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Show History THE KECA-TV STORY

An essay of the production of SPACE PATROL on the KECA / ABC NETWORK LOT with some background on the studio's history and the Hollywood home of SPACE PATROL...

By Tom (The Crimson Collector) Mason

Let's begin with a little background on the old stomping grounds of Space Patrol: KECA-TV located at The ABC Television Center lot in Los Angeles, California.

Space Patrol's KECA home was originally the old Vitagraph Studios lot (pictured at right circa 1928) that the American Broadcasting Company had purchased in 1948 and would later dub The ABC Television Center. It was one of the oldest movie lots in Los Angeles. It had first opened as a movie studio in 1912. Its main gate entrance stood undisturbed until Warner Brothers bought the site in 1925 and installed an archway framing that gate to give it a different look. Through the years many famous and historic films had been produced on the property, including many William S. Hart films, Keystone films, Don Juan (1926), Public Enemy, Svengali, Captain Blood, Noah's Ark, parts of Phantom of the Opera (with Lon Chaney), Jolson's Jazz Singer, The Sea Beast (1926), Blue Skies w/Bing Crosby, just to name a few. At one time there was a lake on the property which the sea-going films used to great advantage. Years later when ABC went to build some new buildings, they had to sink deep support pilings because of the water table underneath.



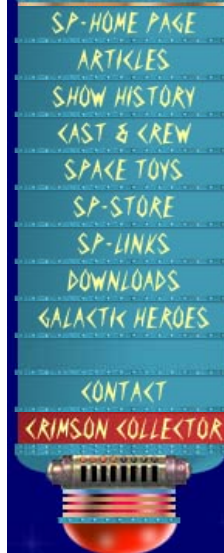
ABC turned Vitagraph Studio's old lot into a combined television studio and West Coast headquarters; it housed both the local station and network operations. (Pictured at left ABC/KECA main gate circa 1950) New buildings to house the offices and technical facilities were built in anticipation of future operations and expansion. After all, they had approximately 22 acres and they meant to use it.

ABC first renamed the "Phantom Stage" where parts of Lon Chaney's classic film had been filmed to STUDIO "E". The newly named studio-E was renovated extensively, its proscenium arch and opera house style balconies and boxes were taken down and the theater look was reconfigured into a television stage.

I corresponded with a friend from ABC, a retired technical director, *Bob Kemp* who started at KECA as a young man in the late 1950s. He had this to say about the studio: "When the old opera stage, (E) was in its heyday (in the 1920's) and The Phantom was shooting. Stages A and B were just beginning to be built. One day a fellow engineer and I were assigned to run some cables under studios "A" and "B". We crawled through years of dust to complete the task. Somewhere in the Northeast corner we found a concrete pylon with the signature of: "*Al Olson*" written on it. I went back a few times in later years with a camera (to take a picture) and never found it again. Years later, of course, it was demolished. I surmised that *Al Olson* visited the construction site and signed one of the pylons that I saw many years later. It was known that Jolson had shot parts of the "*Jazz Singer*" on that very studio-E in 1927.



Studio-E as it appeared in the late 50s and early 60's.



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When I first came to ABC, there was a large painting on the side of studio-E which was a backdrop for a western, something about Gunsight Pass. This was for a western production called "[The Marshal of Gunsight Pass](#)" it was done "live" on the lot in 1950. The show went through three different Marshals in the approximately six months it was on the air. [Russell Hayden](#) was Marshal #1, [Eddie Dean](#) was Marshal #2 and [Riley Hill](#) was Marshal #3.)

Inside of the Phantom's old opera house studio (E) there was a great proscenium which I saw. The stage was raised and boxes surrounded the stage that had an enormous drape that closed off the acts."

Along with the removal of the opera stage look, control rooms were added on a second floor adjacent to the stage from which one could peer down on the stage from the audio booth through large sound-proof glass windows. At that time, it was one of the largest TV stages in Hollywood and would make a great home for the future SPACE PATROL. Years later it became the studio used by [The Lawrence Welk Show](#) as well as many music variety shows and dramas. Studio-E had catwalks high above the stage that were utilized for many scenes in SPACE PATROL, especially in the sequences that took place in Space Patrol's villainous Prince Baccarratti's castle. Some of the old ABC crew members recall shooting a SPACE PATROL episode by combining two stages at one time that could be linked together by opening the connecting "elephant doors" to make one huge stage. These had to be studios A & B as they were the only stages on the lot constructed in that manner. Comedian Ernie Kovacs (who's show [The Ernie Kovacs Show](#) shot on the lot from 1952-56) had once similarly joined the two stages for a sequence where he wandered through a museum's halls. But it was studio E that was to be the home-base for SPACE PATROL.



The cast of Space Patrol (circa 1951) in the KECA/ABC commissary.
[Click for a larger view.](#)

Now, let's get a bit more specific about SPACE PATROL...

Any fan of Space Patrol knows it was created by [Mike Moser](#), a former U.S. Navy Air Force Veteran who had been in charge of training hurricane-hunter squadrons in World War II.

In an interview given to Time Magazine in 1952, Moser said that he conceived the idea for the series while flying across the Pacific Ocean. He began to think about the universe and its future. He wanted to create a program for children that would bring an exciting future to them just as [Buck Rogers](#) and [Flash Gordon](#) had done to him in his youth.

In 1950 he brought his concept for SPACE PATROL to the American Broadcasting Company's Los Angeles owned and operated station, KECA-TV. They bought it and SPACE PATROL was ready to blast off.

In 1951 the show began to air nightly as a fifteen minute series.



The original steel-jawed Commander-in-Chief of the SPACE PATROL, which policed the United Planets, a central government of many interstellar systems, was "Kit Corry" ([Glen Denning](#)). To say that he was not up to the task would be an understatement. He was a masterpiece of bad casting. Denning often forgot his lines, and came across as short-tempered with Cadet Happy ([Lyn Osborn](#)) during his cadet training. Denning was even accused of falling asleep on the air. Moser soon realized that if his show was to survive, it needed another lead actor. As Denning's run on SPACE PATROL began to run out, Kit Corry started getting "Space-O-Phone" messages from his kid brother "Buzz Corry" and he even screwed up his lines there, calling Buzz "Kit" and vice versa, confusing their names. Buzz had not yet been cast and these space-a-phone conversations with him were voiced by [Ken Mayer](#), who would soon become Major Robbie Robertson.

Lyn Osborn, a former radioman in WWII, had studied at the Pasadena Playhouse and knew [Ed Kemmer](#) as a fellow graduate and told him the part of Buzz Corry was opening up.

Kemmer auditioned for the part on Osborn's tip and he was quickly hired to "take over" the duties as Commander-in-Chief Buzz Corry from Denning's botched casting as Kit Corry. Kemmer was an immediate hit as the lead. Kemmer was a real-life war hero who had been shot down over Germany after completing almost fifty missions. Many things were in his favor. Here was a strong but benevolent mentor for cadet Happy. He was handsome, had a winning smile, but was firm and ready to fight it out with all the space villains when necessary. Kemmer and Osborn had great chemistry together and it carried over to the television screen. All the actor's hoped that the show would catch on and go network as their initial paychecks for each 15 minute episode was approximately eight dollars. And interesting contrast to the average per episode paycheck of \$35,000-\$50,000 that a sit-com actor today may receive. There were rumors that they took part time jobs parking cars to supplement their income. Their perseverance paid off, as later on when the show did indeed go network, their salaries escalated to \$45,000.00 a year.





As soon as the show became popular, ABC wasted no time in adding a radio show to the already heavy work-load of Kemmer and company. At the end of each Saturday's TV episode, the announcer would remind us to listen to SPACE PATROL on radio each Saturday as well. Today, there are about a hundred of these radio shows existing and readily available in MP3 disc format on the internet. Decca Records also got into the act and had the cast record some SPACE PATROL audio adventures for a record album.

The work load of all those (combined) shows put a strain on the memories of many of the actors. Many often forgot their lines on camera and Buzz and Happy would sometimes have to prompt them, working it into the dialog. The actor's often used "crib sheets" taped up on the set, out of the range of the camera, so that they could "remind" themselves of what lines they were to say next.

Sets built for the show were not all they appeared to be on camera. They were flimsy and the actors had to be careful in fight scenes not to lean their full body weight against them as they had a tendency to fall over. That did happen on camera a few times and in some cases you could practically see them holding up the sets so they would not fall.

SPACE PATROL'S producer and writer often did double duty... the man who was to become the head writer on the show, [Norman Jolly](#), doubled as the villainous "Agent X". The associate producer [Bella Kovacs](#) created the role of Prince Baccarratti, and soon became the foremost nemesis to Commander Corry and the United Planets. Donning a black leather jacket rented from Western Costume from the 1939 Columbia serial "[Flying G-Men](#)", Kovacs even became known by the serial character's name of "The Black Falcon". On radio, he played many different characters and often doubled in other roles on the TV series as well. No matter how they disguised him and made him up, his thick accent always made him easy to identify.

It is interesting to note that in the early days of the series, there was no major budget. Wardrobe had to be rented from the famous [Western Costume Co.](#) and uniforms and costumes were reused from many of the famous serial cliffhangers. Time and again the Captain Marvel tunic (pictured at right) was used and modified. Luckily there were different sizes as worn by [Tom Tyler](#) and his stuntman [David Sharpe](#). In an early SP episode, sniveling villain Don Gordon wore the Captain Marvel Tunic, and even the father of Carol, the Secretary General of the United Planets wore the tunic at one time with some added piping. Poor Carol, she acquired several "fathers" as the part of the Secretary-General was cast with many different actors at times.



[Superman](#) clothing from the serial's Krypton opener appeared as well as pieces from Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, Flying G-Men, and most any science-fiction serial that could be used for futuristic garb. [Nina Bara](#) as Tonga even had her original outfit custom-made for her by her mother. The lightning bolt insignia on Buzz Corry's uniform noticeably changed several times during the run of the show. When the show went network, specially designed custom uniforms were made for the cast and it gave them a whole new look, and would become the "definitive" look we know today. Many franchised clothing items were made available to the young fans at their local department stores, and many items that had been premiums on the show appeared in stores as well.

Outer space garb was something else... the spacesuits from [George Pal's](#) Paramount film release "[Destination Moon](#)" were extensively used with the big plastic bubble helmets. You could see where a section of the face plate had been cut away to make the actor's faces more visible and to stop the bubbles from fogging up from the actor's breath. When donning the helmets, the actors just had to set them on their shoulders and they were miraculously sealed to the suit. A spiffy Space Patrol-inspired bubble space helmet with the logo and neat graphics could be purchased by youngsters in their local department stores and many exist to this day and are sold and collected at premium prices. To see many collectibles of Space Patrol items, you only have to visit [Ebay](#) where the roster of goodies changes daily.



Buzz's famous Terra space cruisers may have become slicker as the show went on, but the interiors stayed curiously awkward. The controls and futuristic gear were strangely World War II-looking. Early cockpit seats were nothing more than a bench then crude aluminum bucket seats and only later on were they to be replaced by revolving upholstered seats such as we might see in a living room at home.

Marvin Jacobs, an optical engineer, who developed the "Big Jake" lens for the station and became its top optical engineer, told me of how he would comb the war surplus stores on Hollywood Blvd. for old tech equipment and hardware that he could trick up for the show. As the show matured, instruments with blinking lights appeared on the side of the cockpit, and airplane type controls made for a better appearance of piloting the ship through space. Viewing ports similar to port-holes in sea-going vessels were installed in the ships. (Which lead to unknowing crew-men walking behind and in front of these port holes "live-on-air") A curious design oversight was that the sleek Terra V flagship had just two seats in the cockpit and any extra passengers were obliged to stand, looking over the shoulders of Buzz and Happy. Exiting the space-ship was another oddity. In place of having an exit-way in the side of the ship,

everyone exited through a hatch in the topside of the rocket, climbing up a mysterious ladder that would only appear out of nowhere for those exits. A couple of the original camera men said it was always an interesting sight to see the female leads scramble up those ladders in their abbreviated outfits.



Weapons on the show varied from homemade hand-held ray guns to over-the-counter toys, all were put into service at one time or another. Old publicity photos clearly show Happy holding an old toy Smoke-Ring Gun (made by Nu-Age Products Inc) which was sold with special rocket shaped matches that would fill the chamber of the gun with smoke when the gun was cocked. An air bladder blew perfect smoke rings out of the barrel. This could be purchased in most any toy-store; it had no resemblance to the authorized Cosmic Smoke Gun offered as a premium later in the series' run. Even the durable Marx Signal Ray Gun was used. Marx marketed it under the name of their

space hero, Rex Mars, then Tom Corbett, and even a Space Patrol version was sold. Marx licensed it to anybody who would sign up. Eventually the Space Patrol members were given their own specially designed side-arm. It was molded in various colors by U.S. Plastics. In toy stores it came with assorted darts. A deluxe version was marketed with a holster and belt. It was named the Rocket Dart Gun and the TV cast usually carried the model molded in red plastic. Imagine that, the actual show used the very toy that any of us could buy in our local stores. The prop-man put aside the toy darts and settled for dubbed in sound effects. In later years Dan Dare, an English space show had Merit Toys either beg, borrow or steal the design from U.S. Plastics and released their Dan Dare Rocket gun themselves in metallic colors.

Later on, U.S. Plastics created the famous Cosmic Smoke Gun as a premium for the series and we all had the opportunity to send in for our own gun. The first version was in red and was approximately 4 1/2 inches long. Later on, another version was available in stores in green with a slightly longer barrel. You loaded the funnel-like tip of the gun with smoke powder, (actually talcum) and pulled the trigger and the powder was propelled out of the interior rubber bladder with a puff of air and if things worked well, it looked like smoke. A rifle dubbed the Auto-Sonic rifle molded in red and yellow plastic was offered, but few of them survive to this day. Sure enough, most all these items just "happened" to work their way into the story lines of the show making them all the more desirable to viewers who wanted to play along with Buzz & Happy on the show.



In all, there were five local 15 minute episodes on local TV each week, a weekly radio show and a half hour Saturday morning network show, not to mention personal appearances. Due to the time differences between the East and West coasts, the show had to be shot at 8 A.M. at KECA to make the scheduled 11 A.M. time in New York. It was the first regular live coast to coast Saturday morning series. This was accomplished by utilizing cable and multiple relay stations to send it live to New York. Today we use satellites, but those were years off. Los Angeles saw it delayed via a "hot" **kinescope recording**: a sort of "instant movie." (kinescope recording camera pictured at right) These "hot kines," as they were called, got their name because of the speed in which they had to be processed in order to be shown in a few hours. At first they were shot on 16mm film. Later, as the show's budget grew, they were shot on 35mm for added quality and resolution.



If you would like a more detailed summary of the types of equipment used by ABC / KECA in the production of Space Patrol [CLICK HERE](#).

Various historians put the number of the fifteen minute local telecasts at approximately 900 shows, 210 Saturday morning network shows, and over 200 radio performances. The dates given for the total run of the show are from 1950 through 1955.

Ralph W. Emerson, a radio engineer for ABC at the time recalls: "I was still in radio when SPACE PATROL was done at the main lot when creator Mike Moser was killed (April 23 1953) crossing Vine Street in front of the ABC Theater" (where the radio show was done). Moser was struck and knocked some 85 feet, the driver of the car did not see him. Moser's untimely death helped bring about the end eventual of the series. ABC tried to negotiate the purchase of the rights to the show from Moser's widow, but she would not sell them to the network. Unable to acquire the show, ABC cancelled it in 1955. Re-runs of old kinescopes were marketed in syndication as "SATELLITE POLICE" for a time after the show left the network.

Eventually, Moser's widow licensed SPACE PATROL to an entrepreneur, Wade Williams, letting him market the video rights to such companies as the Nostalgia Merchant and Rhino Video and eventually his own company Atomic Television. Nostalgia Merchant and Rhino released some episodes in a few collections and others are available as mentioned from Williams' own company. Most of these are the later half hour network episodes from the better 35MM kinescope recordings. Since then numerous old kinescopes of both the early 15 minute shows as well as the network half hours shows have turned up from various vendors as being in the public domain, a fact that Williams contests. Still, copies of the shows are available readily on places like [Ebay](#) and from websites like Swapsale (If you want the really old shows, starting with Denning and moving along to Kemmer, then I recommend Bruce David's Swapsale: <http://www.swapsale.com/>) as they have many hours of those early shows. Sure, the kinescopes they are mastered from are old and tired, but all the excitement and fun is there. Swapsale also has a quantity of the later half hour

shows as well. I have purchased many volumes of the old shows from him and they are still fun to watch.

In all the thirty-six years that I worked at the ABC Television Center lot, construction never stopped, stages were rebuilt and new ones were added. Today, under Disney's reign, (Leonard Goldenson & United Paramount Theaters bought ABC in 1951 - Capital Cities Broadcasting bought ABC in 1986 - Disney bought ABC from Capital Cities in August of 1995) many of the TV studios have been stripped to be used as bare studio space for in-house film productions or rented out to outside film companies. The only two network shows actively produced on the lot now are General Hospital and it's spin-off Port Charles, both daytime soap operas. Studio-E, SPACE PATROL'S home had become a storage facility for General Hospital's mobile sets. Just an empty stage devoid of cameras and activity, reduced to a storage area...

No longer do we hear the voices of Jack Narz, Dick Tufeld or Roger Barkley inviting us to join them in adventures in the vast reaches of outer space... the roar of the rockets has long been silenced.

Today, after Disney bought the network, they have moved all of the local production of KABC-TV to new facilities in Burbank, California. Only General Hospital & Port Charles are produced using electronic cameras now, along with some news inserts from the west coast. Prime time shows such as the Academy Awards are done outside the studio as outside packages to be funded by the network. No "studio staff" people do these types of specials anymore. Many engineers who have retired or taken buy-out packages have returned to the lot or to location sporting events as "daily hire" employees - hired as they are needed.

The days of taped dramas and variety/comedy shows are gone from the old lot. In May of 2002, Disney dropped the name "ABC Television Center" and renamed it "The Prospect Studio." The idea is to make the studio facilities available to all ABC-Disney productions as well as film, television, and commercial producers, independent of the mother company. In the industry this is referred to as four-walling. The new Prospect Studios Logo is based on the original 1915 entry gate to the Vitagraph Studios with the later Warner Bros archway framing the main gate to the lot.



KABC Studios on Prospect Ave. Circa 1990

*(Update) KABC/Channel 7 moved to their new television studios and vacated the Vitagraph/ABC lot in December 2000.

Demolition of 1960s-70s era buildings has already begun. The original 1915 buildings and bungalows are considered historic studio structures and will remain. The lot will be renovated, restored, and upgraded for modern film and television production needs. Some original sound stages will be renovated for rental along with other facilities nearby. As part of a 24-month program, the building exteriors will be repainted and repaired with a consistent color scheme that will emphasize the long history of the lot. Stages and streets on the lot will be renamed to carry over the historic theme of the entire studio. The vestiges of the old shows like Space Patrol are fast becoming only a fond memory.

Only through the magic of video tape, which has preserved the old kinescope recordings can we relive the fun of SPACE PATROL.

Television production in the fifties had a real sense of excitement to it, mistakes were made on-air and that only enhanced the enjoyment knowing it was "live." Memories of these early days remain vivid in my memory and it is sad to see that those days will never return.

So Space Cadets, get out those old tapes and relive those high adventures in the vast reaches of outer space, missions of daring in the name of interplanetary justice, and travel into the future with Buzz Corry, commander in chief of the SPACEPATROL!

As Cadet Happy so aptly put it... Smokin' Rockets!!!

TOM MASON



DID YOU KNOW?

Two other television shows were produced with the title of "Space Patrol". One was in England (using puppets) and another in Germany. The titles were the same, but neither the content nor the characters were in any way similar to the American show. ([Click here for more info on the British series](#))

Numerous tin toys from Japan and China have Space Patrol emblazoned on them, but the term is generic.

Mike Moser actually sued (the producers of) Tom Corbett Space Cadet as being a rip off of SP's Cadet Happy? He eventually won a settlement from them.



*My special thanks for all the help from Gary Grossman, Bob Kemp, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Marvin Jacobs, Bruce David and all the old crew at ABC for their input. Photos of the ABC/KECA studios courtesy [Chuck Pharis](#).



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