

A Radio Operator in Gander 1943 - Roland Masse's story

The buildings are gone, the papers have been burnt and the memories are fading. So how can we capture the excitement of the moment, the mood of that wartime era and the day-to-day reality of living in Gander during the war? The best way of course is to talk to someone who lived through that period.

After very much searching, I actually found such a person, a gentleman now living in Laval, north of Montreal. Luckily he is still an avid (and well-known) amateur radio operator, which helped me finally find him.

His name is Roland Masse, aged 90 at the time of this article (March 2013), and he very generously shared his story with me over several months. The following is a compilation of his information about his employment with VOAC, staying as close as possible to his own description. VOAC was responsible for ground-to-air communications, mostly concerning weather information, between Gander and aircraft on anti-submarine operations or being ferried to Europe.)



Roland Masse VE2PX

How he says he got involved

"In the summer of 1938 Hitler's name was on everyone's lips, and his message was loud and clear that eventually he would stop talking and bring on a war. The Department of Transport chief radio inspector, Mr Bernard Monday, a friend of my grandfather, recommended that I attend a school for radio operators for the Merchant Navy."

"So I attended the school to study for what they called a second class ticket, as obtained from Department of Transport Canada, to qualify for Merchant Navy operations. After graduating from the radio school in 1939, the year war was declared, I was getting ready to pass the qualification test at DOT. The first part of the test was on the Marconi receiver MSA (I forgot the number), which was the unit, used on Merchant Navy boats. The second test was on the Marconi

transmitter. The third test was on a contraption called auto alarm and on a direction finder. The last test was Morse code which you had to master at not less than 20 words a minute, no mistakes allowed."

"Four days before I was to be tested on Morse code, three officers from RAF Ferry Command made their appearance at the radio school. They were looking for Morse code operators able to work at 20 words a minute or better sending and receiving, capable of typing and receiving messages using an old Underwood typewriter."

"The senior officer's name was Gordon Lynn and he gave us a test right then and there. He jumped on a telegraph key and went at it. Four of us made the test and were told to report the next day to the Dorval administration building radio division. We made it to Dorval and passed. We then signed a bunch of papers attesting we were now members of the RAF Ferry Command organization. I remember we signed a secrecy pledge, to not divulge any information about our operations. "

"So we began operating the next day. Traffic was mostly coded weather messages, five letters and numbers to a word, 150 words per message. The amount of traffic was enormous - which well prepared us for our next job."

"One day in 1943 I received a message which read roughly as follows: 'Your services are required in Gander for a period of no less than six months. You will be leaving on a flight departing on March 19 at 08h00. We request your presence at the administration departure hall by 07h00.'"

"Pre-arranged pay deposits were made and off we went. Room and board in Gander was paid by Ferry Command and to this day, I have no idea how much it

cost to keep us there. "

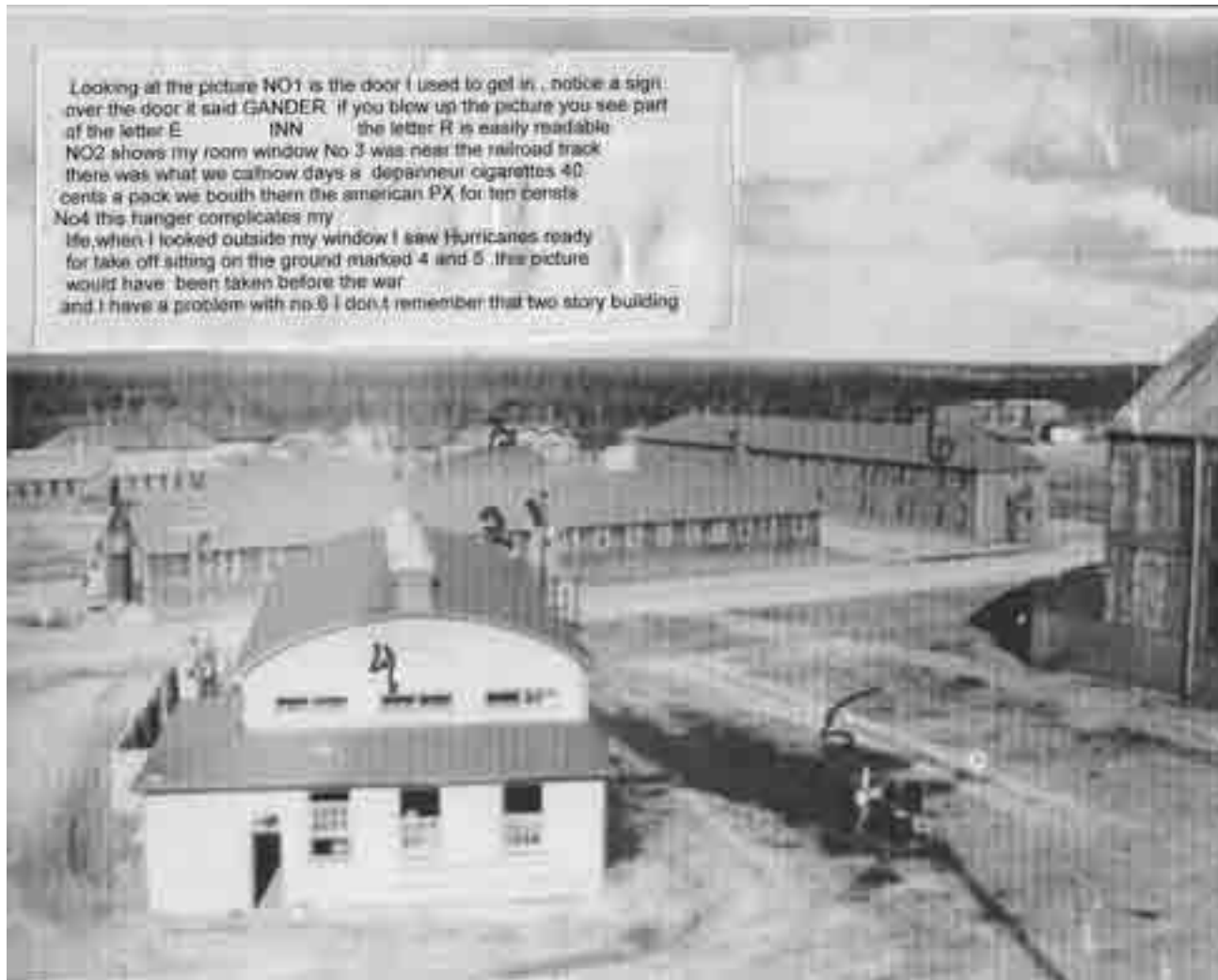
Roland (Rollie to his friends) describes his arrival in Gander.

"On March 19, 1943, I eased myself down from the belly of a four-motor Liberator bomber, also know as a B-24, thus completing a six-hour flight from Montreal to Gander (a 90-minute displacement in today's jet age). I made my way to Security to have my picture and fingerprints taken, to assert that Roland Masse, a member of the Royal Air Force Ferry Command, had arrived in Gander for a tour of duty as a wireless radio operator for a period no less than six months. I was handed a mini passport confirming my identity and was told to make sure it would be carried with me at all times." (Note: six days later the Royal Air Force formed its Transport Command of which Ferry Command became No. 45 Atlantic Transport Group.)

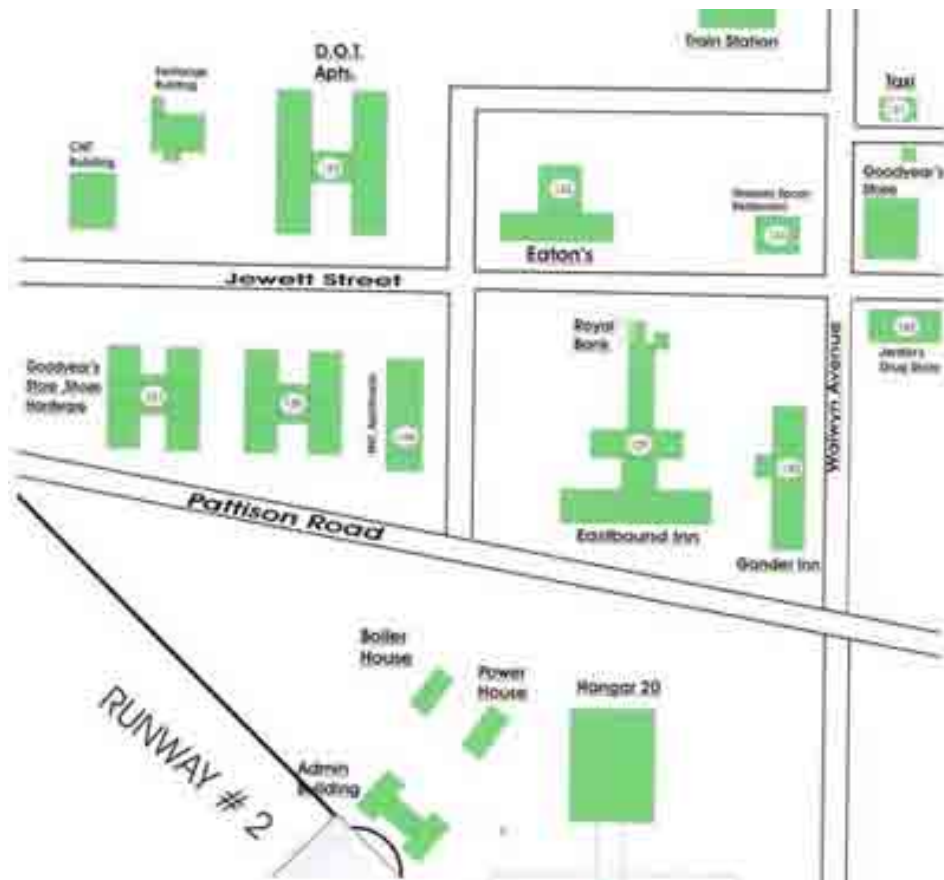
"I found my way to Eastbound Inn, my new address, where the Inn manager directed me to a large room with two beds, on the first floor of this U shape building. My roommate had yet to arrive."

"The sound of voices directed me to the recreation hall, where I met the off-duty boys. Most of them had familiar faces for having had the pleasure of working with them at the Dorval radio communications station. A few had arrived the previous day, while others had completed their tour and were now waiting eagerly to find their way home. Actually the VOAC operating staff was completely renewed. The new arrivals were a mixed bag of French- and English-Canadian, including four local boys. "

Shown below is a photo annotated by Rollie.



On the map below, the building where Rollie stayed is indicated as Eastbound Inn, just above Pattison Rd.



Rollie explains his job in Gander

"I remember asking about the working schedule. The answer came from André Pepin, a friend and class mate from radio and Morse code classes, who confirmed that I was on duty from 8 to 4 the following day, adding I had to make sure I stood at the Eastbound Inn door by 07h30. I was also reminded to check my watch, to learn that it was one hour and half late, the time difference between Montreal and Gander!"

"The following morning I boarded the bus and took a seat a few rows back. As we drove on, we came to a road curve – I saw a car coming towards us and we are not getting out of his way. I braced myself, waiting for an accident - but nothing happened! I was reminded that in

Newfoundland vehicles drive on the left side of the road. My fellow passengers laughed their heads off....that experience was one I was not about to forget."

"We came to a stop facing a large house called the receiving house, meaning no radio signals emitted from that location. The main floor was the VOAC communication center, furnished with desk large enough to stack two receivers. The lower one was a GE all band receiver, while the top one was an HRO National, considered top of the line in those days. The upper floor housed the station manager whose name was easy to remember - you only had to think of the ex heavy weight champion boxer of the early 20s Jack Dempsey. My memory reminds me also of Mrs. Dempsey who was a very attractive and pleasant lady."

(Editor's note : This was not the VOAC building out on Receiver Road. When Rollie went out the front door, the bus went right on Patterson Road, towards what is now the new town of Gander. The area referred to these days as the Old Navy Site and was near the present Walmart.)

" Within an hour I began feeling at home. The operating was identical to Dorval's, with the exception of the identification call letters VOAC instead of VR5, the Dorval call sign. Our job was to establish communications between ground station and planes, plus our other circuits specifically used to assure that airports located in the North Atlantic would receive up to date weather reports, on the hour, so crews getting ready to take off were made aware of the best routes."

"In the first week in May 1943, the bus taking us to the receiving station took a detour, this time turning to the left, and within 10 minutes, our new destination in a hangar was reached. *(Editor's note: Rollie describes this as across the runway from his living quarters. Also, it is*

known that there was a Signals section in Hanger 21, so this may be where VOAC was set up in that period,) We filed in the direction of VOAC's new location and surprised to be standing in the middle of a spacious office, from first glance a much more functional setup. There were larger tables with an inlaid typewriter shelf which offered a very comfortable typing position. We now had an RAF oversize English issue telegraph key, installed at the table's edge. Another improvement over the old receiving house was that the ground to air circuit was caged in a glass office, which served to eliminate white noise heard on speakers or headphones."

"The new station included two circuits to Dorval, one to Preswick and one to Ireland. The bulk of the traffic exchange between Dorval and Gander remained weather reports, which originated from the meteo office in Dorval, responsible for compiling weather conditions for the whole of the North Atlantic. Gander and Preswick in Scotland were the two most important users. Planes ready to leave Gander to fly the Atlantic needed be informed accurately. The Gander flight plan office was their last information source, so VOAC radio receiving the right information within the shortest possible time frame was the key to giving the green light to take off or not. Even the Americans were using VOAC radio control on the frequency of 6500kcs - needless to say Gander was the now one of the busiest airports in the world. "

The type of radio transmissions

"A reminder of what a coded weather message contained : not less than one hundred and fifty words of five characters, a mix of numbers and letters which amounted to about 800 Morse code characters. If you multiply this by 50 messages received over a period of eight hours, it meant receiving and typing 40,000 characters. To accomplish such task, your most needed

asset was concentration. Manipulating a Morse key to send 40,000 Morse code characters was not an easy task either, but we enjoyed doing it.

"The information ground to aircraft was done basically through "Q-codes", largely familiar to ham radio operators. Some of the more common Q-codes might be: - QTC I have a message for you - QRS send Morse code more slowly, - QRZ who is calling me - QTA what time will you arrive - QRA identify yourself - QRT silence "

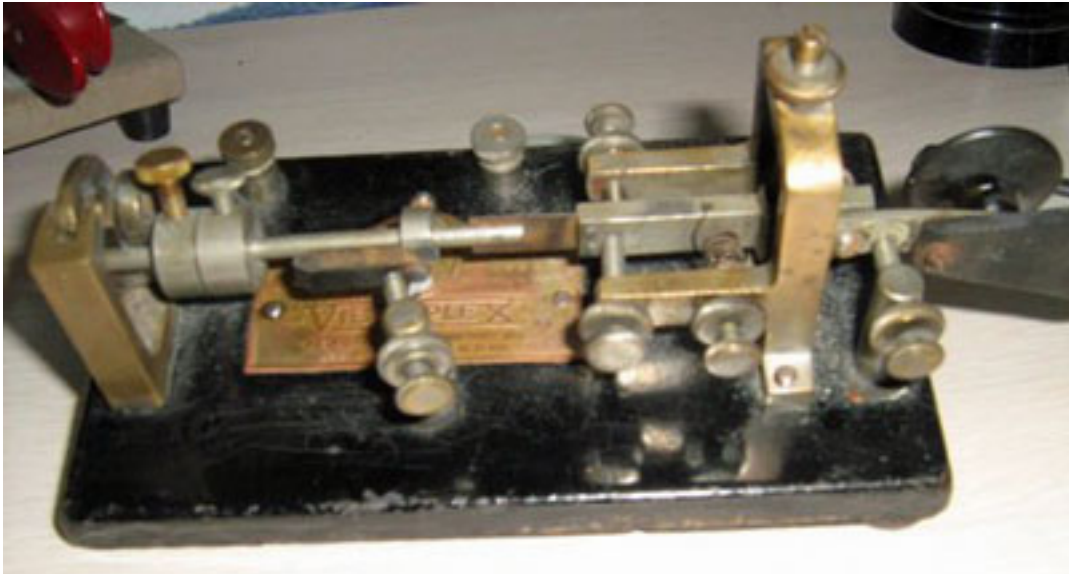
"These are not "secret" codes, so theoretically anybody, including the Germans, could hear them. But it was a question of time. If you had a message for a plane you Morse-coded his call sign - for example "W3ABC from VOAC - QTC". The plane would answer "R ok". A German direction finder would never have had enough time to tune in the plane's signal and to pinpoint it. With a direction finder, you need to triangulate from 3 different locations and the plane would have to hold the key down for at least 20 to 30 seconds, so the Germans could not pinpoint the plane. Of course, they knew the message came from Gander but they still didn't know where the plane was."

"If confidential info was sent from VOAC, that could be coded. The plane crew could also encode a message, for example the time a plane was landing by using a pad with a 26 letter alphabet slide, which was used in conjunction with a card that was changed every 24 hours, at 00h00 GMT. Every plane leaving from Gander would be given a card. If it they flew over two different days, it would be given two cards. By the appropriate placement of the card, a given letter would be replaced by another."

"This Morse code was sent by a telegraph key. There are basically two types of key, the first being the one we see

most often, the one with a button on the end of a shaft that goes up and down. The other one, used by the pros, is called a "bug" and goes back and forth. This was the type of key used in Gander."

(Shown in the photo is Rollie's personal "bug")



Some of Rollie's personal recollections

"In July of 1943 something unusual happen, never seen before, as 104 B-17 bombers left for England. They took off at one-minute intervals. The flight plan said they would fly in four-plane formations. To make sure the ships could get into position, they flew a large spiral until the first plane reached 9000 ft, where it took a sea bound direction. The second plane flew a shorter loop to position itself behind the lead plane, as did the 3rd and 4th. The spiral idea was designed to ease your way into a four plane formation, so when all planes had reached the altitude, you had a global formation of twenty-six 4-plane flights, which was quite a sight !"

"Two or three planes had to turn back, and I saw another first for me, a huge 4-motor bomber with only one

motor running, one propeller turning and the other 3 frozen. Imagine the pilot with only the outboard motor running on the left wing - he had to find a way to keep the ship flying a straight line. It looked awkward coming in on one motor and I guess I said a hundred prayers !”

“A third unusual event took place that same day, involving the person operating the ground-to-air circuit. Upon reaching altitude, each plane’s wireless radio operator turned on the radio transmitter and using Morse code, began to transmit their identification. At the VOAC receiving station, you can imagine the noise Morse code characters sent by fifty or more transmitters sounded like in our earphones. It was identical to a philharmonic orchestra before a concert when musicians tune their instruments. The ground operator got very excited, completely at loss, without the faintest idea how to advise these boys to stop transmitting. The officer in charge did not have a solution either. But he knew I was the most experience operator at hand, so he came to me hoping I held the magic baton to end that symphony. He requested I take over. ”

“Now I needed someone to take care of the log. I turned to my old friend André Pepin, who had extraordinary handwriting, like that a notary public of yesteryear. I was to handle the telegraph key. The nervous ground operator was anxious to know if we had some procedure had in mind, so we quickly answered: “None”! I would simply wait until transmissions quieted down a bit and would then take control. The planes had just began an eight-hour flight or more - so we had plenty of time to complete the roll call...”

“Finally the frequency is quite. I sent out a three-word message QRT, meaning no more sending. I began by calling the lead plane. Andre was logging and we got answers from all of remaining hundred or so planes

remaining on mission.”

“The original arrangement was only the lead plane of each group had to report every thirty minutes while flying over the ocean. But in case of trouble any plane can break radio silence. As they reach half way to England called the “point of no return”, the ground to air station in England takes over. We fellows in the radio room had lived through quite a day and it remained a subject of discussion for quite a few days!”

Off-duty hours

“ One thing that was easy to do was to walk around the airport - I used to do it twice a week, a seven mile hike. We could lay softball till ten o'clock at night. In Newfoundland during summer, nights are very short, so you could play ball till ten or ten thirty before darkness would stop the game. Daylight was back by four a.m. ”

“Swimming in Gander Lake in July and August was also fun. On bad weather days, you could fall back to the rec hall with the pool, ping-pong, cards, or just sit in a quiet corner with a book. But the cherry on the sundae was the American movie theatre. Programs changed twice a week. Pictures came directly to us from Hollywood, before been sent to theatres across the US or Canada. I was therefore able to write my girl friend to inform her which good pictures to watch for.”

“One day I am standing in line waiting for the theater to open. I happened to turn around to see a tall American pilot. I am twisting my brain, trying to identify that man. I knew him from somewhere but could not recall - then it hit me. He was the well-known actor James Stewart who held the rank of captain on a B-17 bomber. I read a few months later he had done a tour of duty, which consisted of 25 flights over enemy territory.

Clark Cable was also seen at the theatre.”

“During that period, in August, I was also sent to Botwood on loan to Pan American and the British Overseas Airways Corporation in support of Boeing Clipper flying boats. These planes begin their flight from Ireland, a neutral country, ferrying businessmen or high-ranking officers traveling to Canada or USA. It was easy to detect them as they simply took off their officer’s cap and tunic and put on a sweater or sports jacket to make believe they were civilians. The first stop over was Botwood for fuel and then on to New York. ”

“This was quite a change from the busy life in Gander. In Botwood you only had to be in service when one of these planes took to the air, which gave you one or two days off occasionally. Compared to Gander, the receiving station was just a small wooden construction inside an RCAF base compound. This receiving station was however connected to Gander via teletype machine, and all coded messages coming from the clippers were typed directly to Gander.”

“One day I found out the probable reason why I had been selected to go to Botwood. With my 35-40 words per minute in code, I was able to work quickly and securely at a very fast speed. On one day in particular, as a Clipper was en route, I remember commenting the RAF liaison officer that this was the first time radio traffic with a Clipper was so heavy, but he did not comment. Finally the Clipper docked and passengers began to descend and one man started to walk towards the RCAF building. As I came out of the radio shack, this man is lighting a long cigar. He looks at us and gives us the V sign with his right hand while puffing on his cigar, yah it was Churchill. The RAF officer friend saluted him he returned it. I don’t remember but I think I did salute him too!”

Conclusion

"Our group included a great bunch of nice guys, and we manage to have an interesting life style. Over 10,000 planes came through Gander controlled by VOAC, so bravo to all the boys who participated.

"On occasion, when they show on TV hundreds of planes converging to Germany during the war, when you see those pictures, it reminds you every one of those planes came through Gander on the call letters VOAC."

Editor's comments

On leaving Gander, Rollie returned to Dorval for a short time and was then sent to Elizabeth City, North Carolina helping aircraft flight being ferried to Africa. On his return to Dorval he became supervisor and remembers well Sir Frederick Bowhill, the Commander of Ferry Command and later Transport Command, would come in for a time check. Bowhill had two watches, the left one on local time and the other on Greenwich Mean Time. Rollie would pick up a time signal from Ottawa and then hand the headphones to Bowhill who would fiddled a few minutes with his two watches and then walk out with a brisk "Good morning, Rollie".

Rollie left that job on 14 February 1946 when Ferry Command / Transport Command closed down its operations on this side of the Atlantic. Below is a photo of a very rare document owned by Rollie, the actual document advising personal the operations were now being transferred to Canadian DOT.

OUT		
ABOVE THIS LINE FOR SIGNALS USE ONLY.		
FROM	N.O. NO. 45 GROUP	PRIORITY: (Delete as necessary)
TO	WINDYBICK; REELJAVIA; LADDER; 04; 03; 00; 00 S.P.*S	DEFERRABLE: (Note 4 (A)) ROUTINE: (Note 4 (B))
REPEATED		IMPORTANT (Note 4 (C))
Reference No.	Date	Security Classification (Note 2)
8 1042	15 FEB	UNCLASSIFIED
<p>FOR SIGNALS OFFICER FROM C/DAFT. NICHOLAS C.S.O. (.)</p> <p>THIS IS THE LAST MESSAGE TRANSMITTED BY THE R.A.F. ON THIS CIRCUIT (.) ALL FUTURE MESSAGES WILL BE TRANSMITTED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT OF THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT (.) PLEASE DESIRE THE STRICT COOPERATION WITH THE CANADIAN AUTHORITIES IN THE OPERATION OF THIS RADIO CIRCUIT AND DO EVERYTHING IN YOUR POWER TO ASSIST THEM IN CARRYING ON THIS MOST IMPORTANT SYSTEM OF COMMUNICATIONS</p>		
AUTHORIZED FOR DESPATCH in accordance with Security Classification indicated at the beginning of the text. (Note 3)		Date/Time Group.
Signature: B.O. NICHOLAS C/DAFT		150455Z
		Originator's Instructions: (Note 5)

Roland Masse has been an amateur radio operator VE2PX since 1948, mainly using Morse code. In fact he is so good at it that it was not difficult for him to communicate all over the world using a surplus World War II "No 19", set, designed only for short range battlefield use of about only 15-20 miles.

During Expo 67, it was his idea to set up a ham radio station not only to let ham radio operators talk to the world but also, in those days before Internet, to help foreign visitors remain in contact with friends back home. He is also a published author with a book called "Keiko",

the life story of a young Japanese girl.

To conclude, this is a photo provided by Rollie of his RAF Ferry Command jacket badge.

