auspices of the City of Limerick Vocational Educational Committee, in conjunction with the Marconi Marine Company in England. The four storey building was reconstructed into a modern fully furnished radio school. The classrooms comprised of two rooms with Morse equipment, a radio room with transmitters and receivers and a general lecture room. Forty-six students enrolled. The teachers appointed were Larry McDonald and Jim Stack, both of the Marconi Company which had played a vital part in sponsoring the school. John Spencer was appointed headmaster and he also taught the principles of electricity and magnetism. The student fee was £10 and at the end of the course students were guaranteed employment by Marconi Marine Company. The students attending the school came from all parts of the country, even as far north as Dungarvan. In conjunction with the course, lectures on sociology were given by Rev. P. Houlihan, O.E.M. Limerick. At the first examination 18 of 21 students passed Part I of the Post Master General Certificate (PMG).

In January 1960 heavy rain came through several broken slates in the roof of the building and water seeped down from the top storey to the basement. Examinations were taking place at the time and had to be moved to the hall in Limerick Clothing Factory Social Club. Limerick Clothing Factory was situated in Edward Street and the social club was on the ground floor on the right hand side as one entered the gate.

When St. Munchin’s College moved to Corbally in 1962 the Henry Street premises was left vacant and the radio school moved there. The City of Limerick Vocational Educational Committee rented the building and it was known as the Municipal Technical College. The radio section occupied the upstairs rooms of the building. In 1969 the site was required for a new Garda station to replace two stations – the old one in William Street and one in John Street, Limerick. This time the school moved to the School Of Electrical Engineering, O’Connell Avenue for radar and practical work and the marine radio communications course was held in the Municipal Technical Institute, O’Connell Avenue. The radio department was at the top of the building in the roof section. It consisted of two lecture rooms, practical room with transmitters and receivers for fault finding, Morse code room, and a radar room.

In 1988 the radio school made its last move to Moylish and joined other Limerick Vocational Educational colleges. In 1993 the Colleges of Art, Commerce and Technology became a Regional Technical College and was finally upgraded to the Institute of Technology status in 1997.

Radio officers in the British Merchant Navy and Irish Shipping were required to hold a certificate of competence issued by the Postmaster-General. E.M. G certificates were issued in three grades – Special Class, Second Class and First Class. The Special

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**CITY OF LIMERICK VOCATIONAL EDUCATION COMMITTEE.**

**RADIO OFFICERS COURSE**

*(MERCANTILE MARINE).*

This Course prepares students for the Examinations of Proficiency in Radio Telegraphy and Radio Telephony. The Radio School is provided with the latest types of Radio Apparatus as required by the Merchant Shipping (Radio) Rules, 1933. The Course is designed to enable students to pass the final Examination in approximately one year. Employment is guaranteed to successful candidates, and salary scales and prospects of promotion are excellent. Application forms and full particulars of the Course are available from the undersigned. Students must possess a standard of education equivalent to that of the Intermediate Certificate. A good standard of mathematics is essential.

**J. G. O’DONNELL**

(Chief Executive Officer).

Municipal Technical Institute,
O’Connell Avenue, Limerick.
Class certificate entitled the holder to operate apparatus in small ships, such as fishing vessels and private yachts which were not by law compulsorily fitted with radio. In the early 1970s the First and Second Class Certificates were combined into one certificate called the Marine Radio General Certificate. This qualified one to serve in the Merchant Navy as a radio officer proficient in:

a) Knowledge of the principles of electronics and the theory of radio.
b) Theoretical knowledge of transmitters, receivers, DF equipment, auto alarms and motors, generators, inverters rectifiers etc.
c) Practical knowledge of the operation of the equipment.
d) Practical knowledge of fault finding.
e) Ability to send and receive Morse code at a speed of twenty words per minute.
f) Knowledge of rules and regulations and Q codes.
g) A good knowledge of the world geography and shipping routes.

On successfully completing the examination and obtaining the certificate it was a matter of applying to Marconi Marine for a job. Merchant Navy uniforms were sourced at J.J O'Callaghan's, Dame Street, Dublin and then Marconi Marine placed a new officer on a ship as a junior radio officer for six months.

Once the officer joined Marconi Marine he was assigned to a particular shipping company. There was no such thing as a typical voyage. A voyage could consist of serving with Bank Line on a round-the-world service, T & J Harrison going to the Caribbean for six weeks, Kuwait Shipping to the Far East or Europe. An officer could be four months away at sea followed by two months at home. In the 1970s, while on board ship, an officer worked in the radio room from 8 a.m. working two hours on, two hours off until 10 p.m.

In the late 1980s Morse code was phased out and replaced by satellite communications thereby removing the requirement to carry a radio officer on board ship. From midnight on 31 January 1999 international regulations no longer required ships at sea to carry a radio officer. The automated Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) using satellites and new state of the art communication techniques became the adopted system. The work of the radio officer could now be done by the master or navigating officer and the position of marine radio officer on board became redundant. Many of the radio officers changed over to the engineering side or navigational side on the ship or simply retired and took up other careers.


Lecturers: Larry McDonald, Jim Stack, (Morse code), Liam Meade, Jim Fitzgibbon, Joe Morton, John Keane, (Radar), Jack Marnell, Mick O’Connell, (Radar), Jim Thompson (Technician) Jim Wallace, Oliver Gleeson, Martin Gleeson, Denis Riordan, Joe Lynham, Bill O’Herlihy.

Acknowledgements:
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References

Irish Independent 22 February 1913, 7 November 1913.

Limerick Leader 12 January 1957, 26 January 1957, 1 August 1962.
My Radio College
(J.J. Hobbin's Wireless School)

Dear old telegraph school I shall never forget
Your sounders and buzzers so clear
A tap-tap tapping all through the day
Their clear notes I still seem to hear.
Those five pretty girls so cheerful, so gay
Ahh! They would twinkle an eye
But just take a tip from an old Grenadier
They often did things on the sly.
There was George Condell, oh boy looked so swell
And Miss Kelly who came from the North
And Michael McGann – the small little man
Who came from the village of Gott.
There was tall Healy Dan and small Brennan John
Kissane – who came from Listowel
Eileen Lucid – so true. Ahh! She'd bewitch you
And Sheehan – we remember so well.
We had Gabriel Deegan with him was John Flynn
McNamara – who came from Rathkeale
And brave Allie Shine – who was a great pal of mine
And Miss Flavin from the banks of the Feale.
There was dauntless John Ryan,
Oh man, he looked so fine
O'Sullivan – the man from Mayo
And Bernie Killeen – his match was never seen
He was always talking to Joe.

(Author unknown)
Larry MacDonald — a tall ship of innate humanitarianism

THE DEATH of Larry MacDonald on Monday, July 19, after a long illness, not only deprived Castleconnell of one of its leading local personalities but also bereaved countless people in all parts of the world of someone whom they would remember affectionately and gratefully as a courageous helper, crossing acquaintances and, where time had allowed, a dear friend.

Indeed, although not one bit of all himself, would describe Larry as sophisticated, much of his long life was passed in exotic settings and his extensive travel had made him quite literally a man of the world. The less productive part of it, however, was also frequently occupied with projects of far more merit than merely local significance. It was his own characteristically unassuming, even sardonic, wry of his life. The local people who came to know needs, therefore, to be put in a wider perspective.

Larry’s qualification for attempting to do that now is not so much that I share his own profession as a teacher, but that for the past ten years I was his next-door neighbour (an extraordinary, but wholly accurate, description of both he and I preferred). My French wife and I also found ourselves in a position, more especially as strangers both to Castleconnell and to Ireland, to experience at first hand Larry McDonald’s extraordinary capacity to befriend neighbourhood.

For him being a neighbour was not just a practical necessity of adjoining space but a universal principle. This aspect of Larry’s Irishness always struck me as having a special message for the troubled world we live in. In fact Larry would patiently listen to me theorising about these other notions, while he himself simply went about good international relations into daily practice, as I suspect he had always done, rather than blathering about it — something Larry conscientiously avoided at all times. My acquaintance with Larry began shortly after he had retired and his stories of his life in the sea, his travels, and his work for humanitarian organisations were fascinating.

Larry had an equally distinguished but longer career in the merchant marine. Leaving his first job, as a manager of Worsfold Mills in his home town of Portadown, Larry qualified as a marine radio officer and commenced service on the Duchess of Bedford in 1942. He became involved in the evacuation of Singapore and later in the highly dangerous war-time shipping across the North Atlantic. He was especially proud to have served on board the vessel on which the Yalta agreement was negotiated. Those who knew him well must be tempted to wonder what the effect on the post-war world might have been had he participated, more directly!

The romantic in Larry meant that he could never wholly resist the call of the sea, where he still served actively in between teaching. Even when I knew him, he was always quite off on some mission, even if only mentally. I suspect, to ease the loneliness of some old comrade still in active service for Irish Shipping or the cross-Channel packets.

As a descendant myself of a seafaring race, Larry’s characteristic traits (down to his maturely balanced rolling gait) were familiar enough to me from my Cornish childhood. But the stories Larry told me were worthy of Joseph Conrad. Like Conrad and most of his characters Larry combined the toughness and dignity that come from life at sea. His thoughts certainly transcended the pettiness of land-locked concerns. It was not just that he had travelled more widely than most. He fervently respected, even loved, different human kind (a modesty his children have marvellously adopted in their own choice of partners).

This grew, I believe, out of an innate humanitarianism, if that does sound too sanctimonious in view of Larry’s capacity, sometimes ruthless, to remark on frailty in all members of the human species. His acceptance of strangers was all the more genuine and fertile, precisely because it was rooted in patriotism and a strong sense of love and respect for his own place. It was his own choice to re-establish roots in Ireland, which he had never actually lost.

Larry was a great diplomat as well as a good traveller; a great teacher as well as a good companion. His precious example to his children and all of us was that he was sincere in all he did, and known to be. He was also in a very special way that tended to escape wider attention, a great raconteur, and, if such a Panamanian image can be transposed to the main street of Castleconnell, a renowned bovverdoit, albeit confined in those later years to the left bank of the Shannon. Larry MacDonald’s presence among local friends in Hickey’s, Worra’s inn Sheehans was sufficient to re-assert the unsuspecting visitor from the city or farther afield that the art of public conversation was not yet wholly barbarised by television, that law and judgment were never, indeed, overbearing or inhumane and, often frank, resorting sometimes to a very forthright use of the vernacular. He was well known to all cases of prudence deserved no better.

Like many sailors he was seriously close to the sea; in later years he cultivated his own garden almost with obsession, but with a determination to provide for as many around him as possible.

This generosity of provide — especially the fruits of the sea and the earth, obtained somehow at his masterful efforts, often struck me as typical of a man of ships. Two memories, in particular, I intend to treasure.

The first is that of serving as a cabin boy’s teacher and an official of the European Community, usually calling on the way back from a Mediterranean Summer School. Minx kippers provided, typically, by Larry MacDonald and cooked according to his instructions.

The other is of sitting in our small back garden, shortly after arriving to live here, and both of us struck, quite heavily, on the head by a missile thrown from over the wall. I knew enough of my neighbours already to realise that this could not be a pre-emptive strike against our new foreigner; it was, indeed, a recently-dug cabbage, which had been intended, like most else Larry MacDonald aimed, without always reaching his true target, not at the head but at the heart.

I am quite simply desperate at his going. But, like many other local friends, and like Mary, his widow, I have the blessing of knowing that his essential goodness lives in his children and grandchildren.

Prof. David Coombs
City Vocational Scheme: Marine Radio Officers Course 1958 - The above group shows candidates from the Limerick City Vocational Education Marine Radio Officers Course who were successful in the recent examinations.

Front row (left to right): P. J. Valley (Part 1), Rev. P. Houlihan, C.C. Social Science Instructor: Mr. J. F. Spencer, A.I.E.E., Head Master; Mr. L. McDonald, Mr. J. F. Stack (Instructors), M. S. McMahon (Part 1).

Back row: V. P. McLoughlin (Part 1), T. G. McGrath (Final), M. J. McNamara (Final), M. F. Ryan (Final), E. J. L. McNamara (Part 1), V. Lynch (Final), J. T. Moloney (Final), W. N. Greer (Part 1), J. J. Fitzgibbon (Final), D. F. Carter (Final), J. Wallace (Final).


The finalists are all qualified Radio Officers, most of whom have already taken up duty on board their ships. The remainder will do so within a few weeks. It gives us great pleasure indeed to congratulate Mr. Spencer, Mr. Stack, Mr. McDonald and Father Houlihan on the work they have done in the short space of fifteen months since the College first opened. They have good reason to be very proud. To these young men who are now going out over the world, we wish God Speed and every success in their new careers.

Michael Kirwan is a native of Newmarket-on-Fergus, County Clare and is now living in Limerick city. After qualifying as a Radio Officer in the Marine Radio School in Limerick he was six years with Marconi Marine working on deep-sea shipping. He now works for the Irish Aviation Authority at their North Atlantic Communication centre at Ballygirreen, County Clare. He has a keen interest in local history and is chairman of Emerald Athletic Club.