

The bottom plate mystery, a tech-fiction story from two worlds.

Reluctantly told by Louis Meulstee PAOPCR, exclusively to those who ever had a look inside a No. 19 Set.

Part 1.

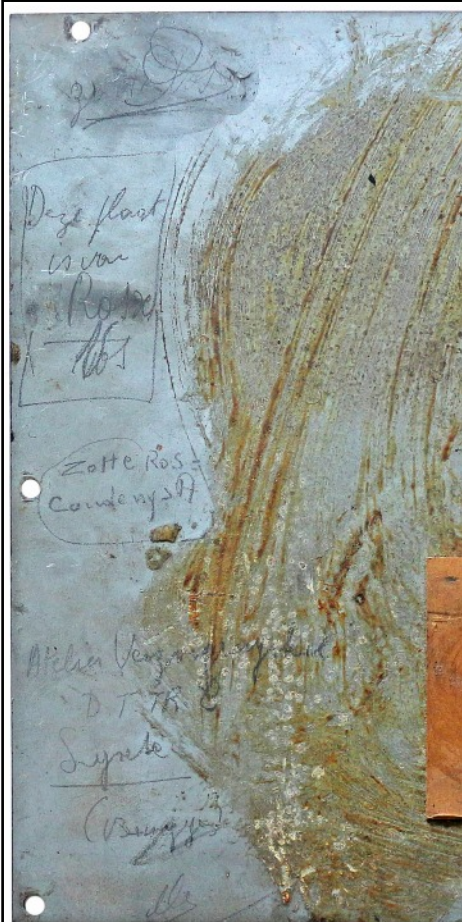
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Introduction

This tale is inspired by happenings that occurred to me. It started many years ago when I bought a rather battered Wireless Set No. 19 in Antwerp, mainly due to the fact that I wanted a British made Mk. III set to match the front panel colour of my High Power RF Amplifier No. 2. Yes, at that time we could afford to be picky. Having neither the time nor the place to restore the set, just standing idle and being decorative, it was much later that I decided to open the set's case and bottom plate in order to check the wiring and its general internal condition. Fortunately the inside was quite clean, apart from some cobwebs and dust. Having replaced a couple of cracked and leaky French manufactured capacitors, reformed and checked any possible leakage of the other capacitors, the receiver sprung into life. At the end of testing the set, I wrote my initials 'LMe' with a lead pencil on the reverse side of the bottom plate, a habit I used to do when having made an alignment or a change of com-

ponent in a set for repair. In addition, and when applicable, I often leave a note of the date and reason for the changes. When I later assembled the set and about to fit the bottom plate, my eyes were caught by some vague pencil scribbling at the back side of this plate. More amused than really interested, I tried to decipher the faded writing. To my surprise I noticed the language of the scribble: Dutch, or actually Flemish, with the readable words 'Deze plaat is van Rosx' ('This plate belongs to Rosx). Directly below was written, by a different hand, 'Zotte Rosx' (Foolish Rosx), no doubt a mate of the person Rosx. I came to the conclusion that this set might have been used in the Belgian Army, not only because of the French capacitors I found, but also to the fact that I bought the set from a Belgian surplus store and the word 'Zotte' (Foolish) is not in general use in the Netherlands. The main clue, however, was jotted at the bottom: the name of an Atelier in Bruges.



The lead pencil's scribble on the reverse side of the No.19 Set bottom plate (left).

How it all began..

After many years I am only now fit to speak about my strange experiences in Northern France. When I tried to tell this story shortly after I recovered in hospital, nobody would believe me. Realising that

I might end up in another sort of hospital, I eventually expressed that I might have dreamed it all and considered that it's all in the mind. The words 'It's all in the mind,' which Doctor McLaren spoke in

the 1946 film with David Niven 'A matter of life and death', reflects slightly what can happen to any person who is cast in a world of his own imagination after a nearly fatal accident.

[See a link to this film in the References] With the passing of the years I still wonder what really occurred to me. Radio friends, you might possibly be the only people who are able to understand this true story.....

You must know that when our now grown-up daughters were at a much younger age, we usually went to Northern France near the village of Nouvres to spend our vacation, initially camping on the ground of a farm, but later renting a stationary caravan from a local. The children loved the place, being full of adventure, woods, and friendly farms with lots of animals and so on. For my wife and me it was a good spot to relax as there were absolutely no dangers in the place and as a good custom we enjoyed each afternoon a good glass of the locally produced wine in the nearby village café. As I make friends very easily I quickly got along very well with the café owner René and I



This is the No. 19 Set I bought in Antwerp and the reverse side of the bottom plate with the mysterious lead pencil writing.

used to help him with repairs of domestic electrical appliances in his café, including nursing his vintage pre-war broadcast receiver.

Often, late in the evening when all customers were gone and René had given me my nightcap, he spoke about the war and how this changed the place and everything. Although the village was far away from the invasion beaches, there appeared to be a lot of heavy resistance from the retreating Germans against the advancing Allied Forces. The rather strong German garrison, stationed in the nearby Château, appeared to be (and in this René always turned a bit vague..) rather good customers during the occupation.

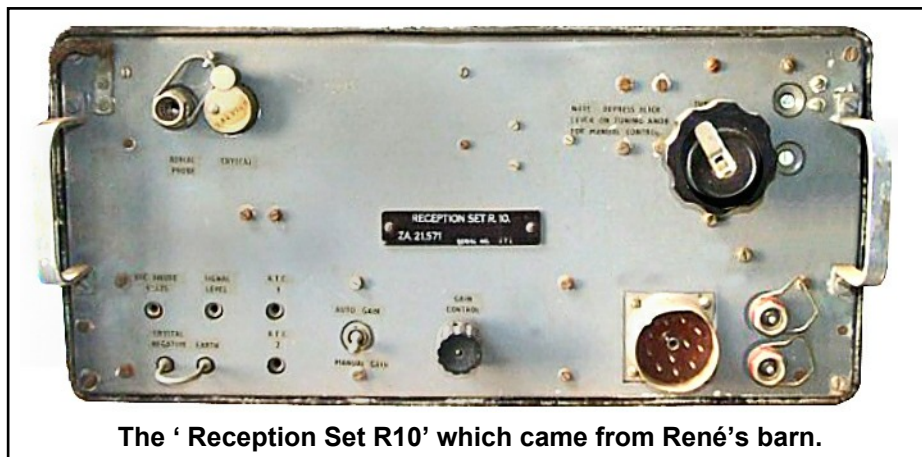
One day, when he came to know that I was interested in old military radios, René looked at me and said that he might do something in return for the television set I repaired for him the previous week: 'Come to the large barn in the orchard behind the café tomorrow morning at 11 o'clock and put on your oldest clothes.' When I returned to the caravan, I told my wife (who knew my bad habit of acquiring old radios) and she replied: 'You are not serious about taking any old rust back to home again, are you?'

Morse keys in a barn

I admit it was right of her to exclaim so, as during the previous year when we returned from our vacation in Novvres, making a long detour via West-Flanders (visiting the village of Meulenede, located south of Gent and Bruges) we passed a decayed radio surplus store (invariably known in Belgium as 'Stock Americain') where I could not resist to stop.

After knocking on the door without any reply, I went to the back of the house where I saw the owner. After my explanation that we were visiting the village my ancestors possibly came from and that we saw his shop on the way back, he smiled and appeared very pleased that I was proud to visit to the place he lives. Although West-Flemish is a rather difficult language, with its relation to the Dutch, (or should I say that Dutch is related to West Flemish..) we understand each other quite well and when I asked him whether the shop was to be opened I came to know that he ceased business about half a year ago and most of the remaining inventory was brought to the local tip.

But I was invited to see what was left behind, 'Some crumbs,' he added laughing, 'which must soon be cleared.' Apart from an empty and very rusty No. 18 Set case, and a few No. 46 Set crystals, all of which I could take for free, he said that in



The 'Reception Set R10' which came from René's barn.

the barn of the farmer opposite the road he used to store some of this stuff.' Ask my friend Emile if there is anything left; I have not been there in years...'

Avoiding the wife who was busy brewing a cup of tea in the camper, I slipped into the yard on the other side of the road where I found the person in question cleaning the byre.

His West Flemish accent and body odour were even stronger than his neighbour from over the road, but he understood what I wanted and slowly opened the barn for me. 'About time that we get rid of this,' he exclaimed whilst showing me a few very dirty wooden packing cases filled with old and rusted away Morse keys. 'The rest of the stuff has already been brought to the tip, but this is what was left behind.' Eventually I was asked to pay a price for the boxes, a sum which went directly into the pockets of the smirking Emile. I managed to smuggle the cases into the car (we had a Volkswagen T1 transporter converted to a homebrew camper at that time) and when arrived home I had put these in the garage, went to work the next day and forgot the whole thing. Just a few days later my wife said that she had seen a mouse in the garage, something I did not expect as the place was quite secure against rodents. Remembering the barn and the wooden boxes, I realised that the mouse was unwillingly included in the sale, which I had to admit to the wife.... Eventually I got rid of the creatures (it was a family of three...) and it was not until a few months later I discovered that the boxes contained most versions and variations of the British Key W.T. 8 Amp, (a later inspiration for WftW Compendium 7 and Pamphlet No. 5, but that is another story).

A No. 10 Set in a barn

Anyhow, the next day I arrived wearing my overalls (always handy to have these at hand when you are camping and like to earn free local fruit, milk, a glass of wine and friendship in exchange for help-

ing local friends and farmers with repairs of their radios or electrical installations..) René opened the large door of his barn and allowed a couple of large brown rats to escape. Look, he said, in 1944 when the Allies drove the Germans away, the château on the nearby hill was merely a ruin after the artillery fire and whilst looking for accommodation, they commandeered the café and two of my barns. He smiled a bit and told me that the British and Canadians were very good customers to his café, and business were better than it ever had been...

'My barns,' said René, 'appeared to be turned into a sort of improvised workshops for repairs of all sorts of things, but, as far as I can remember mostly as what they told me signal equipment. One of the guys in this primitive workshop, a certain Lieutenant MacMillstead, was billeted in my café and as a rule we had a glass of wine as nightcap before closing time. Now I come to think of it, he had something in his appearance that looked like you, he added, looking at me curiously.'

He continued: 'When the Germans were further driven away, most of the men who were billeted in and around the village went further and the barns were consequently emptied. I never saw MacMillstead again, although he promised me to visit the café after the war had ended. He might have died in that terrible war.'

He sighed, 'Life and business strolled on and it was only recently, when cleaning the barn to obtain some space for café stores, I discovered a loose panel in one of the corners. Ah, another rats nest, I thought, and as a matter of safety tightened my trouser trunks not to get attacked in my ..err.. nobler body parts and opened the panel a little further. As I did not see any animal droppings and parts of a nest, I became a bit more confident and finally took the whole panel away.' Whilst explaining, René directed his electric torch at a corner, went there and opened a wooden panel.

‘Well, this is what I found,’ he said ‘a war time Army wireless set, most probably left behind by that Army workshop in early 1945. Because I am not really interested in this old rust,’ said René, ‘I just left it as found, but if you want to have it, I am most happy to see it in your hands.’ To my astonishment I saw a Reception Set R10, the receiver from a Wireless Set No. 10 and a smaller item which I recognised as a Separator Channel Unit, also part of a No. 10 Set, both covered in cob-webs and the dust from years. ‘Yes, please, I certainly would like to have this René,’ I said, ‘for an article on the No. 10 Set I have been looking after this stuff.’ We took both items out of the place where they had been hidden for so many years, and as I looked around curiously to see if there might be more hidden in the shelves, René laughed and said that there was nothing more as he had already combed the place for any unwanted war relicts such as live ammo. ‘The Browning pistol and 40 rounds of ammunition I discovered were delivered to officer Crobtree at the police station across the square, as I did not want to get into trouble again.’

Returned at the caravan, in my good fortune finding the wife away, gossiping with the wife of the farmer we rented our caravan, I dusted the exterior of the R10 receiver case and front panel which had survived the years without much rust. The inside looked complete and apart from some dust at the corners, it was quite clean. The CV90 local oscillator valve was complete with its valve head, and I could even turn the knob of the tuning control, which was quite promising I thought.

When we arrived home 5 days later, I thoroughly cleaned the R10 and Separator Channel Unit, but did not make an attempt to power-up the receiver.

A visit with consequences.

The day before Christmas, during a visit to my friend Jan PA0CHS in the north of our country to pick up a few components and returning a borrowed book, he showed me his new pet: a huge Soviet R-250M receiver, almost new out of its crate. I asked him: ‘How did you manage to get this monster up here on the first floor?’, knowing Jan’s addiction of acquiring any model of Soviet radio in existence, and also that his wife put him on ration: one new radio in, two out! As always, he was not inclined to discuss this subject and quickly diverted me to another pet he had been working on which was recently completed: an original WW2 Willys MB jeep and asked whether I wanted to drive it for a few km’s. I said that I would rather drive a British 8-cwt

or 15-cwt Morris wireless truck, (which I, even at this very day, still haven’t had the chance to), but as this vehicle comes close, so yes, please! ‘Here are the key and the papers,’ Jan said, ‘I must go to my office for a few hours, and let’s meet here later this afternoon,’ he continued. How little did we both know that THIS would never happen....

Jan jumped quickly into his car for an emergency meeting (he is working for a former state owned company, at that time recently privatised with consequently

crafted, but to my opinion ugly radios. (The odour of German radios is not pleasant; it is like that smell in a Siemens telephone exchange of the 1950s. I prefer British radios – nothing beats the scent of the interior of a well kept No. 18 Set, or even better that of a No. 38 Set. Of course, this is all a matter of opinion.)

I decided to take with me the No. 10 Set receiver I got from René and some documentation on this topic I had copied at the Royal Signals Museum at Blandford Camp for a proposed article (No, I had



Nouvres, December 1944, at the wheel of a Morris 8-cwt, 4-wheeled wireless 4x2, with 6-cylinder engine, in front of René’s barn. This picture was taken shortly after I acquired the vehicle as a replacement for the wrecked jeep when I rather unwillingly arrived in France. The rather worn-out vehicle was at that time still equipped with a No. 11 Set (mounted on fore and aft off-side shelf) and the old pattern Aerial Base No. 3 and Antennae Rods ‘D’. I had this installation removed as it took too much space for my travels to No. 10 Set locations (Part 2).

60% redundancy in staff, now doing the job for two although at the time there were three employed for it...) and left me alone with the jeep.

After inspection of the oil level and how much petrol there was left in the tank, not wanting to get stuck with an empty tank in the middle of nowhere. I shouldn’t have to worry, however, knowing my friend Jan, who is a very accurate chap. I found the petrol tank completely filled up, plenty for a long drive. In deciding where to go I had to choose between visiting Jan PA3RTX in Stadskanaal or Jan PA3... in Witharen, (why is it that 50% of the Dutch hams are named Jan?) both being radio amateur friends living relatively nearby. After a look at the grey clouds which boded snow, I decided to visit Jan in Stadskanaal, the nearest place, whom I had not seen for a long time. He is the proud owner of a huge and impressive collection of war-time German radios, and although I am really not so keen on this stuff, I cannot deny to have interest in the mechanical details of those well

not made a start with the Wireless for the Warrior series at that time....) in order to point Jan to some aspects of this unit. After having stowed this carefully in the jeep, I took off in the direction of Stadskanaal, taking as much as possible the smaller tracks through small woods and heath land. It might have been after about 6km, whilst snow began to fall, that in the midst of a rather narrow bent in the track that I saw a light flash from my left, followed by an explosion causing loss of control of the vehicle. The Jeep made a sharp turn, overturned and I blacked out.

‘He is alive, Sergeant Major’

‘He is alive, Sergeant Major.’ was the first thing I heard when I awoke, and felt the hands of someone trying to pull me from under the overturned vehicle. ‘Very good Bombardier, try to be careful, he seems to have a nasty head wound,’ a second voice said, ‘Gunner Parkins give the Bombardier a hand and lay him in the lorry.’ Then I became once again unconscious ...

When I woke up again, I was lying on a stretcher, my head in bandage. Whilst trying to open my eyes I said 'Waar ben ik, wat is er gebeurt?'

From a stretcher beside me a voice shouted, 'Corporal, he's awake!'

A medical orderly came swiftly to me and said, 'Hello Lieutenant MacMillstead, glad you woke up, and no use speaking Gaelic. We found your name on your papers and ID tag. In addition, your uniform and papers showed that you are REME.' Weakly, I tried to tell him in English that I did not understand what he meant, and where was I?

The RAMC corporal looked at me in pity and said: 'You were found under your overturned and under snowed vehicle by an accidentally passing Royal Artillery section.'

He continued 'They took you and your driver from under the overturned vehicle, and delivered you along with weapon, kit and the wooden boxes to the nearest village they passed where fortunately this improvised field hospital was established. Your driver was badly wounded and hurriedly transported to a military surgical hospital.'

He added 'Much blood from your wound was lost and you must have had a guardian angel guiding the Royal Artillery chaps to the place of the accident.' Slowly I tried to make up my mind, closing my eyes again, and thinking that I was becoming insane or dying. Was this to be the end?

To be finished in the second and final part.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Cor Moerman, PA0VYL, who accompanied me in the late 1970's to various surplus stores in Flanders and Jan Rijnders, PA0CHS, for the pleasant journeys to (mostly) German radio flea markets in the 1980s and 90s'.

With apologies to the British comedy series 'allo-allo', and 'It ain't half hot mom.'

The photographs in this story are courtesy Royal Signals Museum. Without the permission for access and assistance to the museum archives by current and past directors, curators and archivists, this story could not have been written. A complete No. 10 Set with Signalling Unit No. 10 that survived the years is on permanent display in the museum.

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For those who are not familiar with British Army abbreviations:

- C.S.O. = Chief Signal Officer
- Key W.T. 8 Amp = Key Wireless Telegraphy 8 Ampere.
- R.E.M.E. = Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
- R.A.M.C. = Royal Army Medical Corps
- R.A.S.C. = Royal Army Service Corps
- S.R.D.E. = Signals Research and Development Establishment
- B.A.O.R. = British Army of the Rhine
- C.C.F. = Combined Cadet Force