

WS 42 - ITS DEMISE: AN UNEDUCATED GUESS BY RAY COLEY, G3IFF

[Editorial note: this article is a response to mine on the WS42, published in issue 2]

Regarding the failure of the WS 42 to get into service

Those requiring equipment during WW2 had become accustomed to extremely quick service in most things. Compared with present day development times, astonishing feats of producing an answer were achieved. Consider airborne radar for night fighters, for instance, or the General Purpose HF T1154/R1155 - the requirement for which was made in Sept 1939 - with the first T1154 being offered to a RAF unit overseas in May 1940.

The long development time of the WS 42 and reports of production delays would have caused some impatience, and a quick alternative - as witness the appearance of the 62 set, which was not hampered by the complexities involved with 10kc/s channel switching of wide range LC oscillators.

A similar case is that of the R1115 and T1116: by the time it was ready, interest had faded and it never went into RAF service at all - however a few found their way into the Fleet Air Arm.

After considering other events in the same period in which WS 42 was rejected, I believe that no mystery plot or conspiracy was involved. The reason could be uncomplicatedly simple.

The WS42 was intended for use in an accelerated campaign against the Japanese, once the conflict in Europe was settled. It was probably anticipated that the need for a truly tropicalised set would be for perhaps two years. Fortunately for everyone concerned, the Far East war ended within three months of that in Europe, and the need for the set faded away. The cancellation did not leave a void, as the WS 62 was not only well in production, but was also in the hands of the users.

A parallel case is that in early 1945 a batch of Lancaster bombers were ordered to 'Far East' standards numbering 130. Not one of them got to the Far East before the unexpected end of the need for them.

Regarding the original prospective users of the WS42

Three men to serve the communication requirements of a Company Commander sounds equivalent to the modern expression 'labour intensive'.

Still thinking of the original users and considering the weight factor, an important point (easily overlooked regarding man pack equipment) is that the person carrying it is not just a signaller - he is also a soldier, and equipped as one.

Some would consider that the rig-out of an Infantry soldier of 1945, known as Fighting Order, with haversack, ammunition pouches, water bottle, entrenching tool, steel helmet, Enfield rifle with 120 rounds, and perhaps a couple of grenades was enough... now put the wireless set on his back as well! In the case of the Infantry set WS18/68, this was an extra 30 pounds - quite a burden in total.

The radio burden during the campaigns in Burma was endured by mules. These animals shared all the discomforts and hazards up to the point where, as one Force was leaving the jungle, duty done for the moment, the mules were put to death by throat cutting - the need for their services having passed. Similar treatment seems to have been applied to the WS42, but without blood or distressed sound effects - just regret, and even that not expressed until 50-odd years later... by a collector.

Our much admired leader in WW2, Winston Churchill, was awarded the order of the BOOT by the British electorate as the war came to a close - the need for him had passed in the same way as the Lancasters, mules and the WS42.

This last point is probably most significant. In July 1945 there was a change in Government: Winston Churchill and the coalition were out and the Labour party was in power. The new Government took office at the end of an extremely expensive war - the country was virtually bankrupt. At this time a huge loan was obtained from the United States to buy food and other necessities - therefore it is probable that spending priorities dictated cuts in military acquisitions. Not only had the need for the WS42 passed but the money to pay for it was also in doubt.

In short and in modern parlance, it was a defence cut. Not very mysterious after all?

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