

Off the Air

Some Random Notes

By THE OLD TIMER

Mainly Historical

Little do some of the newcomers know about our prefixes, and how many changes they went through before we arrived at the system which every good amateur now knows off by heart. No mean feat of memory, by the way, to remember some 250 of them with hardly any conscious effort, but lots and lots of people can do it.

In the very early days of Amateur Radio (just after the 1914-18 war) the British ama-teurs were distinguished by the initial figure "2". No "G", of course. The "2" was doubtless allotted because there was, and still is, a horror in some circles of using "0" or "1", which might be mistaken in writing for the letters "O" and "I".

So all British amateurs were "2's", which is why the Old Timers who busted the very first DX records all hold calls like (to quote a few) 2NM, 2KF, 2SZ, 2OD, 2WJ, 2JZ, and so on. As the number of British licences increased the authorities for some reason omitted to use "3" and "4", so the next series was the "5's", followed by the "6's".

Searching round Europe, therefore, *circa* 1925-27, one heard 2's, 5's and 6's from Great Britain; 8's from France; Ø's from Holland; 1's from Italy; 4's from Belgium; 7's from Denmark. Swedish stations had calls like SMZZ, SMZV, and so on, starting from SMZZ, and working backwards. Their figures, denoting districts, were put in after-wards. Spanish stations were EAR1, EAR2, and the like.

Then the prefix scheme was started, owing to the fact that American and Canadian stations were being so well received in Europe that they had to distinguish themselves by using the letters "U" and "C" respectively. So in came a system of somewhat unofficial single-letter prefixes—F for France, B for Belgium, D for Denmark, H for Switzerland, L for Luxembourg, N for the Netherlands, and so on. At the same time stations in other conti-nents were beginning to overlap; Brazil, for instance, used B, Chile used C.

Next, at the instigation of the I.A.R.U., each *continent* adopted a prefix in front of the country prefix. So we—quite unofficially—became EG; France EF; the United States NU, Canada NC; Brazil SB, Chile SC; Australia OA and New Zealand OZ (O for Oceania); India AI, China AC; and Africa, finding Asia already using "A", had to use

"F" as the continental prefix, which gave us FO for the Union of South Africa, FK for Kenya, FE for Egypt, and so on.

All this was quite clear and free from overlap, but it was unofficial. So, in 1928-29, at one of the periodical high-power conferences, amateur stations throughout the world were given official prefixes, derived from the blocks of call-sign letters allocated to each country. And then, for the first time, W was heard from the U.S.A., VE from Canada, VK from Australia, and, in fact, the prefixes became what they are to-day except for the various individual alterations and modifications that have taken place from time to time.

The interesting thing is this—if you hark right back to the time when Europe had no prefixes at all, and note the Belgian 4's, the Italian 1's, the Dutch Ø's, the French 8's and the Swiss 9's, you will see that these, at least, have persisted right through to the present day.