St. Helena secret

Piney woods station high-tech lighthouse

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GRANGEVILLE -- Nestled in the piney woods more than 100 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, this tiny U.S. Coast Guard station poses a mystery to some residents of this rural area. Lots of people in St. Helena Parish don't know the station exists, and those who've seen its tower sometimes invent fanciful missions to explain its hidden location, the five specialists who maintain the station said.

Seeing the 60-foot tower rising from the woods, some people want to know if the station is really a top-secret spot for decoding Russian radio signals, which is one of the favorite rumors.

To such questions, electronics specialist Ray Beavers usually answers that the purpose of the station is to track submarines on the Atchafalaya River. Actually the station is an important part of the navigation system used by ships, fishing boats and aircraft in the Gulf and over much of the southeastern United States, said Chief Gerald Sexton, the officer in charge of the LORAN-C site.

LORAN stands for long-range navigation, and the C signifies the third generation of the technology, he said.

Like a far-ranging lighthouse, the station puts out a regular pulse. The pulse isn't light, but radio waves that follow the curvature of the earth for hundreds of miles.

Receivers in boats and planes determine their location by measuring the difference in time from the pulses of two or more LORAN transmitters.

That means the transmitters — like the one here and others in Florida, Texas and other parts of the world — have to keep their beacons going in all types of weather.

It also means the operators have to maintain precise control over the timing and shape of each station's unique signal so that it can be identified by the automatic receiving devices.

The receiver, on a boat or plane, then displays the latitude and longitude of the craft's location.

Losing a signal is bad, but sending out an incorrect one, which can sometimes happen as a result of a computer glitch, is worse, since it can cause a ship to run aground or hit an...

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This 700-foot LORAN antenna operated by the U.S. Coast Guard is a well-known landmark in the community of Grangeville.

Ray Beavers prepares to inspect a tray of electronic components that are part of the LORAN system.
obstruction, Sexton said.
The job of this station’s crew is to keep the equipment maintained and then to handle emergencies like lightning strikes on its tower, power failures and the gremlins that sometimes tip-toe around inside the sophisticated electronic equipment.

Operating a LORAN station is hours of “tedious boredom” punctuated by moments of panic,” said executive officer Kenny Hydock. Hydock is serving his second tour of duty at this station, partly because he married a girl from Greensburg the first time he was there.

Hydock likes the comparatively laid-back feeling of the five-man military station.

“It’s not as stressful as search and rescue,” Beavers agreed, comparing it to previous duty.

“This is nice. It’s the best duty I’ve had yet.”

Beavers has been at the station for two-and-a-half years, but will be transferred, possibly to Alaska, in six months.

Sexton served at a LORAN station on an island off the Alaskan coast, where the transmitter combined with a Russian station to help craft navigate.

He remembers it as a bitterly cold rock in the sea where the wind always seemed to whip.

Like that and other LORAN sites, the site south of Grangeville was chosen in part because of its remoteness. LORAN signals tend to mess up radio and television reception of the neighbors, even with the improved filtering that has been added, Sexton said, turning on his own AM radio to demonstrate the pulsating crackle emitted from the tower.

But it pumps money into the local economy. With salaries, it has an operating budget of $325,000 a year, including a $7,000-a-month electric bill, he said.

Another reason the government chose this location, which began operation in 1978, was that it is positioned correctly with LORAN sites in Florida and Texas, he said.

But the future of this and other LORAN sites appears limited.

The federal government is taking comments on shutting them down by the year 2000, though Sexton believes 2015 may be more likely.

Most ships and larger fishing vessels base their navigation on LORAN and use the newer global positioning systems from satellites as backups, he said, opining that the change won’t come as quickly as some people have thought.

Until then, a handful of Coast Guardsmen will remain here to make sure the tower rising above these piney woods continues to put out its beacon — a lighthouse far, far from the sea.