Armed Forces Radio (the Early Days) – I

Lead: During World War II, to the lonely GI, Armed Forces Radio was a welcome reminder of home. It is a part of the war that continues to this day.

Intro.: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: In 1942 Allied forces began to assemble for the Normandy invasion in bases throughout the English countryside. For many, this was the first time away from home and they missed it. To pass the time they listened to the radio, and for that the only choice was the British Broadcasting Company. This was the heyday of the BBC. All over
Europe, indeed, all over the world, those who could listen were dependent on the BBC for news that was largely free from bias, very accurate, and absent the hopeless propaganda that poured out of Berlin, Rome and Tokyo. To the American ear, however, the BBC was deadly dull. The music was boring, the humor dry and out of context, the announcers starchy and pretentious.

General Eisenhower had a huge army waiting and training and to keep up morale he wanted to start a GI network to bring news and commentary, variety shows, music, and comedy direct from home. The BBC bureaucrats hit the ceiling and began intensive guerrilla warfare in the halls of power to stop it. Public broadcasting in Britain enjoyed a monopoly and if the United States had a
network, other Allies would want to have their own stations. Having a bunch of different radio stations might detract from the lofty goals of Allied unity. Essayist Patrick Morley suspects that the real reason was the fear that the BBC's once-captive audience would evaporate and start listening to GI Radio, a fear that was eventually realized. By the end of the war it is estimated that five million Britons were regular listeners. Despite opposition and under severe restrictions, American Forces Network went on the air on July 4, 1943. Next time: The shotgun marriage of AFN and the BBC

At the University of Richmond, I’m Dan Roberts.

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