

Arctic Waves

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Radio News and Stories from Canada's Arctic Region

The Red Radio, Part 2

LAST month in Arctic Waves we presented a couple of articles that mentioned the “Red Radio”, favoured in the Arctic for communications of up to a few hundred miles. Further research would seem to identify the “Red Radio” as the Spilsbury SBX-11A. Following are some of the references and information we have unearthed. If any of our readers can provide additional information, we’d be happy to hear from you. (Harold Sellers)

A **shortwave radio** inside the entrance is used to keep in touch with town; and (purchased from the **Hudson’s Bay Company**). ...

www.johntyman.com/arctic/inuit203.html



The SBX-11A HF Transceiver 10 watts, 1.6-8.0 MHz SSB

From November 1994 to April 2000 I worked for Racal Canada Inc, part of the UK-based Racal Electronics group. Racal Canada was formed when Racal bought Spilsbury Communications. Racal was primarily interested in the products of the RACE Technologies subsidiary, but also inherited a range

of Spilsbury-branded products. The most famous of these was the SBX-11A portable 10 Watt HF SSB radio, which had for some time been the primary means of communication in Canada’s North.

The SBX-11A has been out of production since 1999, when all the Spilsbury products were discontinued. Racal Canada closed in 2000. Subsequently Racal itself merged with Thomson CSF and the group is now known as Thales. Thus the Spilsbury products are well and truly dead.

However, when the company closed a significant quantity of material was donated to the local radio museum, and I and others managed to take copies of some historically interesting photos and documents. This page presents those artifacts, and the items I have acquired subsequently.

<http://www.matthewkendall.com/electronics/sbx-11a>

A.J. SPILSBURY PAPERS

http://www.library.ubc.ca/spcoll/AZ/PDF/S/Spilsbury_A.J.pdf

Introduction

This inventory describes the papers of Ashton James Spilsbury held in the Special Collections Division, Main Library , University of British Columbia. They were donated to the division by A.J. Spilsbury in December 1989 .

Biographical/Historical Note

A.J. (Jim) Spilsbury was born in Findern, Derbyshire in 1905, the only child of recent immigrants to Canada, Ashton Wilmot and Alice Maud Blizard Spilsbury. He grew up on the B.C. coast, mainly on Savary Island. At the age of thirteen Spilsbury went to the Orient on board the S.S. Melville Dollar as a merchant marine

officer apprentice. Seasick and lonely, Spilsbury spent many an hour in the radio room of the freighter. This experience sparked a lifelong interest and extremely successful business career.

Returning to B.C. sixteen months later, Spilsbury worked in the logging industry. By the age of 17, he had earned a steam donkey logging engineer certificate and enough money to buy radio parts, batteries and tubes. He set himself up in business building radio sets for his Savary Island neighbours, then for the logging and tow boat operators and fishing industry, providing service on their radios as well. He travelled up and down the coast in a small boat, the "5BR", servicing equipment and taking orders for more.

On April 18, 1941, Spilsbury & Hepburn came into being when Spilsbury joined forces with Jim Hepburn a fellow ham radio operator who was also in the radio service business. They decided to apply their expertise with high frequency radios to solving the communications problems plaguing the rugged coast and interior of B.C. They opened an office at 570 Cardero Street in Vancouver. Spilsbury continued to travel the coast servicing radios and Hepburn located in the Vancouver premise making and repairing radio equipment. By the mid-1940's they were also producing radiotelephones. The company was incorporated as Spilsbury Tindall Ltd. in 1941.

In 1943, Spilsbury bought an old single engine seaplane to more quickly service his customers up and down the B.C. coast. In 1945, Queen Charlotte Airlines Ltd. was born. Spilsbury soon expanded the airlines to carry passengers as well radio equipment. By 1955 when Spilsbury and his partners sold their shares in the company, Queen Charlotte Airlines Ltd. (renamed Pacific Western Airlines Ltd.) had 30 planes and was ranked the third largest carrier in Canada.

Meanwhile Spilsbury & Tindall Ltd. continued to grow, developing and manufacturing communications systems and equipment especially for use on boats and in remote areas. A 50 foot vessel, "Blythe Spirit", as well as the Vancouver lab served as the research and testing facilities. In 1981, Spilsbury sold his shares in the company, renamed Spilsbury Communications Ltd., which not only had plant

space in Vancouver but outlets and agents around the world. What started as a two-man B.C. operation back in 1941 had turned into an internationally acclaimed business and Canada's largest exporter of radio-telephone equipment.

Spilsbury's accomplishments, however, do not lie solely in these entrepreneurial ventures. He is an author, having published three books, *Spilsbury's Coast*, *The Accidental Airline* and *Spilsbury's Album*. He is a recognized authority on coastal navigation. He has given courses for over 25 years to the Vancouver Power Squadron of which he at one time was president. Lastly, Spilsbury is an acclaimed B.C. artist, a painter of evokative pastels of his beloved B.C. coast.

The Man Behind Spilsbury Communications

Ashton James (Jim) Spilbury
Entrepreneur
By Philip Collings

Radioman, airline operator, businessman, author, artist, chronicler of West Coast life. The list of Jim Spilsbury's accomplishments could be extended almost indefinitely. But the most important, for the purposes of this article, is "author." Jim wrote *Spilsbury's Coast*, *The Accidental Airline* and *Spilsbury's Album*. These books are readily available and one hopes they won't go out of print for a long time.

Jim wasn't, in fact, born on the West Coast – he was born in 1905 at Findern, Derbyshire, in England. His parents were among those romantic souls that settled in remote and scenic parts of the Province prior to World War I. The Spilsburys took their young family (Jim being a babe in arms) to Savary Island, five miles off British Columbia's mainland coast, at Lund. Among the downsides of this choice were a tent for accommodation and a one-room school with a handful of students for the children's education. The school took Jim up to high school entrance where his formal education stopped. His mother then apprenticed him on a merchant ship, the *Melville Dollar*, with the idea that he'd take up a career as a ship's officer. A combination of chronic seasickness and loneliness led to his being bought out, but in spite of this, the trip led to a career for Jim. The only friend

he had aboard was the radio operator, who, to fill the time, taught him the rudiments of radio theory and practice.

Now, Jim was a born entrepreneur, with an inbred instinct for spotting a commercial opportunity. He knew (who better) the solitude of those long winter nights in the isolated camps and settlements up the coast, and he appreciated the people's longing for human contact, both by communication and by transportation. So first he provided them with communication by the sale and servicing of radio sets and then he provided them with transportation in the form of a fleet of floatplanes. These ventures had long gestation periods, made all the longer because Jim started, literally, with no money at all. He is living proof of the old saying that with enough enthusiasm and energy, you don't need capital to be a capitalist.

At first, Jim made his own radios and made his sales and service calls in a small open boat provided by a nine-horsepower Buffalo motor "which you started with a Johnson bar" – one must bear in mind that he was taking this ancient clunker all the way up through the Northern Gulf Islands as far as Loughborough Inlet. A big moment came in 1936 when he bought a 40-foot cabin cruiser which he called the Five BR (after his radio call-sign), and paid for at the rate of \$1.00 a day. He lived aboard, extended his business range to the north end of Vancouver Island, and even used it as a floating home for his wife and eldest son. He started a branch of the radio business in Vancouver and hired some help, but his main problem was the time it took one slow boat to ship parts and make service calls, as the Five BR could only make seven knots. In 1942, Jim had to make a quick trip back to the Vancouver office and a client bought him an air-ticket home on a Canadian Pacific Airlines' Rapide biplane. This trip took an hour-and-a-half as opposed to a week in the 5 BR. Ever alert for a business opening, Jim began to look out for airplanes. Since this was in the middle of World War II, gas was hard to get. Jim had a government contract for a series of radio/telephone stations, which had been placed on the outer coast of Vancouver Island to watch for a Japanese invasion. He was able to parlay this into a licence to operate a small float plane in support and so obtain the necessary fuel. Jim also had an aviator cousin named Rupert who

had airplanes for sale (or at least available), and now had a small biplane on floats called the Waco (named after the factory in Waco, Texas). Jim still had little or no money but was able to raise the \$500 price for this plane on his life insurance. Needless to say, as soon as he got the Waco, he used it to transport passengers as well as radio parts. He even put out bright red illegal posters of the Waco with a sign saying, "It pays to fly." This brought him into instant and long-term conflict with the Aviation Inspection Division of the Federal government. Jim had limited patience with rules and regulations.

A story from this period may illustrate the rough-and-tumble nature of early flying. In the winter of 1944-45, a mining company paid Jim a premium price to rent the Waco for four days, with the condition that they'd provide their own pilot. "Well and good," thought Jim, figuring how much he'd save by not having to pay a pilot himself. At the end of the four days, Jim got his beautiful airplane back, but whereas it had started gleaming red-and-black, now it was totally covered with dark grey sludge from one end to the other. During the course of a loud telephone conversation, the miner bashfully disclosed what had happened. The access to his mine was usually by boat along a lake, but this winter the lake was frozen and the mine cut off. Someone had the brilliant idea of spreading lampblack on the surface of the ice, to absorb the sun's heat and melt a channel through to the mine. The ice wasn't thick enough to bear a truck. Eureka! Hire an airplane and the lampblack could be spread without any vehicle actually touching the ice.

Ingenious but impractical. What actually happened was that the lampblack was sucked back into the airflow around the plane and deposited on the surface like a spray of paint. The pilot only landed her by sticking his head out of a window.

Shortly after this, the war came to an end, and war surplus aircraft began to be available and the many wartime restrictions that had put a spoke in the wheels of the Jim Spilsburys of this world were removed. Jim was able to buy a modest fleet of Stranraer flying boats, some Noorduyn Norsemen floatplanes, and, later, some Canso flying boats and DC3 land planes. The various arms of Jim's operations were incorporated and made more efficient. The story was now about Queen Charlotte Airlines as a company. The

company had many ups and downs- mercy flights, fatal crashes – and, in 1955, Jim sold it to Pacific Western Airlines. Air transport had evolved to such size and sophistication that the market would only support a few lines. Jim devoted himself full time to the radio business until he sold that in 1981 at the age of 76. By then he was living in the Copper Cliff area of West Vancouver.

I hesitate to say that Jim Spilsbury retired, because his writing, painting in pastels, travelling abroad and cruising the coast, in a more comfortable vessel than the Five BR, kept him pretty busy until his death in April 2003 at the age of 97.

http://archives.westvancouver.ca/communityvoices/spilsbury/spilsbury_essay_p.htm

Right: photo of Jim Spilsbury from his 1993 induction to Order of British Columbia



Northern Communication & Navigations Systems Limited (NCNS Ltd.), Yellowknife, NWT

We have manufactured a portable High Frequency (HF) antenna specifically for use in a northern environment. This is the “NCNS model 85”. To date nearly 4,000 have been produced. This antenna coupled with the Spilsbury SBX 11A, has become the “Bush Radio” widely used throughout the Arctic.