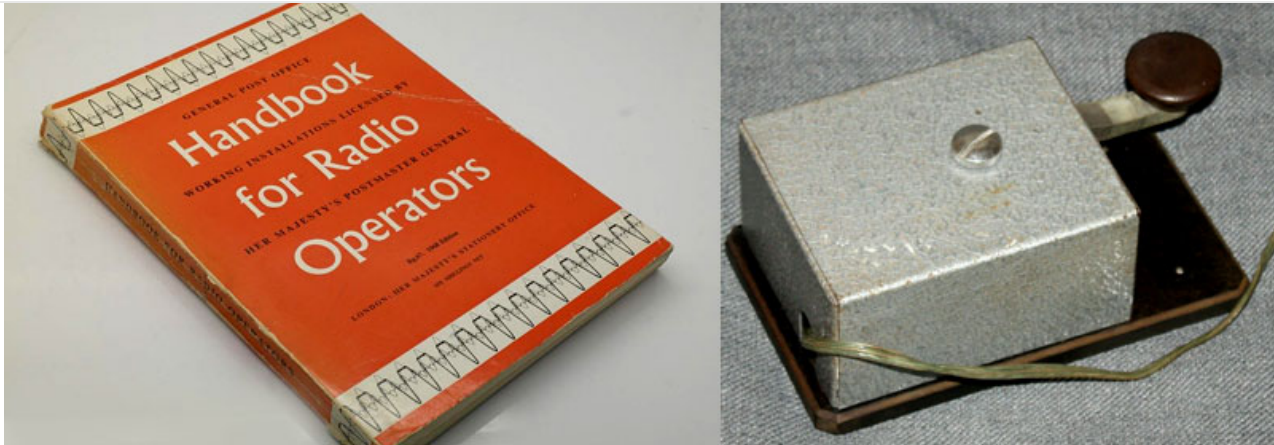


Fiction: The last Radio Officer

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*By Dave Ellis**

Joe Black came awake with a start. For a moment he couldn't recall where he was. He saw a strange tartan pattern filling his vision. Then, opening his eyes more widely, saw his own gnarled and rheumatically hands resting on what he now perceived to be a rug over his legs.

It began to come back to him. He was sitting in his armchair in his dayroom and must have dozed off. But where exactly was that? Ah, yes, a retirement home. A nurse would come in soon with tea and tab nabs.

Then he became aware of himself more fully. He was the eldest resident, now 119 years old, and had been here for 20 years. He was outliving them all. And he still had all his faculties, even if his memory was becoming erratic and his body didn't do a whole lot these days.

Joe's mind began to drift again. He remembered he'd just been dreaming. He was back in the Radio Room of the *New Zealand Star*, a Merchant Navy Radio Officer. He'd been trying to clear radio traffic for some time in difficult atmospheric conditions.

The Old Man popped his head around the door. "Sparks, has that telegram gone yet?"

"Sorry, Sir, the static out there is terrible. I'm still trying, and won't go off watch until I've cleared it. I'll let you know straight away when it's gone."

"Thanks, Joe. Talk to you later." The door closed softly behind him.

Joe turned back to the radio console. Ah, that was better, he could hear GKA now. Still plenty of QRN, but QRK3 at least. He began to work the morse key, repeatedly calling Portishead. After about 10 minutes he was recognised. Working frequencies were agreed and he was given QRY 18 – his turn was number 18.

Blast! There was every chance the link would have faded by the time his turn came around. And it could easily be an hour. Since his watch had already finished an hour ago, it looked like being a long and probably unprofitable wait.

* * * * *

"Hello, Joe, like a nice cup of tea and a biscuit or two?"

Joe jerked awake. He had drifted back into his dream again! That telegram was cleared, in reality, about 80 years ago; that lovely ship had been scrapped some 10 years later, and the Old Man, Captain Price, had died 20 years after that.

"Yes please, dear. Don't forget, two sugars. My, you're looking very pretty today."

Nurse Collins laughed as she wheeled the trolley out through the door. "Joe, you're just a dirty old man! But I still love you."

Nurse Collins only ever served tea to one resident – Joe. Everybody else had to wait for the carers.

Joe chuckled to himself as he sipped his tea. Then he gave a little groan as his fingers protested at the weight of the cup. He put it down and began to nibble at a Rich Tea biscuit.

How he had loved those years at sea, and how he missed them now. Like every Radio Officer in the world, he had been forced out of a job in 1998 when the international requirements for ships changed. From then on, ship owners were allowed to use un-manned automated radio systems and satellites for communications. As had happened so many times in history, machines replaced men.

But he was one of the lucky ones. He'd had a full innings. Joe was born in 1940 and went to sea as a Junior Radio Officer in 1960. He managed to remain continuously employed right up until the end, when he was 58 years old. But many other Radio Officers were much younger at that point, and they lost their jobs just the same.

* * * * *

"Hello, Joe, how's it going?"

Joe looked up and saw a young man standing in front of him, a broad smile on his face. He looked familiar, but Joe couldn't place him.

"It's Joel, your great-great-grandson. I've found something for you to read. I think you're going to like it."

With that he took a rather battered book from his briefcase and handed it over. The cover was orange. On it in bold print was the title *Handbook for Radio Operators*. Young Joel had seen it at a boot sale and bought it for less than a pint of beer would cost.

The old man took the book in his hands wonderingly. He leafed through it. Q Codes, working frequencies, procedures, watch-keeping, it was all there. By the cover's colour he knew this edition was published in the late 1960s. A lot of memories would be revived as he dipped into the handbook in the coming months.

"And I found something else in the same batch of stuff, Joe. Look at this."

With a flourish, Joel pulled an old Morse key from the same briefcase. The key was battered, but Joe recognised it immediately: a Marconi 365FZ. Tentatively he worked the key up and down a few times. It still moved freely, and made a satisfying click each time.

He looked up at his great-great grandson. Unexpectedly, tears sprang to his eyes. "Thank you, my boy. This book has been my bible on many ships, and I've pounded this self-same key for more years than you've been alive. I'm going to enjoy them more than you can know."

Joel flushed with pleasure. He bent and kissed the patriarch on the forehead. "You're welcome, Joe. I've got to go now, but I'll look in again next week." With a smile and a wave he was gone.

Joe caressed the key, running his hand over the case lovingly. He peered at the maker's label, but his eyes were too weak to read it. Never mind, he knew darned well it was a 365FZ. He didn't need to see the label to prove that.

He recalled that this same key type was fitted on his first ship, the *City of Port Elizabeth*. He had been a callow youth of 20 when he signed on the articles as junior R/O. The seamen and stewards had called him "Marconi Saab" while the officers called him Sparks. He was fresh out of college and, in spite of two years of morse training at Wireless College, he had never operated a Morse key on the air.

He still felt the same frisson of fear thinking about going on the air live for the first time, and the elation after making a successful contact.

What was that station? Oh, yes, GNF – North Foreland Radio, defunct like every coast station in the world today. He had sent a TR, a transition report. It was coming back now. They had just left the Royal Albert Docks bound for Immingham to load cargo for South Africa.

Something disturbed his fingers and he came out of his reverie. Nurse Collins was gently removing the biscuit from his hand and pulling the rug up around his shoulders. Joe closed his eyes again.

Yes, he had sent that TR on a 365FZ. And he had encountered it and others in the same series on many ships. In later years, bug keys began to appear, and then iambic paddle keys, mostly frowned on by the wireless companies but smuggled on board and used anyway. The very early paddle keys used a valve-based electronic keyer. He had built one himself from a kit, and it worked well.

For a couple of hours Joe sat there, half dreaming, as his mind played over the many keys and the many radio rooms he had encountered in his 38 years at sea. And now he could hear the faint twitter of the 500 kHz watch receiver in the background, dozens of ships calling several different coast stations at the same time. His mind could tune any one of those in at will, blanking all others, reading the signal easily as though it were the only station transmitting. And he would hear his own callsign even when he wasn't actively listening. Casual visitors to the radio room were amazed at this trick every time.

"Joe, are you coming down to dinner tonight, or would you like to eat up here?" It was one of the young care workers, Muriel or something like it. She began to help him to sit up properly from the position he had slumped down into.

"Thanks, Muriel, I'd like to come down, please. I haven't left this blasted chair all day except for a pee."

"It's Maureen, darling, and yes, let's get you on your way."

She fetched his walking frame over, then helped him stand up and hold onto it. He tried a tentative step or two. Apart from the ever-present pain in his lower back and a little shooting pain down the back of his legs, he felt ok.

"Ok, Muriel, I'm up for it. Could you come along with me, please, just in case?"

Slowly they made their way to the lift. On the ground floor they went into the dining room, where a couple of dozen of the residents, mostly women, were already eating. A little chorus of greetings followed Joe as he made his careful way

to a seat.

The ladies made a fuss of Joe, and he received many little kisses and hugs. And he lapped it up! But it didn't help his appetite and he picked desultorily at the meal as he chatted. After all these years, some of his fellow diners still asked for his tales of life at sea, and tonight he related the incident of a drunken pilot at Lourenco Marques. The Captain had been so worried that he took Joe on one side and told him to keep the transmitter run up on 500 KHz in case the pilot caused a collision. They survived that without incident. When pressed to tell them what he did ashore after they docked he had to water events down substantially.

Joe wasn't feeling too well after that, and was unable to get back to his room under his own steam. Maureen put him in a wheelchair and soon had him back in his own room.

"Thanks, Muriel, you're my Girl Friday. I don't feel up to much at all now. Could you help me into bed, please?"

"It's Maureen, Joe, and I suspect you know it, you old rogue! Let's get you into your pit. I'll ask Nurse Collins to look in on you later."

* * * * *

Joe lay there in his bed, feeling exhausted and rather unwell. His newly-acquired morse key lay next to him on the night table, and he was holding the Handbook for Radio Operators. He was thinking about the more serious side of the questions he'd been asked in the dining room.

Radio Officers had been responsible for saving so many lives. In the early years, well over 2000 were saved in two incidents alone, the sinking of the *Titanic* and the *SS Republic/Florida* collision. Over 400 were saved in the sinking of the *Empress of Ireland*. Joe speculated on how many had been saved overall in the roughly hundred-year era of Radio Officers. Possibly millions worldwide, certainly more than a hundred thousand.

This led his thoughts on to the Wars. Many Radio Officers had been killed by enemy action, and many more had died after their shipmates had abandoned a sinking ship. These brave and selfless men had remained at their posts, pounding out SOS messages so that their colleagues, some in life-boats and some in the water, would have a better chance of being picked up.

But now that was all past. No new Radio Officers had been trained since the late 1980s. As far as he knew, they were all dead. The aging population of ex-Radio Officers had swelled the ranks of the [Radio Officers Association](#) for a while, but eventually the numbers began to drop as members passed away at an increasing rate. Then the sad day came when the Association had to be disbanded by the few remaining members.

They were all dead now – except Joe. His wife was long dead, and all his children. By some fluke of nature and a very strong constitution he had outlived them all. Only his grandchildren, great grand-children, and their children remained. He could only name a handful of them, and many of the younger generations hadn't ever met him – maybe hadn't even heard of him.

There was nothing here for him now, he thought. Everyone close to him was gone. His profession was gone. His health was gone. It was a fantastic life, but the good parts had passed for ever. He would have no regrets when he was called to the great Radio Room in the Heavenly Vessel. He was fairly sure he was the last Radio Officer anyway.

Joe didn't realise he had fallen asleep. An observer would have seen him begin REMs, the rapid movements of the eyes behind closed lids that characterises entering and leaving deeper sleep. He began to greet old colleagues, to sit at cherished radio consoles, to work old friends at coast stations on the key. In his dreams he once again walked the

docks and streets of oft-visited ports around the world. He heard the brilliant sending of first class operators on the Queens, the American coast stations, the big European ones – Portishead, Norddeich, Scheveningen, and several others.

His mind played ships' telegraphs, their great horns, the cries from the bumboats of Cairo, and he felt the vibration of a ship's deck under his feet as it cleared a harbour's heads and rapidly built up to full revs. And of course, the ship began to roll as it came out of the lee of the land.

Nurse Collins came quietly into the room. She smiled as she saw Joe. He was partly propped up on his pillows. His eyes were closed and he was breathing easily. A lovely smile creased his ancient, weather-beaten face. His right hand was resting on an old morse key on the night table at his bed-side. In his left hand he held an orange-covered book. She could see the word "Radio" on it, but the rest was obscured by his gnarled and twisted fingers.

She smiled. "Sleep well, Joe, darling. God bless you." Somehow, seeing Joe so at peace with the world had touched her deeply. She felt a little rush of tears and berated herself as she tiptoed from the room and closed the door quietly behind her.

* * * * *

Maureen was on early duty the next morning. She wheeled her trolley around the private rooms, dispensing tea, biscuits and good cheer at every stop. When she came to Joe's door, she gave her usual cheeky knock and went in.

"Look at you, you lazy lay-abed!" she chirped. Then she stopped where she was. Joe was too still. She had seen too many scenes like this on her morning rounds to have any serious doubt. She used the intercom to rouse Nurse Collins, who, having been on late call the previous evening was somewhat crotchety. But when she heard it was Joe, she came to his room straight away.

"Bless him, he's gone" she pronounced after checking his pulse and breathing. "I knew something was up last night by the way he was sleeping. He looked so happy and peaceful, like a man who has run a long and hard race successfully, and is both worn out and delighted at the same time."

Both women were a little tearful, for Joe was a much-loved resident. The news quickly buzzed round the grapevine, and many of the other residents came to Joe's room for a last private word. Some left flowers. Many gave his now cold forehead a kiss.

"Goodbye, Joe, you brightened our lives so much. But you're with God now."

Soon they were shooed out as the doctor arrived to pronounce the death and prepare a death certificate. The body was taken away to the mortuary until arrangements could be made for the undertaker to collect it. There was to be no post-mortem.

* * * * *

The service was attended by several of the residents of Joe's last home, along with Maureen and Nurse Collins. A handful of Joe's grandchildren, pensioners themselves, and their descendants, were seated together in the pews.

After the usual formalities, young Joel came to the lectern. He stood for a long minute looking at the congregation. At last a smile played about his lips.

"Thank you everybody for coming along to remember my great-great-grandfather Joe, and to say a last farewell to him. I feel he is somehow here with us now.

"Joe was a tremendous chap. He was part of an era that has now passed forever. His working life was spent on ships as a Radio Officer. He was responsible for the safety of everyone on every ship he served on. He took part in several SOS incidents and was instrumental himself in saving seafarers' lives.

"He led a fruitful and happy life after retiring in 1998. He was able to continue to use his Morse code skills for fun and to keep old memories alive for many years after that as a Radio Amateur. But even they are now a dwindling organisation.

"Joe outlived all the Radio Officers and much of his family. But he was happy and loved to the end. And I believe he is happy now.

"In closing, I'd like to read from the last few verses of a poem I found in Joe's effects. It was published many years ago in a magazine called *QSO*. They show that, although the Radio Officer was replaced by newer technology in 1998, his spirit lived on. Joe was the last one and he's gone, but they have won their place in history. In this extract, those that were still alive then were exhorted not to be disheartened that technology has wiped their profession out. As you will hear, they were known affectionately as *Sparks*.

*But be proud to have been in the ranks of the few,
The Sparks were such marvelous men;
They earned their own place in the lore of the sea,
You'll not see their like e'er again.*

*Our club is exclusive, the membership's closed;
We alone carry the flame.
Hold your heads high, my fellow Sparks,
Your name's in the sea's Hall of Fame.*

"Thank you, God bless you all, and think of Joe now and again."

© Dave Ellis, G4AJY/M0ROA, ex-Radio Officer
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