

Letter to the Editor

SWAN ISLAND

I attach a copy of the letter I received from E. Howard Hunt relating to Swan Island and some interpretive text about it. I would be grateful to you and the *Review* to see it published.

Hunt is wrong about the transmitters already being there in 1954, although there was a radio installation (it was a long time ago and he was pretty old). Some utility radio facilities were already on the island. But the Black Station used a transmitter the Navy brought in from Europe. (This is detailed in my article). Hunt's handnote PS about Pan American is interesting in that Pan American Airways seems to have had something to do with the radio beacon (callsign SWA) on the island. United Fruit "owned" the island in a complicated way -- much as some say United Fruit owned the CIA. But as of 1954, Pan American Airways may have been the main commercial American presence - if there was any at all. Pan Am was the "American National Airline," started for western hemisphere business travel. Then PanAm One went West around the world and PanAm Two went East around the world. *That* was a really nice way to travel, especially once they got 747s.

Going back to Hunt's letter gave me some qualms about how I had understood it. I did read it, and do read it now, to make reference to unwelcome visitors while he and Phillips were on the island. But Phillips writes about such a visit

much later (at the time of anti-Castro broadcasts) by Hondurans, when only one CIA security man manned the post. Fortunately they mainly wanted to party once they had established by their presence Honduran sovereignty. But Hunt is quite concrete in his reference, even as I look back on that letter now many years later.

I have no doubt that it was David Phillips who picked Swan Island for the "Radio Swan" anti-Castro broadcasts, inasmuch as he'd been there for the anti-Arbenz Black Station work. The CIA memo telling the history of that station doesn't name him, but I also have no doubt he wrote that memo (I quote some of it in my article).

I had the impression reading David Phillips's *Night Watch* book that it was part of a Company charm offensive. Maybe his formation of the Association of Foreign Intelligence Officers was also part charm offensive. But how "official" would be hard to say. I do think that, like Hunt, Phillips was an honorable man -- but with way better luck.

THIS IS AN APPENDIX TO THE RADIO HISTORY OF SWAN ISLAND.¹

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That article of mine cited a communication from E. Howard Hunt. Mr. Hunt wrote to me about Central Intelligence Agency activities

on Swan Island in 1954. The CIA directed these and related actions against the Guatemalan government. He and David Phillips set up a “Black” propaganda radio station on Swan Island and perhaps several in neighboring countries. The programming, done by Phillips, sought to overthrow the regime, duly elected, of Col. Jacobo Arbenz. It succeeded.

Not long after he wrote to me, he wrote to *Esquire* magazine.² He responded to an article it had published about Jack Richardson, another CIA officer. Hunt compared their Agency work: “... like Jack Richardson, I was fortunate to have a career I cared about in interesting parts of the world....” But he first made his point: “ Richardson and I were engaged in carrying out the nation’s business, and I was proud of that.”

I have been urged to publish Mr. Hunt’s letter. After he wrote it to me, he conveyed all rights in it to me. There follows a scan of this letter. The letter and all rights in it belong to me, and I assert all legal and moral rights with respect to it, especially that its authorship and ownership always be recognized and that its integrity be always maintained.

I have come to believe that, at all times, Mr. Hunt acted in good faith and all honesty in “carrying out the nation’s business.” He paid a high price for his loyalty and integrity. His loyalty to it exceeded that of the nation he served to him.

I know that Mr. Hunt wanted the world, and its historians, to know what he had done, with whom he had done it, and to whom he had done it, and why. Hence, any reasonable “fair use” may be made of some of the text (but not the image) of his letter to me, respecting its integrity.

Bart Lee

ENDNOTES

1. Bartholomew Lee, “Swan Island, its radio history including the CIA and the revenge of United Fruit” *Antique Wireless Association Review*, 2010, vol. 23, pages 115-140.
2. *Esquire*, 1999, May, page 18.

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December 6, 1998

Dear Mr. Lee:

Thanks to you, via Bill Snyder, I have your excellent and very interesting monograph on wireless espionage. All of us who worked at espionage recognize the incalculable value of the craft and its contributions.

As to Swan Island, it was, and perhaps is, a piece of real estate owned, leased or occupied at the time by a cooperative radio communications company that may have had a tie-in with United Fruit. Its transmitters were made available to our task force, specifically to Dave Phillips, who developed a propaganda writing team of experienced Guatemalan refugee writers. They put together the broadcasts that in no small way contributed to the success of our effort to rid Guatemala of Col. Arbenz.

I would suggest looking into David Atlee Phillips' books for more information on Swan Island. One incident I recall, is the "invasion" of a boatload of "students" (à la Iran) resolved to take back the island from gringos. We couldn't permit that and did not, not at a time when, as the Bard put it, the horny hand of Time was on the prick of noon. (Figuratively). Dave was my propaganda chief while I dealt with political matters involving the succession.

With thanks and cordial regards,



