

Few hams who travel on business have a mobile platform anything like this one. For that matter, few hams travel in these "circles."

Drifting Off Thule, By Frank Wolfe, NM7R
Published on ARRL Website, March 28, 2001:



It's been a hectic workday. My office has, uncommonly, been the center of attention, and the day began before six. It's now after nine in the evening, and things are finally beginning to calm down. With my desk cleared of work, I am ready to shut things down. Dominating the small office is a Mackay MRU-35, High Frequency Single Sideband transmitter. It will run 1500 W PEP output on any HF frequency and is the workhorse for communications from my tiny office. My hand hesitates on the

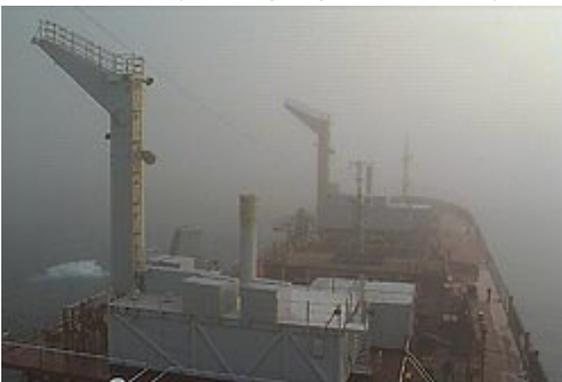
power switch, and withdraws. Instead, I tune the receiver to 14.300 MHz and listen for the Maritime Mobile Net. Sure enough, the net is in operation and coming in strong.

I tune up the MRU-35, keeping the throttle backed down to about 1300 W. When the net control asks for check-ins, I throw in "November Mike Seven Romeo." He responds: "The Seven Romeo, fill in your call sign and call your traffic." Before I can even make a call, a familiar voice chimes in: "W2ABM copies you. '303 and up, I'll call you, Frank." "Ok, Roy, 14.303 and up; I'll listen for your call. Thanks Net," I answer.



The ship anchored in Thule harbor, 800 miles from the North Pole, after discharging her cargo. In the background are the storage tanks we came to fill, and to the right are buildings of the Thule US Air Force Base.

The MRU-35 was not designed with sliding up and down the band in mind, and for a minute or so I am quite busy rolling digital frequency selector switches up and down, listening for Roy's voice calling me. After finding him with the receiver, I have to move the transmitter to the same frequency. Most commercial radio work is handled on split frequencies, so the equipment is designed with transmitter and receiver as separate units.



A view from the bridge--and fog. Ship safety depends upon radar to avoid icebergs in the sometimes dense fog. Note the ice "growler" to the left of the ship.

"Good evening, Roy. You're coming in loud and clear. How me?" "I've found you with the beam, and you're doing fine here in Elmira, New York," he responds. Roy knows I want a phone patch home, and I pass him the number. While he places the collect call, I muse over the scores of phone patches he has run for me from all over the world. I hope he knows the warm regard in which those he has helped over the years hold him.

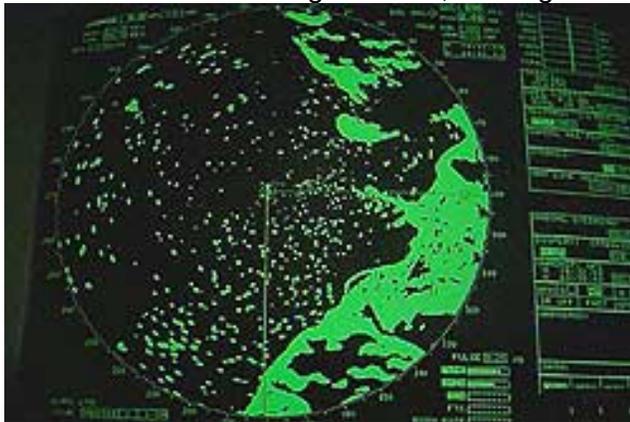
My reverie is broken by those wonderful words: "OK, Frank, your wife is on the line; go ahead."

We exchange the usual banter, catching up. Much of what we say is unnecessary, but it's so good just to hear her voice. Knowing that all is going well at home is a relief

for any traveler, and I've been away for three months. All too soon we terminate the patch. Like all good things in life, the gracious assistance of a good natured fellow Amateur must be taken in moderation. Trying to hold our patches to three minutes is tough, but we usually manage five or six.

Afterwards, Roy chats for a minute, and then he's back off to the Net to help some other soul. "Kay Five See Eye Zed, near San Francisco." A strong signal cutting through the warble and hiss is my introduction to Jim, in Fremont, California. Having been born and raised in the Bay Area, I know where Fremont is and, as it turns out, Jim spent time near here in the 1950s. It's truly a small world. At 73 degrees North Latitude, I am well above the Arctic Circle, and it's daylight all the time. The North Magnetic Pole is actually to the west, causing interesting radio effects, including warbling, hiss and an intermittent echo effect. It's nice to meet Jim, and we both share our past experiences. His kilowatt and seven elements make the trip nicely.

Clearing with Jim brings several calls, and I chat with K7VNW, Bob, in Richland, Washington. My home is now in Washington State, although a long way from Richland. He asks about my day, and I fill in some of the details. Up before 6 AM to catch the first of several radio-facsimile broadcasts, I'd already put in an hour and a half before going down to breakfast. These important charts, mapping weather and ice floe conditions, are spread out now on every horizontal surface in the room. In the afternoon, I managed to catch a few ice charts directly from "Can-Ice Three", the Canadian ice patrol aircraft. The charts are pieced together to form a mosaic. Captain Rick Beede, and Ice Pilot Ed Paeffle, have been in the office all day, poring over the latest charts as they roll off the printer.



One of the two radar screens showing icebergs in Thule harbor. The large area of green at right is land. The peninsula directly to the right of the ship (at center) is the Thule harbor area. All the little specks on the screen are large icebergs that must be avoided. Range from center to edge is 3 miles.

to clear a path through the worst of the ice. The weather is a critical factor on such a voyage, and the ice conditions even more so. With the ebb and flow of daily message traffic and staying in contact with various ships, aircraft, and of course, Thule Air Base--on various HF SSB and teletype circuits--it's been a full day. Juggling transmission times so as not to interfere with chart reception, while meeting schedules and monitoring four or five receivers all day, has worn me out. The Merchant Marine; it's not just an adventure, it's also a job.



Sailing north up Baffin Bay along the Labrador coast, one finally reaches the edge of the ice. From here the 'bergs are a constant companion, becoming thicker until the solid sea ice sheet--breaking up in summer--is encountered.

Signals on 20 meters are beginning to fade as I sign with John, N3MSE, in Butler, Pennsylvania, but there is time for one more contact before closing down and heading for the bunk. I go back to Les, KB2WZY, Long Island, New York. Les is running 100 W into a vertical, but his signal is the loudest on the frequency. He says he's been a ham for only five months but admits to having been a Novice 25 years ago. Those were the days when you had a year to upgrade or lose your license. Welcome back, Les, to the World's Greatest Hobby!

Twenty five years sounds like a long time, but I've been a ham for 20, and it seems like only yesterday. I've used my amateur privileges to communicate with home and to meet lots of interesting people. My present career and many of my most cherished friendships have grown out of Amateur Radio. If there is one thing I've learned about this hobby, it is this: Amateur Radio isn't about equipment or contest points or certificates or even rare DX. Amateur Radio is about people.

Amazing, how chatting on the radio for a few minutes can relieve the exhaustion of a long day, isn't it? Another early morning is just around the corner. Time to pull the big switch.

Editor's note: Frank Wolfe, NM7R, is a Merchant Marine Radio Officer/Electronics Technician and holds a Second Class Commercial Radiotelegraph (T2) certificate, General Commercial Radiotelephone License, and a GMDSS Operator and Maintainer License. He has a BS from Oregon State University and worked for several electronics companies in Silicon Valley during the 1970s. When not at sea, Wolfe lives in southwestern Washington, where he is active with the Sunset Empire Amateur Radio Club. A ham since 1980, Wolfe teaches license classes, serves as a VE and provides technical support for the area repeaters.