

# Sidelines

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The first of a highly irregular occasional series:

translator **KITTY BLACK** recalls her brush with pirate radio



On a warm Sunday night in June about 40 years ago, a tug slipped her moorings in the London docks and headed downstream. There was a motley collection on board – the crew, 20 riggers, three Trinity House pilots, a lone businessman named Oliver Smedley, and me.

The object of the exercise was a raid. Following on the creation of pirate radio ships, various groups had installed

themselves on the derelict forts that had protected the Thames

Estuary during WWII. Some genius had come up with the idea that, as territorial waters only extended three miles offshore, some of them could technically be considered as being in international waters. The pirate radio ships had taken advantage of this to launch their activities, and according to maritime law were not liable to pay royalties on any music performed.

One fort had been taken over by Reg Calvert, a trumpet player, who called his station Radio City. He had accepted but never paid for radio equipment to the value of £10,000 from another organisation known as Radio Atlanta, and was now planning to sell his interest in Radio City to Radio London. The passengers on the tug represented the interests of Radio Atlanta, intent on taking over Radio City in a surprise raid and so prevent the sale.



I had supported Radio Atlanta from its beginnings. This last piece of chicanery on Calvert's part was the final straw and we felt we had to do something to retrieve at least some of our money before it was too late. The pilots had passed the forts in the course of their normal duties and had noted that there was no security. Access was via steel ladders which led straight up from the water to gantries where the radio equipment was installed. The hatches at the top of the ladders were never closed.

Like the hero of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Crime Passionnel*, which I had translated, I had never taken part in any direct action (up till then, all I had contributed to the action was to guarantee the bank overdraft).

Knowing that we had at least eight hours of travel ahead of us, I did as I always used to do during dress-rehearsals; having equipped myself with wool and knitting needles, as soon as we were under way I cast on the stitches for the first of a pair of golf stockings I was making for a friend.

We arrived at Radio City and the boarding party climbed up the ladder and took over the fort. DJs and technicians came tumbling out of their beds and were quickly persuaded to hand over the crystal which operated the radio station. The atmosphere was friendly, punctuated by cups of tea. Although some papers said the raiders were armed, we had carried nothing more dangerous than an electric torch. Eventually the pilots, Oliver and I embarked on the tug, leaving the riggers to maintain control of the station. Before we landed in an early dawn I had finished my golf stocking.

Next morning we arranged a meeting with Reg Calvert. I have never seen a man look so angry. He embarked on a series of threats, saying he had a friend who was the best shot in England who would help him, and he himself produced an object like a fountain pen, which he claimed was a gas gun. He boasted he had sufficient technical knowledge to set up a lethal cloud, which could overwhelm the riggers on Radio City – though he made no mention of what effect this gas might have on his own personnel. Eventually he stormed out without making any concessions. I went on holiday to Norfolk, arranging to ring the office the following morning. But when I made the scheduled call, Oliver's manager answered and said 'Calvert's dead. Oliver is in prison accused of murder, and the police are looking for you.'

Anyone living in Norfolk now complains about the lack of police presence, but it was no different 40 years ago. What had been the nearest station two villages away had recently been closed, and the next was ten miles in the other direction. When I presented myself there, they had no knowledge of any raid and directed me to Bishop's Stortford as being the station nearest to the scene of the crime. After some difficulty, I arrived at my destination and told my story to the sergeant on duty.

Fast forward to the scene in the magistrate's court. To my amazement, I had been cited as a witness for the prosecution and although I tried hard to explain I was Oliver's partner, so was entirely on his side, this carried no weight.

Oliver explained that he had gone home as usual after

office hours to his cottage in Wendon's Ambo, which he shared with an attractive young woman, Gail Thorburn, who acted as his secretary. At about 8 o'clock he heard a car outside and saw Calvert and a strange man who he correctly identified as 'the best shot in England'. Leaving Gail behind, Oliver slipped next door to ask the help of his neighbour, who was in bed with flu but was well enough to promise to call the police.

Back in his own cottage, Oliver picked up a shotgun and went into the living room, where he saw Calvert apparently about to clobber Gail with an object he was holding above his head. Coming down the stairs was Calvert's friend who shouted 'There's the b... now!' Calvert swung round and threw what he was holding at Oliver, hitting him on the arm. The gun jerked up, Oliver fired, catching Calvert full in the stomach. Calvert spun round and fell to the ground. After making him as comfortable as they could, Oliver tried to telephone for an ambulance, but the phone had been ripped from the wall and it took a few minutes to realise that the extension upstairs was still working.

The ambulance arrived ahead of the police but too late to save Calvert. When the Bill arrived, they decided the scene represented a real-life *Crime Passionnel* and the two men had been fighting over the girl. Nothing Oliver said would convince them otherwise, and they arrested him for murder. His sporting friends said Oliver couldn't possibly have meant to shoot Calvert as if he had aimed, he would have missed.

In court, Calvert's marksman friend, obviously deeply nervous about his own position in the affair, did his best to explain what he was doing in Oliver's house, and only succeeded in making the case for the prosecution more absurd. A magistrate's court has no authority to grant bail to a man accused of murder but, as the police had obviously been proved wrong, this no longer applied to Oliver. He was released, and we all had to wait for three months until his case could be heard at the assizes court. This proved a formality and the jury didn't even retire to consider their verdict, but found him not guilty – and lined up to shake his hand as they filed past the dock.

There were a couple of odd sequels to the story. A French evening paper managed to get hold of a studio picture of me, which appeared on the back page, where it was seen by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. They promptly contacted their lawyer and prohibited the use of my translations of his plays. Ted, later Lord, Willis cancelled my appointment as secretary of one of the translators' committees, and the government brought in legislation as an effective stop to all pirate radio activities.

None of us made the expected millions we thought we would, but at least we opened the airwaves to the performance of non-stop pop music by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Elvis Presley, which the British audience demanded as their right.

The second golf stocking was duly completed in more normal circumstances and the pair presented to its grateful new owner.