

An Anorak Adventure

"Offshore 98" made some radio freaks' dreams come true

A Feature by Björn Quäck

Fact or fairy tale? Many listeners probably thought "Offshore 98" would remain nothing but a rumour. They were wrong. The special station finally made it to the airwaves over the Easter weekend 1999 and proved to be one of the most exciting projects the German free radio scene has come up with for a long time. For a couple of days there was a swimming, swinging radio station broadcasting on short, medium and even long wave from a vessel in the North Sea.

Short wave piracy, free radio from Eastern Belgium, private radio in Germany. Helmut Peters had been involved in almost anything a radioman could think of. There was just one thing missing - broadcasting off the shore from a radio ship! Some of Helmut's mates from his days with Radio Benelux and Telstar shared his dream. "That idea had been in our heads for a long time," he says. But for years the project made no progress because the most important of all was missing, a vessel to hire for a few days, big enough for antennas and run by a crew you can trust. Without foreign support "Offshore 98" would probably never have made it to the High Seas.

The original plan was to go on the air in 1998 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of offshore radio in Europe. Several DJs had already put together some programmes on board the MV Communicator, former home of Radio Laser 558. An appropriate place to relive the atmosphere of broadcasting from a ship, even though it anchored just in the IJsselmeer. Just a few days after that recording session Q-Radio (1224 kHz) took over the floating radio station and removed the Laser studio.

The whole project was kept secret for a long time. Well, as secret as possible when a group of few radio enthusiasts was informed and asked to join. Finding people for that adventure wasn't easy, some staff quit before it went any further, others didn't want to participate at all. Not everyone was happy about the idea of "Offshore 98". Herbert Visser, formerly with Radio Monique on board the MV Ross Revenge, warned the organizers. His point was that the Dutch parliament was discussing the liberalization of the country's Marine Offences Act (the law which forced stations like Radio Northsea International and Veronica off the air in 1974). Herby was afraid that a new radio vessel would make politicians change their minds and make everything worse.



Technicians working hard onboard the radioship

The stormy weather ruined the plans. The first attempt to hit the airwaves on the 2nd weekend in October 1998 was cancelled, simply because it would be too risky to sail when the North Sea was that rough. Half a year later, at Easter, the sea was supposed to have calmed down enough for a second try. The name "Offshore 98" remained the same, so jingles and programmes produced the year before would not have been a waste. Eventually, a fishing vessel was hired (34 metres long, 7 metres wide, with 4 members of crew, and 3 masts) to take 13 radio anoraks out to the North Sea.

When the ship had reached international waters, the technicians installed the transmitting equipment right on deck. On Good Friday (April 2nd), at 16.00 UTC tests commenced. The official start took place next morning, at around 05.00 UTC. For almost 2 days "Offshore 98" stayed on the air and closed down Easter Sunday (April 4th) at 23.00 UTC. The station was broadcasting simultaneously on long, medium and short wave, but the vast majority of listeners picked up the signal on 6210 kHz (as proved by some 70 reception reports that arrived at the station's P.O.Box the following weeks). Two experienced shortwave pirates from Germany, Chris Ise (Crazy Wave Radio) and Jens Martin (Radio Benelux), had brought two of their transmitters on board, 100 and 120 watts of power, plus a halfwave dipole. DXers from Italy, Spain and Finland heard the station fairly well, but

reception in Germany could have been better. Helmut thought this might have been because the antenna was far from ideal. Usually the dipole performs best if the wire is about 7-8 metres above the ground... it was much higher above sea level then.

"I was amazed the transmitters didn't mind running for 12 hours nonstop," Chris was surprised how well the cooling system worked. But it would have been a surprise if no technical problems had occurred. "The medium wave transmitter almost went into smoke," Chris refers to a rather bad incident in the evening. The coil which protects the P.A. against RF getting back into the rig got too hot and had to be replaced during the night. The problem was most likely caused by all the energy around the ship, with 3 transmitters on the air at the same time, disturbing each other.



Climbing the mast

Therefore, the medium wave transmitter capable of 200 watts actually put out as little as 25 watts, Helmut guesses. However, listeners from Denmark, England, Holland and Belgium who live close to the shoreline managed to pick up the station on 1566 kHz. A DXpert from London claims he also logged signals on 279 kHz. "But this can't be true," Helmut comments. It was his idea to combine the offshore adventure with a "free radio first", broadcasting on long wave, too. But this didn't turn out to be the big success. The main mast, some 12 metres high, was too short for the vertical antenna which needed 15, if not 20 metres. In the end, the aerial looked more like an "S". At least the 100 watt transmitter formerly used in GDR air traffic was audible on the ship, but most likely not beyond.

The on-air studio needed some special preparation for the High Seas, to avoid problems with RF feedback. "We used equipment, as simple as can be," DJ Walter Koenig reports. Pre-recorded shows were played from ordinary cassette tapes, not the hi-tech MD. To Walter's surprise the CD players did their job. "But we had to wrap them up in tin foil before." The ship crew which had been informed of the radio plans before couldn't watch TV due to all the interference.

There was little time to relax that weekend. Apart from handling the transmitters several hours of broadcasts were presented from the small studio below the deck. The music shows included news bulletins, weather forecasts and some live reports about what was happening on the ship. 72 professionally produced jingles were available, too. Some of the voices heard on the air included those of Ron Visser, A.J. Beirens, Tommy Bollmann, Stephen Young, Paul Graham, Ton Vogt, Bert de Graaf, Chet Reuter und Rob Devil.

"Offshore 98" was not there to remember the glory days of Radio Caroline, Big L or RNI. Some of the staff on board only knew those legends from tapes, the youngest anorak was aged 21, the oldest 50. "Our idea was to spread more than just nostalgia," Helmut explains. The station wanted to show how offshore radio could sound in the late 90s. Well, some listeners thought it sounded too much like a commercial FM service.

But things got really exciting when another ship seemed to follow the radio vessel. The transmitters went off the air, the captain ordered full speed - and found it that it was a false alarm. For the whole weekend the "Offshore 98" ship cruised across the North Sea, and the night watch had to keep an eye not only on the transmitters. Helmut had thought the chances to get trouble with the authorities were rather high, perhaps 50-50. He almost seemed to be a little bit disappointed when nobody was waiting for them to return to the harbour. "Well, after all we were quite happy that nothing like that happened."

Very few cases of seasickness were reported. Chris: "The first night I saw the fish a second time." The sea was very quiet, apart from the final day of the journey. Walter: "I just felt bad from drinking Heineken beer." Everyone was lucky to get back on shore. To take the first shower after 4 days...



Just before the start of the transmissions

Helmut wouldn't want to miss the special experience of that offshore weekend. There was a unique atmosphere, he says. A group of very different people from various countries met in the uncomforness of a small ship and worked together for their common goal, to put a radio station on the air. And there was the challenge of solving some extraordinary technical difficulties. If everything worked perfectly, the trip would have been much less attractive. "It was a real adventure," Helmut sums it up.

But will "Offshore 98" remain a one-off station? Well, Helmut considers the Easter broadcast a "suggestion" for other radio freaks to do the same. However, few will find the financial backing for such a venture, with costs of more than 10,000 DEM. On the other hand, the experience gained could help others to make not the same mistakes again. "For example, I really can't recommend broadcasting on long wave," Helmut says. The short wave broadcasts, however, didn't cause many problems, but he would prefer a 76 metre outlet during the night. 100-200 watts of power are easy to handle and enough to cover a wide target area. Next time he moves out to the sea,

he wouldn't put up a dipole but use an "inverted V" instead. Several transmitters running in parallel are not recommendable either, and so is broadcasting on FM with low power, perhaps 20 miles off the coast, far away from the nearest listeners.