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Telkom Maritime Services

A demonstration of Wireless Telegraphy in 1897 drew the response from the then Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, John X Merriman, which was to kill the introduction with the words: "Life is troublesome enough with ordinary telegrams, with Wireless Telegraphy it would be unbearable." Despite John X Merriman the unbearable soon became a reality in the form of ship to shore wireless telegraphy when in 1910 South Africa's first ship to shore station opened in Durban known as Jacobs Radio. In 1943, Durban radio was constructed at Pine Town, its present location.

Cape Town Radio was established in 1913 at the old lighthouse site at Kommetjie on the western seaboard of the Cape Peninsula. The first call-sign allocated was VNC and the station operated on the 400 kHz frequency using Spark transmitters. The operators had to work with the windows of the station wide open to the elements, summer and winter, to release the sulphur odours created by the apparatus. In 1928 the call-sign ZSC was allocated and is still in use today.

The Mayor of Port Elizabeth officially opened Port Elizabeth radio on the 2nd May 1921. The first message was received from the motor vessel Armadale Castle at 1150 on 2nd May 1921. The vessel was 165 nautical miles Southwest of Port Elizabeth.

During World War Two, Cape Town Radio played a valuable role intercepting distress messages from allied ships under Axis submarine attack or being shelled by German battleships. It is recorded that on one occasion the station monitored eight distress calls in ten minutes.

Towards the middle of the war, the station moved to Wireless Road, Kommetjie, where it shared premises with the Royal Navy. In September 1965 our address changed to Koeberg Road, Milnerton, vacated premises of the South African Broadcasting Corp.

In March 1997 we moved to our new premises in Bosmansdam Road, Milnerton. Nearby is the building in which Marconi established the Wireless and Telegraph Company in 1919. Cape Town Radio established itself on the world maritime map from June 1967 when the Suez Canal was closed by the Arab/Israeli conflict. The station played a vital role in controlling communication traffic for the thousands of ships that diverted to the Cape route.

Additional operator circuits had to be hastily manufactured, transmitters for the overflow traffic were provided by stations in the Transvaal and tremendous pressure was placed on the maritime services. Sometimes ships had to be given turn numbers on Morse circuits as high as number twenty-seven. Each answering operator had to have up to two "slave operators" with separate transmitters and receivers and a record number of messages were transmitted daily. Congestion was just as bad at the ports. Frequently there were more than 100 ships at anchor in Table Bay anchorage seeking bunkers, stores and water. The reputation earned by Cape Town Radio during the eight years that Suez was closed has been maintained to this day. It is common practice for ships passing through the Suez Canal to communicate with Europe via Cape Town Radio.

Klipheuwel (50 km north east of Milnerton), has long been the preferred site for radio transmitters. On relatively high ground clear of mountains, it is far enough from the Milnerton operations centre to prevent transmitted signals interfering with reception at Milnerton. Marconi erected 245 meter high radio masts at Klipheuwel in 1923. This was part of a plan to establish long-wave radio links between London and the entire British Empire. These high masts were never used, because in 1924 Marconi introduced short-wave radio, which cost a percentage of the long wave system, used only a fraction of the power and trebled the transmission capability.

Our technicians maintain transmitters around our coast from Alexander Bay to Kosi Bay. It's been a long walk from those sulphur-laden rooms and the Spark transmitters. Development did not stand still and modern error correcting Telex-over-radio (TOR) was introduced in February 1985 on all high frequency bands. Upgrading of the services has been constant and in 1993 an automated radiotelephone service, Autolink RT, was introduced. This service provides automatic telephone calls from ships to any destination worldwide.

The introduction of email on HF radio resulted in the closure of the Telex over radio service in the early part of the 21st century. On 31st March 2000 the Wireless Telegraphy Service closed down. In 2003, due to the advancement of computers, Durban Radio, Port Elizabeth Radio and Cape Town Radio are now under one roof, in their own separate sound booths, using their own transmitters and receivers all over South Africa and all linked via the MariTel Control and Message and Handling Billing System. The Operating staff sit at their computer consoles, where they can select any Maritime frequency within a few seconds and communicate with ships and aircraft offering a wide range of services.

The Southern African coastline is one of the most treacherous in the world and South Africa takes its responsibilities for the Safety of Life at Sea most seriously. Telkom's Maritime Services has ever-vigilant human and electronic ears to ensure that those in distress are quickly heard. Telkom, in fact, has an important role in maritime safety. Its comprehensive communications system provides radiotelephone (manual and automated), data and E-mail communications to and from ships sailing in local and international waters.

It operates an extensive network of 38 radio stations around the coast of South Africa, stretching from Alexander Bay on the Namibian border to Kosi Bay near the Mozambique border. Highly trained staff on constant alert 24 hours a day, 365 days a year monitors these stations. Without these dedicated people, no amount of electronic equipment would be able to supervise South Africa's coastline so effectively, waiting for distress calls and monitoring safety and distress signals.

South Africa is a signatory to the SOLAS Agreement (Safety of Life at Sea), and the National Department of Transport is responsible for compliance with the country's responsibilities under that agreement. Telkom sees it as a natural part of its commitment to and partnership with customers to be involved with their safety at sea. In order to comply fully with its obligations, the Department has contracted Telkom SA Maritime Radio Section as its service provider, and this service contract is reviewed on a continuous basis to ensure that South Africa meets its obligations. The men and women of Telkom's Maritime Services regard themselves as part of the international fraternity of the sea. When the chips are down and there is a MAYDAY call, they shift into a high gear and use every resource at their disposal in terms of men and machinery to contribute to the overall success of a sea rescue operation.

In the interests of the safety of international mariners, Telkom's Maritime Services undertakes the following:
- Watch keeping of all radiotelephone distress frequencies.
- Maintaining a fully duplicated Digital Selective Calling (DSC) watch on all Sea Area A3 frequencies in terms of Global Maritime Distress and Safety Systems (GMDSS) requirements.
- Monitoring the COSPAS/SARSAT system for emergency radio beacon transmissions
- Transmitting relays of all distress messages.
- Co-coordinating communications on international maritime frequencies in cases of distress.
- Transmitting weather forecasts and reports for Metarea VII.
- Transmitting Navigation Warnings for Navarea VII
- Transmitting Navtex Broadcasts.
- Transmitting Maritime Safety Information via Inmarsat C to the Atlantic Ocean Region (East) and the Indian Ocean Region.
- Receiving and passing ships' reports in the SAFREP ship reporting system.
- Receiving and passing ships' ISPS reports

Whether the needs of customers are as simple as a 3-minute radiotelephone call to a loved one on shore or as technologically advanced as an E-mail to the ships owner world wide, Telkom can provide it. If a vessel needs to receive advance warning about a faulty lighthouse or a storm at sea, Telkom uses at least three forms of transmissions to alert seafarers of these dangers. And if there is a need for quick and professional response to calls for help from vessels in distress at sea, Telkom's radio operators and modern infrastructure are always alert and ready to answer the call.

It is a vital service and Telkom is proud to have been entrusted with providing it. Even when the vessel is safely tied up alongside, Telkom continues to provide services. Telkom supplies the necessary infrastructure in all of South Africa's harbour's to cater for the shipping customer's needs.