

RECALLING THE DAY

KAFA was born

GRADS RECALL THE EARLY DAYS OF CADET RADIO STATION

By Steven A. Simon, '77



In early 1971, singer-songwriter Don McLean wrote and recorded one of the most iconic songs in history, “American Pie.” The song addressed the Feb. 3, 1959, death of singer Buddy Holly, describing it as “The Day the Music Died.”

While McLean was working on his masterpiece, the Air Force Academy experienced “The Day the Music Was Born.” At 6:57 p.m. on Sunday evening, Jan. 17, 1971, KAFA went on the air for the first time.

As with most great achievements, the work to get the cadet radio station up and running began years before the payoff was realized. By all accounts, the station was the brainchild of John Severski, Class of 1971. He was the driving force and the single person most responsible for KAFA getting on the air.

“I had always wanted to be a DJ and I’m sure I would have gotten into the business had it not been for my nomination to USAFA,” Severski recently recalled.

He recruited a small cadre of cadets to undertake the task. Al Leitch '72, remembers that “... in the beginning there were four of us: John, Tom Mayberry [’73], Carl Foerster [’73], and myself that formed the ‘club’ and got the ball rolling. John was the leader, Tom had some radio experience, Carl was the electronic genius, and I was just a guy who thought the idea sounded like it would be fun, so they made me the production manager.” Mayberry had worked on Armed Forces Radio in Italy as a teenager.

Like most efforts, the KAFA project began with paperwork. Their first challenge was to get Academy officials interested in and supportive of the concept.

“I wrote up the justification for the station as a viable means for cadets to communicate and entertain,” Severski remembers, “and since West Point and Annapolis just had closed circuit AM stations, I pushed for us to have an on-air presence for at least some exposure to the general public.”

He said the station did reach parts of Colorado Springs and Black Forest, in addition to most of the Academy grounds.

“We were the only military broadcast station in the lower 48 United States, and maybe even Alaska, that broadcast over the open airways — and stereo FM was a big deal back then,” he explained.

On Jan. 10, 1969, Lt. Col. Howard Hitchens, Jr., the director of Instructional Technology (DFIT, which ran the television studio and other Fairchild Hall facilities), sent a letter to Academy agencies addressing the possibility of the Academy having its own radio station. He asked about their interest in providing educational programming to the station. Coincidentally, responses were due Jan. 17, 1969, two years to the day before that initial broadcast.

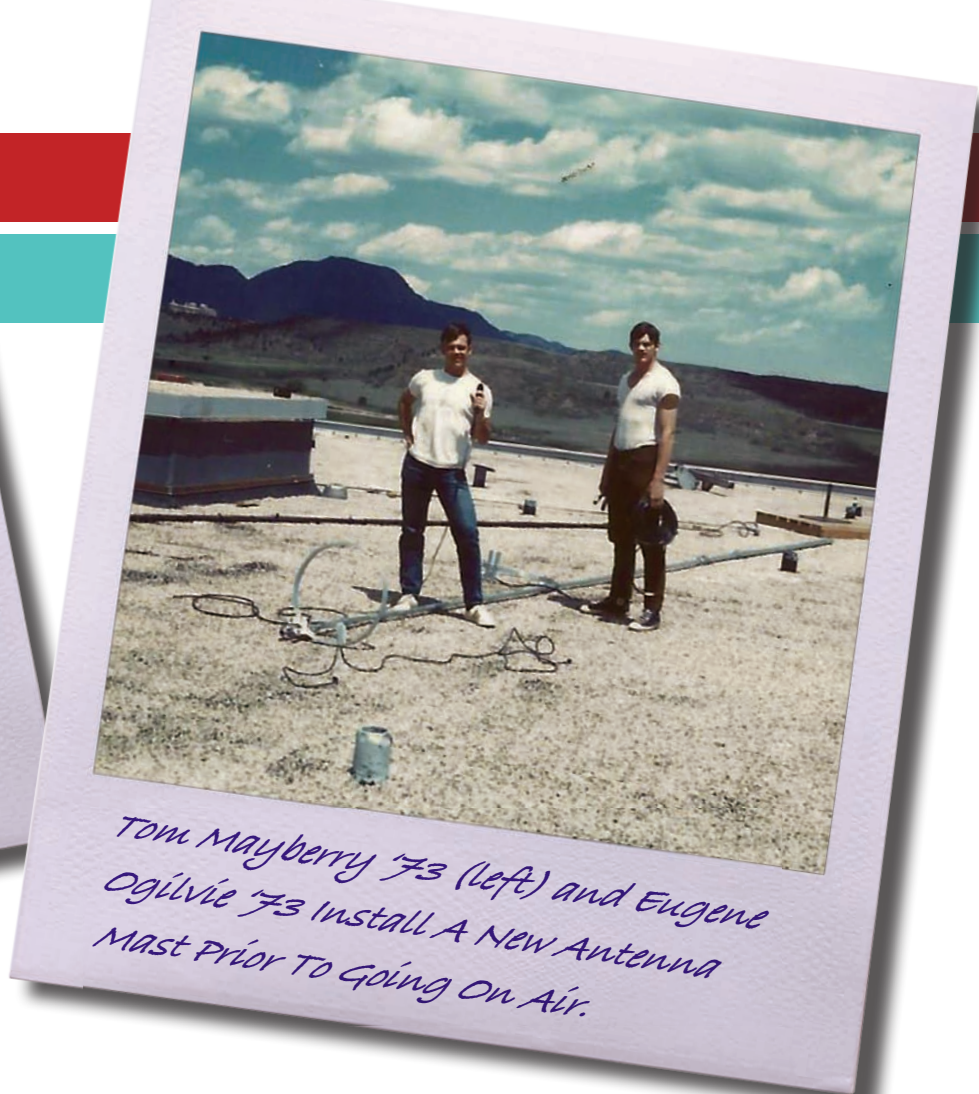
The responses Col. Hitchens received were decidedly mixed, with several respondents expressing concerns about the proposal and arguing against the endeavor.

Undaunted, Cadet Severski and his team continued to pursue their goal of a station. Severski says Master Sgt. Bob Woodruff from DFIT was especially supportive. Jim Means, also from DFIT, signed on as the required Federal Communications Commission (FCC) 1st Class engineer.

As momentum grew, a location for the studio became the next battle. As is typical, Academy agencies were fiercely protective of their office space and did not want to relinquish any of their precious territory for the fledgling station.

Eventually, the station was assigned three small adjoining rooms in Vandenberg Hall, near other cadet activity clubs. (Interestingly, while there have been some short moves in the past 46 years, the current iteration of KAFA is in virtually the same location.)

The next need was broadcasting equipment. “The station cost a bit over \$10,000 in equipment with a great deal of the studio construction from raw lumber,” Severski reported. Mayberry noted that some of that equipment came from radio stations that were being closed in Vietnam.



Foerster was an electrical engineering major with some experience working on sound for the Bluebirds, the Cadet theatrical troupe. His talents were very much needed. He related recently that, of all the cadet volunteers for Kafa, “I was the only ‘techie’ and thus became the station engineer.”

“The procured equipment package included a transmitter, antenna, two turntables, a reel-to-reel tape recorder, two tape cartridge machines, and a nice, modern sound board,” Foerster said. “Although the purchase included all the hardware necessary to build a radio station, it became immediately obvious that a great deal of scrounging was going to be necessary to make it all operational.”

Foerster turned out to be an accomplished scrounger and, with the help of a standing purchase order and items from the Electrical Engineering Department and DFIT, he was able to procure all of the necessary materials.

Leitch says, “I designed the original studio and the civil engineers came in during the Christmas break and erected the walls around the equipment that the guys had managed to scrounge up.”

With those modifications to the office space, a few pieces of government furniture, and some do-it-yourself work, the space began to look like a studio.

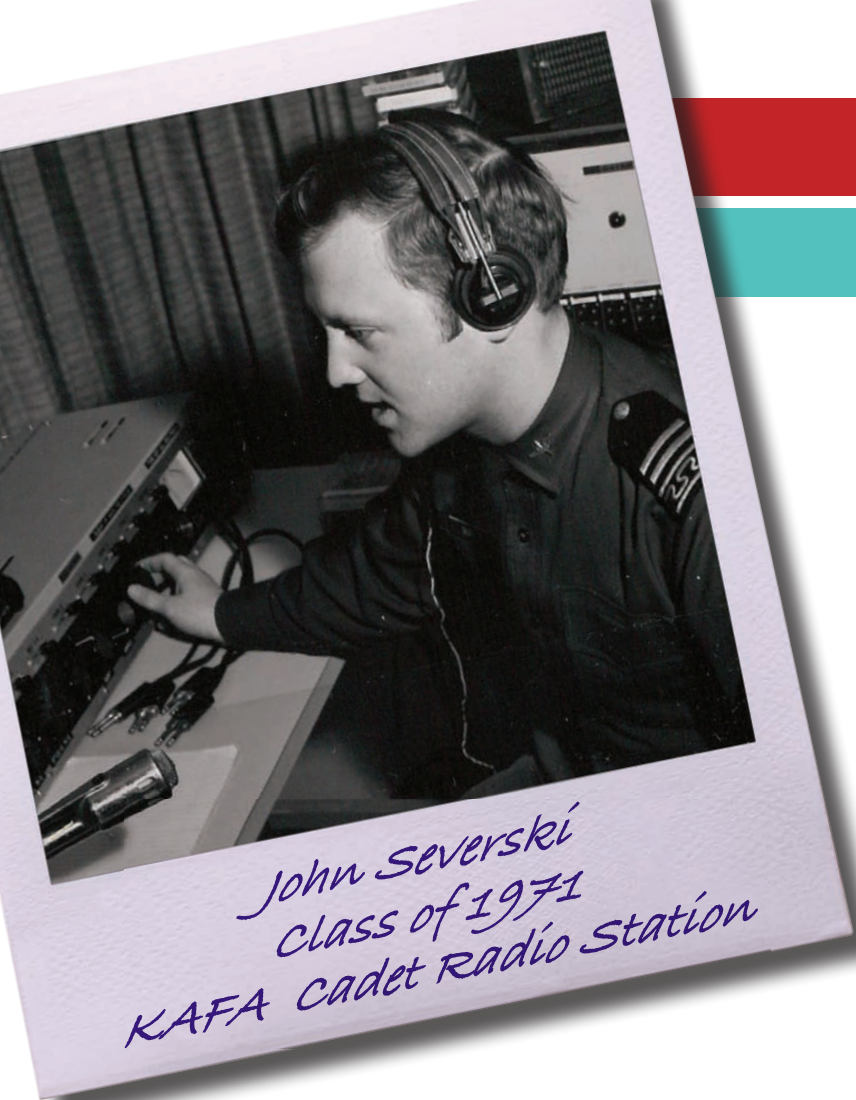
Of course, office space, equipment, disk jockeys and all the other accoutrements of a radio station are nothing without approval to broadcast. That was addressed in an

Oct. 16, 1970, message from the Academy to Washington requesting that a “license and call sign be authorized to initiate activity for the educational FM-MPX radio facility at the Academy ... Request call letters Kafa or alternate KDET be assigned.”

While KDET (“cadet” – get it?) was cute and catchy, the call letters Kafa already had a history at the Academy. As reported in the February 1964 issue of the cadet magazine *The Talon*, “Conceived and organized in the fall of 1963, Kafa-TV now operates on a monthly basis and broadcasts on the closed-circuit educational channel to which nearly all of the sets on the base are connected.”

Sure enough, on Oct. 30, 1970, the Academy received a message from the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Air Force stating, “Call sign Kafa has been assigned by the FCC for use at USAFA FM broadcast facility.” The message also relayed the approval of 89.7 megahertz as the station’s frequency.

Johnny Whitaker ’73 served as the fledgling station’s record librarian. “Once we got our FCC license, we started receiving free demo record albums [vinyl 33 rpm ‘platters’] from music companies around the country,” he recalled. “A lot was garbage, but a lot was great stuff by current and future big-name musicians and bands. Somehow, we also got onto the AFRTS [Armed Forces Radio and Television Service] distribution lists for music and special programs.” ▶



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“By the way,” Whitaker goes on to say, “it was my KAFA association with USAFA/OI [Office of Information, later renamed Public Affairs] that led me into a 30-plus-year career [active duty and civil service] in Air Force Public Affairs and Communications. Who-da-thunk-it?!”

Severski and his staff had polled cadets and determined that rock was the most popular music option, so that became the station’s format. Mayberry used his previously noted experience with AFRTS to bring some of that format to KAFA, to include public service announcements and Air Force news, aiding in KAFA’s professional sound.

By Jan. 17, 1971, everything was ready for the 10-watt station to go on the air. The broadcast began with a clever 10-minute preview show hosted by Mayberry. If the broadcast is to be believed (which it shouldn’t be), thousands of cadets, some having traveled all the way from the new dorm, crowded around the studio.

Al Leitch reported from high overhead in the KAFA copter, and Whitaker interviewed cadets. The pre-program also featured tongue-in-cheek interviews with other cadets who had helped get the station on the air.

Finally, it was air time. Severski smashed a Tiny Tim record to christen the station.

KAFA’s official inaugural broadcast began, appropriately, with the National Anthem. The first rock song

to be played on KAFA was “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes,” by Crosby, Stills & Nash. Severski said he didn’t give the opening song a lot of thought, but played that one first because “it was a really big hit and a favorite of mine and my wife-to-be ... and it had a good intro for voice over.”

Severski then introduced Lt. Gen. A.P. Clark, the then-superintendent, who welcomed KAFA and commended the staff for their work getting the station on the air. He then introduced a song, “Molina,” by Credence Clearwater Revival. The broadcast also included several “thank yous” to individuals at the Academy and Washington, D.C., who were instrumental in KAFA’s founding, including Master Sgt. Woodruff, who by that time was stationed in Saigon.

After Severski’s shift, he was followed in order by cadet DJs Leitch, Mayberry and Whitaker on the initial broadcast.

Because the station could only operate when someone was present in the studio, and cadets had many higher priority activities, the hours of KAFA were limited. Typically, it would be on the air briefly on weekday evenings, for longer periods on Friday evenings, and all day on the weekends.

The KAFA staff also worked diligently to become part of the Academy community. They held charity marathons to raise money for local families. In those days, before broadcast rights were sold to local radio stations, KAFA was

able to broadcast Academy sports, including football from Falcon Stadium. Steve Dalrymple and Gary Dutelle, both from the Class of 1973, were the first announcers.

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Due to problems with its signal bleeding into commercial stations' coverage, KAFA has had to move its frequency from 89.7 to 104.3, then 104.5, and now to 97.7. The station went off the air for a time in the 1980s, but has broadcast continuously since restarting on Feb. 13, 1989.

Today, KAFA's signal is 125 watts, more than 10 times the original strength. That, and a better antenna location, allow the station to reach far more listeners in the local community. The format is stable, with a mix of current alternative rock and a healthy dose of older rock music. A full-time civilian station manager supervises the operation of the station and works with cadet and permanent party DJs.

Since May 1, 2008, the Association of Graduates has funded live streaming of KAFA, making it available to graduates, parents and other interested parties anywhere in the world. The feed can be accessed at the AOG website, www.usafa.org. Listeners also can find KAFA on their mobile devices, and the station is active on various social media platforms.

Another service provided by KAFA is live broadcasts of important Academy events. Every year since 2006, KAFA has broadcast live from Falcon Stadium for graduation. Beginning in 2008, KAFA also has provided live coverage of in-processing activities at Doolittle Hall. These broadcasts are especially well-received by cadet parents who are unable to attend the events.

From humble beginnings, and that first official broadcast on Jan. 17, 1971, KAFA has grown to be a major part of the Air Force Academy's outreach operation, providing listeners around the world with the best the Air Force Academy has to offer. With any luck at all, "The Day the Music Died" at KAFA will never come.

(Col. Simon '77 was a KAFA DJ during his cadet tenure and has had a show on KAFA since June 2007. It currently airs Saturdays from 3 to 6 p.m. Mountain Time.) 

"I want to see what @%# sounds like in echo"

While the first broadcast was still weeks away, an accidental and very inappropriate transmission was made during a practice session.

"One day I set [the equipment] up to echo and the DJs there were trying every combination they could to make weird and hopefully useful effects," Foerster recounts. "I left to continue transmitter checks as they were doing their DJ thing and playing with the new toy. When I came back, a new game had begun and the goal was to see what crude, vulgar obscenities sounded like with deep, repeating echo (a reasonable question). ... Part of the game seemed to be how many times you could get the obscenity to echo before it faded out. ... As I watched the cursing game progress, I looked at the patch board and noticed that my unconnected patch cable was gone. I asked what happened and was told that they needed another patch cable to bring something else into the mix, so they took the one that wasn't connected at the other end. This of course put the soundboard live on the air. ... This was shortly before the station officially began operations in January of 1971, so we had no audience yet. One of the calmer DJs went to the board, opened the microphone, gave some sort of explanation (or apology) and asked anyone listening to call in. One cadet from the new dorm, now Sijan Hall, called in and said he loved the show and looked forward to our January premiere."

"Sir, Have The Security Police Called You Yet?"

Foerster was again instrumental in the effort to allow KAFA to broadcast from Falcon Stadium. KAFA could not afford phone lines, but he was able to talk the supply folks into giving him several spools of field phone wire.

Late one night, he and some accomplices strung the wire through tunnels and overland from Vandenberg Hall to the stadium. As it would happen, security was especially tight that week because the crew of Apollo 15 was going to attend the game.

"I trailed slightly behind [in a tunnel], probably splicing wire, as the others moved ahead playing out wire from the spools when I heard, 'YOU MAN – HALT!' As I moved forward, I found my comrades apprehended by the security police," Foerster recalled. "To this day, some claim guns were drawn, but I can't verify that part. ... The security police chatted with me and I verified that we were all cadets and not stringing detonator wire but simply stringing almost three miles of wire for the radio station. I gave them the name of KAFA's officer advisor and they went to the surface to call it in. ... I immediately back-tracked to the nearest phone and called Capt. Diamond and asked, 'Sir, have the Security Police called you yet?' My call beat theirs and Capt. Diamond ... explained to the Security Police that we were not a threat. We got two football seasons of use out of that wire until we finally got regular broadcast lines from the phone company. However, we never had a clearer, cleaner connection than we got from those three strands of steel, four strands of copper strung in the dead of night."