

Technology changed dramatically over the years

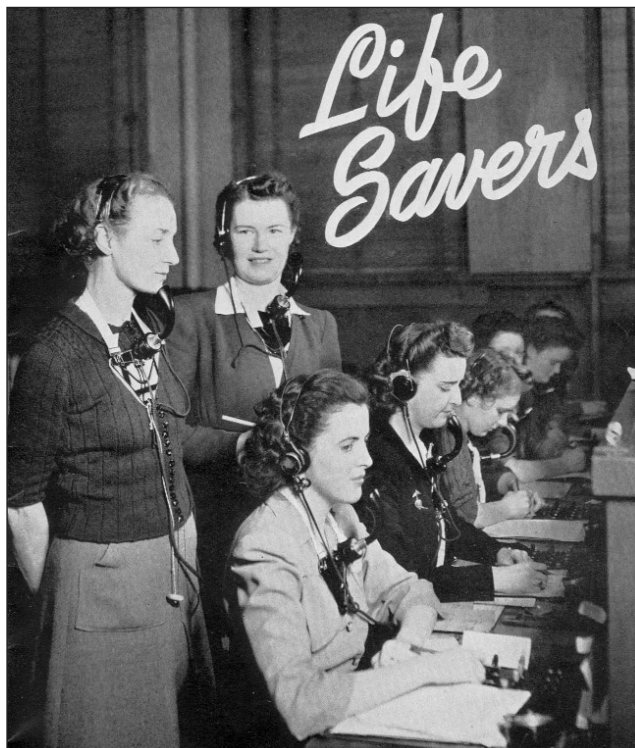
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their life history. You felt that you had to look after them. And logging camps always had something going [on]. They either had a logger injured, or something you had to respond to.”

If an operator ever heard a shipboard caller say that his ship was “taking on water,” she was immediately to interrupt. “As soon as they said that, you would open up your key [interrupt the conversation] and say, ‘Are you in distress?’” recalled Bourne. All of the other radiotelephone operators would clear their calls, and the distress call would be put up on all three of the radio telephone board’s channels, as well as on a monitor. Other ships listening to those channels and in the vicinity of the troubled ship could then alter course to help.

Long distance and radiotelephone operators were required to stick to a set list of phrases when handling calls, like “ready on your call” or “CZO Vancouver calling.” “We had a book that was almost two inches thick that we had to know cover to cover,” said Mary Orre, who worked as an operator in the 1940s and ‘50s. “There were umpteen different phrases; you learned them all by heart. There was a lot of memorizing.”

McCubbin said there was so much to learn, it was like going to school. “When you were on your own, you were so nervous that you were going to blow it.”



A 1945 issue of *Telephone Talk* told how radiotelephone operators played a part in the rescue of a logger who had lost his leg.

photo courtesy Telus

The operators worked a variety of shifts—on the long distance board, the radiotelephone board, the rate desk where long distance charges were calculated and on the route desk, which provided routing information for long distance calls. Many of them handled calls from celebrities.

McCubbin handled a call from a young Tony Bennett. “I remember him because his language wasn’t that great,” she said.

Bob Hope and Bing Crosby used to call the U.S. from their chartered yachts during fishing trips to B.C., said

Archer. “Bing Crosby always was with a jolly crowd,” said Archer. “But they were sometimes a bit free with their language.”

When Queen Elizabeth visited Vancouver in the 1950s, a buzz of excitement went through the long distance office when the Queen called home. “They said, ‘Queen Elizabeth’s calling her husband,’” Hanson imitated in an excited whisper.

Archer said the operators would try to sneak to listen in on the call, but were afraid of getting into trouble. “They didn’t go too far with that.”

As the years went by, ra-

diotelephone technology gradually improved. By the time the long distance and radiotelephone operations moved to a new office at 768 Seymour St., around 1959 or 1960, the radiotelephone board was becoming increasingly automated and the radiotelephone section was in a room of its own, under the supervision of Chief Operator Maude Eccleston, who worked for B.C. Telephone for 50 years.

“The equipment had changed; it was an entirely different board,” said Bourne, who continued to work for B.C. Telephone until 1986. “The calls came automatically into your headset. You didn’t pick up a cord and answer a signal; you just got the calls.”

As automation came in, people in isolated areas up the coast no longer needed to call the radio room—they could dial themselves, without going through an operator.

Still, the operators—most now in their 70s—have fond memories of an era when radiotelephone was the only connection with the outside world for many small communities in B.C.

“These people up in Namu, and Klemtu and Dean Channel, Fair Harbour and R.W. Lodge Memorial Hospital—all of these places relied on 24-hour service from the operators,” said Archer. “[Radiotelephone] was a section of communication that was vital. I think B.C. wouldn’t have progressed the way it did without it.”