



# GOOD MORNING IRAQ

Meet the DJs providing the soundtrack for America's war in the Middle East

BY MIKE MACEACHERAN

**THE** EXPLOSIONS RANG OUT ACROSS DOWNTOWN BAGHDAD, reverberating like a bass drum beat. It was April 7, 2010 and the four scattered bombs, hidden in apartment buildings across northern Shula, exploded in intervals, with the first one detonating at 9.30am local time. Fifty people were killed and 180 were injured – the latest collateral damage in a long series of terror attacks in the Iraqi capital. About this time, Staff Sergeant (SSG) Don Dees was gearing up for his next assignment. But he wasn't on street patrol in central Baghdad or out tracking Al-Qaeda-linked insurgents; SSG Dees was cuing up the next record to play on Freedom Radio, the American Forces Network (AFN) communications lynchpin in Iraq. For the mid-afternoon host, it was just another day in the office.

DJs seldom play records while a city burns. Most radio show hosts wake up to the sound of traffic jams or perhaps the call to prayer from a local mosque. At Freedom Radio, broadcast from a secret U.S. military location in Baghdad, the radio jockey might also hear the sound of falling bombs and mortar rockets accompanying the songs of Eminem and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. "We're just military like everyone else," SSG Dees says modestly. "Everyone has a speciality – ours happens to be broadcasting."

Year on year across America, thousands of men and women dream of wearing camouflage army fatigues. Often inspired by onscreen heroics – army recruitment booths were even set-up in theatres showing *Top Gun* – restless adolescents from Mississippi to Montana have long held an insatiable lust for combat and modern warfare. For a select few, however, the cry of "Gooooood Morning Vietnam!" in 1987 turned them on and tuned them in to military service.

"Yep – I joined the army in December '88, inspired by that movie," admits SSG Dees. "I was trained as an army broadcaster and have been doing that ever since. I love being able to inform and entertain troops deployed to Iraq. Obviously in the film there were political undertones and a back story that doesn't mirror what we do here. The only frustration for me is the limited interaction with our audience. It's hard for our listeners to get to a phone or computer, so it's a really loyal core group that we hear from."

Playing from and for the heart, Freedom Radio plugs Professor Parker's "Sunday School of Rock" (think the Stones, Meat Loaf and Hendrix), "Clubbin' with the Desert Diva" and Dees' own "Afternoon Express". "Officials fear Freedom Radio may be making it hotter in Iraq," he jokes. "Cypress Hill, Ke\$ha, Black Eyed Peas and Young Money may also be contributing factors." To date, Paul Hardcastle's anti-Vietnam record "19" has failed to make the playlist.

Trained in the same killing fields as routine marines, the tools of the trade for DJs like Dees and Parker might be a microphone and turntable, but they go to work equipped with a flak jacket and

M16 combat rifle. This unlikely juxtaposition of entertainment and war goes back to the great battles of Pearl Harbour and Iwo Jima. Funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, AFN started out in May 1942 when the U.S. War Department created the Armed Forces Radio Service to entertain and inform troops during WW2. With Uncle Sam's boys and girls on foreign soil in vast numbers, the singular goal was to keep the forces motivated, happy and up to date with the Andrews Sisters at home and Adolf and Heinrich on the Western Front.

Broadcast from London, in studio facilities borrowed from the BBC, Corporal Syl Binkin, the first ever wartime DJ, found himself entertaining not only U.S. troops preparing for the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe, but also to UK civilians preparing their dinner. Another sign, perhaps, of the imminent Americanisation of European popular culture.

From the 1950s and 1960s, when European audiences widely tuned in to AFN to hear Elvis Presley, to its strategic role during the Vietnam War – jockeys famously played "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" as a signal for Americans to leave Saigon – military radio has existed for a number of different, and sometimes competing, reasons. There is the genuine desire to disseminate objective news; the need to rally troops on distant frontlines; and occasionally – as in Vietnam – it has become an instrument of war in its own right.

Shortly after Operation Iraqi Freedom was initiated by former President George W. Bush in 2003, Armed Forces Radio and Television established Freedom Radio to broadcast throughout Iraq and Kuwait. This joined a roster of established on-air networks, which broadcast to more than 175 countries worldwide from Germany, Italy and Saudi Arabia to South Korea, Japan and beyond. Anywhere the U. S. has deployed troops, AFN can find its audience.



U.S. Army Spec. Marlon A. Styles, in Kabul, Afghanistan, March 20, 2010. Above left, U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Joshua Adkins at Bagram Air Field



## TIME OF YOUR LIFE: AFN IN HISTORY

**1940s:** Preceding the U.S. involvement in World War Two, there are several radio stations based in American military bases — but none are officially recognised until 1942.

**1950s:** As war breaks out in Korea, AFN goes on air from a station in Seoul. American TV star Jim Perry — anyone remember *Sale of the Century* from the '80s? — then gets his big break fresh out of high school with the Armed Forces Korea Network.

**1960s:** The American Forces Caribbean Network launches from Puerto Rico with an unmistakably reggae inspired soundtrack, decades before Bob Marley writes “Buffalo Soldier”.

**1960s:** AFN in Vietnam. Among their number is DJ Adrian Cronauer who later wrote a film script about his experiences. It's bought by Robin Williams, mostly re-written (or ad-libbed) and released in 1987 as *Good Morning Vietnam* — Cronauer's catchphrase when presenting his “Dawn Buster” show. In 2001, he told *Vietnam* magazine: “At that time it was possible to differentiate between news for the troops and news intended for consumption back home. A lot of coverage in Vietnam was censored because it could not be aired in a war zone without compromising the mission of the men who were involved.”

DJ “Gorgeous George” at AFN Nuernberg in 1981



**1980s:** AFN Nuremberg in West Germany helps provide a soundtrack to Ronald Reagan's Cold War by broadcasting beyond the iron curtain to Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Eastern Bloc.

**1990s:** George Bush Senior dispatches news teams and technicians to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia for Operation Iraqi Freedom: the very first Freedom Radio is born.

**2000s:** A milestone decade as AFN Afghanistan begins its first radio transmission in 2006 and AFN Europe launches AFN The Eagle, its first 24-hour-a-day radio service.

Symbolically, the first record played in Baghdad was Paul McCartney's “Freedom”, a song written and recorded by the former Beatle in response to the September 11 attacks of 2001. “I was the morning DJ when the station first went on air,” recalls Sandra Altamirano of the 222nd Broadcast Operations Detachment from Southern California, which launched the station in Baghdad. “We had a big discussion to decide between American country music artist John Michael Montgomery's ‘Letters from Home’ and ‘Freedom’ by Paul McCartney. It was our Air Force Sergeant that ultimately chose — I think it was pretty successful.” In contrast, the first song on air in 1991 during the first Gulf War ground offensive after the start of Operation Desert Storm was “Rock the Casbah” by The Clash.

**ALMOST** SEVEN YEARS AFTER THE INITIAL OCCUPATION, THE BOMBS AND BEATS CONTINUE TO DROP. The mission, albeit under the more diplomatic approach of Barack Obama, is still the same: lift morale, entertain and inform. To this end, Freedom Radio broadcasts seven days a week with at least one hundred hours of uncensored air time, proffering a mixture of Billboard 100 music, chat and public service broadcasting. “We read as much as we can about pop culture in the States and we monitor current events and significant military news,” says SGT Dees. “We know our listeners’ appreciate us for the music and the personalities of the announcers, but we hope they are also benefiting from the information we try to provide.” Typically, the DJs create infomercials about health and nutrition, guidance on weapon safety, and hands-on Arabic language lessons that may diffuse hostile situations and ultimately save their lives. In these fatalist terms, the lyric “Last Night a DJ Saved My Life” takes on a very real life or death meaning.

“For me, life at Freedom Radio was a rollercoaster and it started once I got through the front door,” remembers SSG Tyler Alexander, who was stationed at AFN Iraq from November 2008 to June 2009. “It takes a lot of motivation and the hours are long. But it's worth it in the end when you get that one email or phone call saying that you made someone's day with the music you played.”

“We're about a touch of home,” adds former recruit Altamirano. For the record, the ex-breakfast host once interviewed legendary Vietnam radio host Adrian Cronauer — embarrassingly without having ever seen his life story onscreen. “We have a good connection with our audience as we experience what they experience — we're deployed in Iraq just like them; we miss our families like them; we're stationed in a combat zone where there is rocket and mortar fire. Of course, there are inherent risks in contingency operations but it's the same danger for any troop in Iraq — there are still a lot of security concerns here.” Considering the logistical problems of broadcasting in such a volatile country, besieged by turmoil and terror alerts, it is a major victory for the production team.

The potential reach and influence of Freedom Radio should also not be underestimated. It broadcasts to a potential daily audience of ninety-two thousand [the current number of U. S. soldiers left on duty in Iraq], eight Marine Corps bases, and maintains a Facebook fan page with nearly three thousand followers. The DJs also receive emails from an avid Iraqi and Kuwaiti public keen to absorb Western influences. “We know we have a significant following of Iraqi citizens interested in American culture,” explains Specialist (SPC) Jessica Randon, who works on the Freedom Radio production desk. “It's very different today than ever before; primarily because of our extensive use of social media to extend our reach.” It's a bizarre thought that Iraqi tribal chiefs and militia may also be listening in. What exactly, you might be forgiven for wondering, do they think of “Sweet Home Alabama”?

But while its detractors believe Freedom Radio is purely a machine of wartime propaganda, the AFN DJs insist they provide a crucial lifeline to the soldiers who put their lives on the line every day. “We exist to serve the USF-I commander as a vehicle for important information,” insists Randon. “The music is a morale booster and a connection to home, and it's the hook

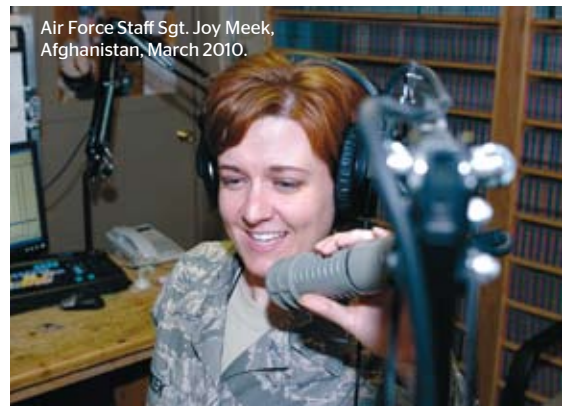


TSGt Chris Eder interviewing Country music recording artist Toby Keith in Baghdad



SFC Jim Ayers hosting The Memorial Day Countdown on Freedom Radio

“There is the genuine desire to disseminate objective news; the need to rally troops on distant frontlines; and occasionally — as in Vietnam — it has become an instrument of war”



Air Force Staff Sgt. Joy Meek, Afghanistan, March 2010.

we use to entice them to listen. But the real focus is on providing critical information in useful and relevant bites.” They regularly deal with emotional shrapnel too: in the past announcers have handled suicidal and disillusioned recruits and nursed traumatised soldiers re-adapting to life back home through its online fan-site. Regular unedited bulletins from Associated Press and daily news reels from the U.S. Forces-Iraq frontline also help maintain the station’s independent stance. “Our presentation must be objective if it is to be perceived as credible by our listeners,” adds SPC Randon. “We have to tell it like it is or we will lose the respect of our audience.” Presently, one of the DJs’ most significant operational tasks relates to the responsible draw down of U.S. forces in Iraq; an overtly contentious issue on the front line.

Whilst Barack Obama’s tactical retreat from Iraq is planned for October this year — with the destiny of the Iraq oil law expected to be the crucial point determining the manner in which the U. S. administration withdraws — Freedom Radio’s DJs have no plans to hang up their headphones or dim the faders just yet. Ever the consummate professionals, the show must go on.

“If I got the chance to play the last song...” pauses Altamirano. “I think I’d choose ‘I’m Done’ by Jo Dee Messina.” At the mention of the tacky hit by the U. S. country music star, she bursts into raucous laughter. But, as Altamirano has ended her tour of duty and returned to California, the task will most likely fall to SSG Dees or one of his colleagues from the 209th. “My vote goes for Green Day’s ‘Time of Your Life,’” he concludes with a tinge of melancholy. “I like the line, ‘For what it’s worth; it was worth all the while...”



## AN HOUR IN THE LIFE OF FREEDOM RADIO

**Lady Ga-Ga**  
**Tool**  
**Nickelback**  
**Shakira**  
**Puddle of Mudd**  
**Them Crooked Vultures**  
**Sick Puppies**

**Cypress Hill**  
**Three Days Grace**  
**Stone Temple Pilots**  
**Avril Lavigne**  
**Flobots**  
**The Cheap Seats**  
**Neil Young**