

Operation Manna: The “Flying Grocers of 1945” and the Manna @ 80 Special Event Station April 25-27

John Schouten, VE7TI

During the final months of the Second World War, as Europe lay in ruins and millions faced starvation, a remarkable humanitarian mission took place that demonstrated the power of compassion amidst the chaos of war. Known as Operations Manna and Chowhound, these missions involved the Royal Air Force (RAF) and allied forces dropping food supplies to the starving population of the German-occupied Netherlands. This April, nearly 80 years later, the memory of Operation Manna is being honoured through a special event Amateur Radio station, **Manna @ 80**, which aims to commemorate this extraordinary chapter in history and educate a new generation about its significance.



The Dutch Famine of 1944-1945

By the autumn of 1944, the Netherlands had endured five years of Nazi occupation. The southern part of the country had been liberated following the Allied advance after D-Day, but the northwest regions remained under German control. In retaliation for Dutch support of the Allies, the German occupiers imposed a brutal blockade, cutting off food and fuel supplies to the civilian population. This, combined with an unusually harsh winter, led to what became known as the *Hongerwinter* (Hunger Winter), a famine that claimed the lives of approximately 20,000 Dutch citizens including my grandfather.



Manna @ 80: Honouring the legacy through Amateur Radio

To commemorate the 80th anniversary of Operation Manna, special event Amateur Radio stations will be activated from April 25 through 27, 2025.

This initiative aims to honour the memory of those who participated in the operation and to educate the public about this remarkable chapter in history. It is fitting that it occurs the week after World Amateur Radio Day on April 18.

Amateur Radio has a long tradition of commemorating historical events and fostering international communication. The **Manna @ 80** special event station will operate on various Amateur Radio bands, allowing operators from around the world to make contact to commemorate and learn about Operation Manna. Each contact will serve as a reminder of the humanitarian spirit that defined the mission.

The primary Manna @ 80 station will be set up in the Netherlands. Other stations will operate from airbases in England, where the flights departed, and around the globe in countries that participated with military personnel. Operators will use vintage and modern equipment to communicate with other radio enthusiasts globally, sharing stories and information about Operation Manna.

In addition to the radio operations, the Manna @ 80 event will include exhibitions, lectures, and educational programs aimed at raising awareness about Operation Manna and its significance. Schools and community groups will be encouraged to participate, ensuring that the legacy of this humanitarian mission is passed on to future generations. For complete information visit <https://manna80.radio>.

From stories related by my parents and older siblings, the situation was dire. People resorted to eating tulip bulbs, grass, and even rats to survive. Malnutrition and disease were rampant, and the population was on the brink of mass starvation. Because of the cold winter, people started to remove any burnable material for heat. I'm told that hardly a stick of furniture, and only every third staircase step in our third-floor apartment was left after the war ended.

Operations Manna and Operation Chowhound: The Food Drops Begin

Appeals for help were made to the Allies, and in response, a plan was devised to deliver food by air to the starving people. Operation Manna and Operation Chowhound were humanitarian food drops to relieve the famine in Holland behind Nazi lines, in late April 1945, just weeks before the end of the war in Europe.

Operation Manna

The British operation started first. The operation was named after the biblical story of "Manna", the bread from heaven that sustained the Israelites during their exodus. It was a fitting name for a mission that aimed to deliver lifesaving food to the Dutch population.

The planning of the operation was initially done by the Royal Air Force. The first of the two RAF Avro Lancasters chosen for the test flight, the morning of April 29, 1945, was nicknamed "Bad Penny", as in the expression "a bad penny always turns up". This bomber, with a crew of seven young men (five from Ontario, Canada, including pilot Robert Upcott of Windsor, Ontario), took off in bad weather despite the fact that the Germans had not yet agreed to a ceasefire. Bad Penny had to fly low, down to 50 feet (15 metres), over German guns, but succeeded in dropping her cargo and returning to her airfield.

Operation Manna then began in earnest. British aircraft from 1 Group, 3 Group, and 8 Group took part, with 145 sorties by Mosquitoes and 3,156 by Lancaster bombers. The bomber crews were experienced with bomb drops from 20,000 feet (6,000 metres) but this operation was performed at a height of 490 feet (150 metres), some even flying as low as 390 feet (120 metres), as the cargo did not have parachutes.

The drop zones, marked by Mosquitoes from 105 and 109 Squadrons, were: Katwijk (Valkenburg airfield near Leiden); The Hague (Duindigt horse racecourse and Ypenburg airfield); Rotterdam (Waalhaven airfield and Kralingse Plas); and Gouda.

Bomber Command delivered a total of 6,680 tons of food.

Operation Chowhound

During Operation Chowhound (May 1–8, 1945), the United States Army Airforce dropped 4,000 tons of food. In total, over 11,000 tons of food were dropped over the 10 days. By that time, 20,000 people had died from starvation and 980,000 were malnourished.

The RAF, along with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF), and crews from Australia and Poland, played a central role in the operation. Over the course of several days, hundreds of aircraft, including Lancaster and Mosquito bombers, were repurposed to carry food instead of bombs. These planes flew at low altitudes to drop thousands of tons of food – including flour, dried eggs, margarine and chocolate – into designated areas in the Netherlands.

The food drops were not without risk.

The aircraft had to fly at low altitudes to ensure the food parcels reached the ground intact, making them vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire. However, the German forces, aware of the humanitarian nature of the mission, largely refrained from attacking the planes. In some cases, German soldiers even helped distribute the food to the Dutch population.

Operation Manna continued until early May 1945, when the Netherlands was finally liberated. In total, over 11,000 tons of food were delivered, saving countless lives and providing a glimmer of hope in the darkest days of the war.

The "Manna @ 80" Teams and Stations

The following teams, each representing their nation's involvement, will be participating in Manna @ 80, making this a truly international event.



PH80MAN: The Netherlands

PH80MAN is in the Netherlands, run by Sander, PD9HIX, Erwin, PA3EFR, and other members of the Plusscouts PA3EFR/J, a Dutch Radio Scouting Fellowship, from former operation Manna drop zone 5 Duindigt, close to the city of The Hague in the Netherlands.

On April 25, 26 and 27, the team intends to operate 24 hours a day to contact as many international Amateurs as possible to spread awareness. The station is planned to be open to the public. Plans are underway for schoolchildren to visit on April 25 and Scouts on April 26.

The radio communications will be on HF, VHF and DMR. Please keep an eye on the clusters to find the right current operating frequencies. The DMR Brandmeister talk group is 204-321, and there will be a WebSDR Station.



GB80MAN: United Kingdom

GB80MAN will run from the International Bomber Command Centre in Lincoln. UK operating on April 25, 26 and 27. Operation will commence on April 25, which will be a day of School visits to the station and a service to commemorate Anzac day. On April 26 there will be a family day organized by the teachers at the International Bomber Command Centre, and April 27 will be a

day of operation, still open to the public but without pre-organized visits. The team intends to operate long hours to contact as many people as possible and spread awareness. Operation will be on HF, VHF and DMR, and live streaming of the station will take place when it is suitable to do so.

GB8MAN: United Kingdom

GB8MAN is the call sign of the Lincoln Shortwave Radio Club, which is based in the village of Aisthorpe seven miles north of the City of Lincoln. Members of the club will be operating from RAF Binbrook, which is a former Operation Manna airfield.

VK80MAN: Australia

VK80MAN will operate from April 12 to June 30, from various locations in Australia but especially during our event on April 25, 26 and 27. They will operate HF, VHF and DMR.



SN80MAN: Poland

The SP5KAB Radio Club will operate in Poland with the call sign SN80MAN to pay tribute to the many brave Polish airmen who were stationed in the UK, who took part in every aspect of RAF operation during WW2, and the crews of the 300th Masovian Squadron RAF/PAF, who took part in operation Manna from RAF Faldingworth Lincolnshire in April/May 1945. The club call sign SP5KAB is one of the oldest Amateur Radio call signs issued in Poland after 1945.

VB7MAN: Canada

In Canada, Surrey Amateur Radio Communications (SARC) has been granted special event call sign VB7MAN for 60 days during April and May. We will be on the air from our training station and elsewhere prior to, during and after the event and will seek involvement of the high school students from our RF Communications class.



Contacts with Europe can be sporadic from our location but we are generally able to contact North and South America, Asia and Oceania. As shown on the previous page, we have created a QSL card to commemorate the event. The card bears the \$100 Canadian gold and silver coin struck in 2020 for the 75th anniversary.

The Canadian teams closest to Europe will be operating from their club station as VE1UW. Stuart Crawford, VE9CF, in New Brunswick is hoping his new club will operate under the call VE9AAC. John Macnutt, VE9EZ, and his team of local clubs and Amateurs are also considering running a station from Nova Scotia.

As stations are added they will be posted to the **Manna @ 80** webpage at <https://manna80.radio/the-stations/>. The QRZ page for VB7MAN is <https://www.qrz.com/db/VB7MAN>. That link will be updated as we move through the activation, and during the event from April 25-27 we will try to have our current operating frequencies listed there. The other participating stations have similar pages.

Netherlands PH80MAN: <https://www.qrz.com/db/PH80MAN>

UK GB80MAN: <https://www.qrz.com/db/GB80MAN> and GB8MAN <https://www.qrz.com/db/GB8MAN>

Australia: VK80MAN <https://www.qrz.com/db/VK80MAN>

The others have no QRZ page as yet. As of this writing, teams in the United States are still being organized.

The Legacy of Operation Manna

As the years pass, the number of people who remember Operation Manna firsthand dwindles. It is more important than ever to preserve the memory of this mission and the lessons it teaches us. Operation Manna remains a powerful symbol of humanity and solidarity in the face of adversity. It demonstrated that even in the midst of a brutal conflict, acts of compassion and cooperation could prevail.

For the Dutch people, the food drops were a lifeline that they would never forget. Many survivors of the famine have spoken of their gratitude to the Allied aircrews who risked their lives to deliver the much-needed supplies. To this day, Allied cemeteries are cared for and children educated on the history of this conflict, and the sacrifices of the allies. The operation also highlighted the importance of international cooperation in addressing humanitarian crises. It was a joint effort involving British, Canadian and American forces, working together to alleviate the suffering of a civilian population caught in the crossfire of war.

There is a touching YouTube video describing the operation and its impact at: https://youtu.be/0PwhYFdZ_Y_Q

There is also a Children's page with age-appropriate activities, and a Youth page that includes an introductory guide to Amateur Radio.

The Manna @ 80 special event stations are not just a tribute to the past, they are also a call to action for the present and future. In a world still plagued by conflict and humanitarian crises, the story of Operation Manna serves as a powerful reminder of what can be achieved when nations come together to help those in need.

As we approach the 80th anniversary of this remarkable mission, the Manna @ 80 special event station offers a unique opportunity to honour its legacy and ensure that its story continues to inspire future generations. Through the airwaves, Amateur Radio operators will connect with people around the world, sharing the story of Operation Manna and celebrating the spirit of compassion that defined it.