

ERNEST KRENKEL

".....Friends showed up on the Hawaiian islands. I worked one of them several times and he turned into a supporter of our expedition, he was worried - would the ice melt, aren't you afraid?... He was well-informed about our drifting expedition. He reported to us the contents of our reports, only the day before they had been printed in central Moscow newspapers. By his reports we saw how quickly the foreign printing of our radio messages, sent to Pravda and Izvestiya could be reprinted."- Ernest Krenkel (famed Russian ham radio operator)

In the world of radio communication, ham radio operators are an important fraternity. They are recognized all over the world for their passionate involvement in the promotion of the art and science of radio communication. One such ham radio operator was Ernest Krenkel from the erstwhile USSR. Like all other hams Ernest also had a call-sign (personal identification characters allotted by the government), but he had a very special call-sign. He used to tell everybody – "RAEM is my call-sign" and he had every reason to feel proud of it. He also wrote a book with the same title: 'RAEM is my call-sign'. In fact RAEM was the call-sign of a ship by the name of Cheluskin which sank in the Arctic on February 13, 1934. Ernest was a radio operator in that ship. RAEM later on became Ernest Krenkel's personal ham radio call-sign.

Born in a poor family, Ernest had to do many odd jobs. In 1917, at the age of 15, he used to repair kerosene stoves, meat-mincing machines and baby carriages. After finishing a course for radio operators in 1920, he got the chance to spend a winter at the Novaya Zemlya Polar Station during the year 1924. His career started as a telegraph operator in the Red Army. But Ernest had high ambitions too. He wanted to live an adventurous life. He wanted to go back to the North Pole again. At that time, he had no radio equipment of his own. A desperate Ernest sought out his own way. He met a professor at the Lenin Laboratory and convinced him to provide a radio equipment for experimentation with an impression that the Russian Navy would test it in the Arctic! Now it was Ernest's turn to get a job. He went to Leningrad with the little pocket money which he earned as a telegraph operator while serving in the Red Army (He also used to play bugles in the Red Army functions, but he once admitted that he was a very bad bugler!). He met the Navy officials at Leningrad and told them that he had a wireless equipment with him which he can spare for Navy works! He told them that if there was a vacancy for him in the polar expedition team, the equipment problem was already solved! With this little ingenuity, Ernest could now again dream high. He got the job! In his life, he never looked back except for a few vindictive punishments meted out to him by the political hierarchy. He was never a member of the Communist Party for which he had to pay a price. His ham radio licence was once revoked by the authority, but, later on he got it back with all the glory. Ernest belonged to a German speaking small community in Russia.

Ernest was the radio operator at polar stations and ships going on expeditions for many a year. He spent many winters



Ernest Krenkel

in the Arctic in primitive camps. He survived many aircraft disasters while getting off the ground and while landing on the rough ice. He also survived scurvy suffered on a desolated island. Whether it was from a wrecked ship or a melting ice floe drifting to the unknown land, Ernest was always successful in keeping his radio signals on the air under the harshest of the situation. But according to him, he could not operate with his ham call-sign much, because he had to save his battery power for official radio communication in other frequencies. He publicly apologized for this. In fact, while leaving for North Pole, he promised his ham fraternity in Russia that he would regularly talk to them through radio. But he could not. He wrote: "A special job in my work was contacting radio amateurs on short-waves. Leaving Moscow, I promised radio amateurs of the Soviet Union to actively maintain communications with them. It was not my fault that I was unable to fulfill the promise in a way that I would have liked. As on many other occasions I was severely limited by the wind and the batteries. At the slightest opportunity I tried to work radio amateurs. But this work always went on only "under wind". Not only accumulators had to be fully charged, but, while working radio amateurs there had to be a fresh wind. I worked until the first signs of an abating wind in order to ensure time to restore, with the help of the windmill, the electric power output used up. Only with observance of these conditions could working radio amateurs be permitted."

Krenkel rose to the position of Head of the Polar Stations of the Northern Sea Route Administration (NSRA). He took part in the record-breaking voyage of the "Alexander Sibriakov" ice-breaker, which covered the entire Northern Sea Route in a single navigation season (The Northern Sea Route stretches six and a half thousand kilometres along the Arctic coast, which is considered as the world's most challenging shipping line). A year later, in 1934, Krenkel sent the now famous radiogram from S/S *Cheluskin* that the ship had perished and the crew pitched camp on the ice. He was able to save 104 lives after that disaster. He among a very few other crews were the last to be evicted from that icy land. They were stranded for long two months in that icy land till the final rescue took place. On a personal account, Ernest told Alf Lindgren (a ham radio operator from Sweden with the call-sign: SM5IQ), that, while they were waiting for the last aircraft, there was no firewood left to light the fire so that the pilots could find them. So, they had to set their fur-coats on fire - hoping that they would not be left on the ice another night! Later on, Ernest was conferred the 'Hero of the Soviet Union' award.

In 1937 he was among the celebrated Ivan Papanin's (who was a political officer) team of four as the radio operator of the North Pole. A great adventure began in the history of the world, when they pitched camp and

Ham Radio....

established a research station on a drifting ice floe in the vicinity of the North Pole. Ernest was also running a beacon radio station from the drifting ice floe. They drifted and drifted for a record 274 days from the North Pole to Greenland, a distance of 2600 km, obtaining the first scientific observations from that high altitude. Ernest Krenkel thus earned the distinction of becoming the first drifting radio station in the world! Even much before that, in 1930, he was able to establish a link between the Franz-Josef Land and the Antarctic, a record in long-distance radio communication. Later he became a doctor of geography and was in charge of the Research Institute of Hydrometeorological Instrument Making. He was also the chairman of the USSR Central Radio Club.

Ernst Krenkel died on December 8, 1971. As a tribute to this heroic polar explorer (who was renowned much as a 'radio operator' and to the ham radio fraternity rather as a brave 'ham radio operator'), a bay on the coast of Komsomolets Island and one of the islands in the Severnaya Zemlya archipelago are now named after him, and so is a polar hydro-meteorological observatory at Franz Josef's Land, a Communications Electro-Technical College in St. Petersburg and a weather research vessel of the Hydro-meteorological Service.

The 100th anniversary of Soviet Polar Explorer/Radio Operator Ernest Krenkel (Call-sign: RAEM) was celebrated by a team of ham radio operators from 18th to 21st December, 2003. All the ham radio operators who participated in this



RAEM was the call of S/S Cheluskin named by me in the Polar sea in 1934. I was there the chief operator. Since then RAEM is my personal amateur call. Mail address: Ernst Krenkel, Cheluskina street, 1/A, Moscow, USSR.
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Hams exchange QSL cards as a memoir of their radio contact. This was the card sent by Ernest to one of his friends

expedition were allotted with special call-signs which resembled the personal call-sign of Ernest Krenkel. (RAEM) except that their call-sign prefixes now included digits (R0AEM, R1AEM, R3AEM and like that) complying to the ham radio rules.

We from VU2NCT ham radio club station of Vigyan Prasar also offer our tribute to this legendary ham radio operator. I first came to know about Ernest Krenkel in 1989 (the year in which I got my ham licence) from a crumpled paper which I received as a wrapper with a grocery item! I feel proud today that I preserved that paper and I am able to rediscover Ernest Krenkel through the Internet, after 15 long years. I wish Ernest Krenkel be alive again!

There are many reasons for a person to become a ham radio operator. Some become ham for sheer adventure, some want to build their own equipment, some just want to

make friendship by leisurely talking with fellow hams from around that world, some for the sheer belief that if they become ham then they would be able to talk to their family when they go far apart. To some, ham radio is just a simple hobby for the pastime when they have nothing to do. For the techno-savvy, it is an excellent way to fulfill their craving for sophistication. For the sailors and for the people who have to go to remote places, becoming a ham is an added advantage.



Ernest Krenkel in 1961
(photo courtesy: Alf Lindgren)

While ham radio provides merriment to the hobbyist, to the sailors and explorers it is an utility. They can even send e-mails to their families/friends right away from the sailboats or vehicles without any internet connection and that too without any cost! This becomes possible through a dedicated global network of ham radio stations popularly known as 'Winlink' (for more information please refer to: <http://www.winlink.org>). In fact, with a technology known as PACTOR-III, ham radio operators can virtually send any file formats from one computer to another using radio waves. A physician for nuclear medicine by the name of Dr. Thomas Rink (DL2FAK) once established a R&D organization (SCS Germany) with an aim to develop a technology to cater to the emergency need of sailor ham radio operators on small sailboats. A new packet radio modem called PACTOR-III was then designed & developed by Martin Clas, DL1ZAM (a military engineer). Hans-Peter Helfert (DL6MAA) who was a Chemist by profession wrote the software for it. Another ham by the name of Jim Corenman (KE6RK), who himself was a cruising sailor and a ham radio operator then wrote a software called AirMail to give it free to all the hams so that they can send e-mails from the sea. One of my ham friends (Captain Fatty Goodlander, W2FAT, who is a ham and a sailor from the Caribbean Seas: http://www.qsl.net/vu2msy/fatty_goodlander.htm), who has been sailing round the world for the last 4 years in a small sailboat keeps me updated about his voyage using a similar PACTOR-III system.

The 'civic-minded' hams get opportunity to carry out 'disaster preparedness' activities by way of operating their wireless sets during 'mock exercises' so that in the event of a distress they can help their fellow beings when all other modes of communication may fail. An industrious ham with a technical bend may take it as an opportunity to research and develop radio equipment for her/his fellow ham radio operators, which may turn out to be a profitable proposition. In fact, in Japan, the Japan Amateur Radio Industries Association (JARIA) plays an important role in bringing out new technologies for ham radio operators. Undoubtedly ham radio has a great social role to play among the school children. Only if the budding scientists do something with their own hands, shall our country be able to rise to the heights of technical and industrial excellence and ham radio offers this opportunity to the school children at a very young age.

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