

TALKING TO THE WORLD - IN HIS BACK ROOM



Mr. Frank Aw, 41 sits in the silence of his room before an array of electronic gadgets and radio transceivers, his face in deep concentration.

Slowly and gently, his fingers turn the knobs on his radio set as he watches the needle jump in the counter.

Suddenly, a babble of voices comes through the loudspeaker, followed by intermittent beep-beeps or morse messages.

Then there's a brief silence and Frank speaks into the microphone: "This is 9V1OK standing by . . . this is 9V1OK standing by . . ." (9V1 is Singapore's international radio call and OK is Frank's personal identification code).

Another short silence follows, then a deep rich voice answers with

remarkable clarity: "This is 4S7PB receiving you . . ."

Frank's eyes light up and he smiles into the mike: "Good evening Paddy . . . receiving very solid copy here. How are things in Sri Lanka?"

And both go into a long friendly discussion about the latest in radio and electronic techniques and exchange personal news.

Franks is one of the 35 licenced amateur radio enthusiasts (or radio hams as they are known) in Singapore who spend their leisure hours communicating with 400,000 other hams throughout the world through radio.

"It is a fascinating to think that I can sit in the cosy comfort of my room and have the world at my fingertips" he said.

Morse

Frank, who is president of the Singapore Amateur Radio Transmitting Society, has spent eight years at this scientific hobby and has made several thousand contacts with people from the four corners of the earth.

"I cannot think of a better way of promoting international goodwill and making friends with people in distant lands than through this means," he said.

"We can learn much about each other and keep abreast of the latest in radio and electronics technology as many hams are experts in the field," he added.

Conversations between hams touch on many topics but there is an

understanding among them to avoid issues like religion and politics.

Language is no problem as English is the universally accepted medium. But a ham in Singapore who is in contact with another say, in Moscow, can communicate in international morse which all hams learn to master before they get their licences to operate.

In Singapore, aspiring hams have to sit for a basic radio theory test and pass a practical morse code test at 12 words a minute set by the Telecommunications Authority of Singapore before they are licenced.

Licences are issued by the TAS at \$25 a year to those aged 18 and above.

Is radio-hamming within the reach of the average Singaporean?

Yes, says Frank. After passing the test, all that is needed is a radio transmitter and receiver. These can be bought for less than \$500. Of course, the more sophisticated and high-powered ones can cost as much as \$10,000 or more.

"But if you have the patience, go to Sungei Road and scout around. You are likely to find one there," said Frank.

To help those wishing to pursue this hobby, the TAS has printed a booklet, How to be a Radio Ham in Singapore, at \$1 a copy.

Living in multi-storeyed flat is also no impediment to the pursuit of this hobby.

Frank stays in a four-room flat at Marine Terrace. But to ensure better reception, he has chosen a unit on the topmost floor of the 16-storey block and has fixed the antennae on the rooftop.

Scouts

Tips on how to set up equipment are obtainable from SARTS members who meet monthly at the Scouts Headquarters at Sands House.

Singapore Scouts are also keen radio hams. They have three local radio stations - one at Sands House, the other at Katong and a third at the Merino Crescent home of Dr. Cheran Singh, a SARTS member.

At present there are 15 associated members besides the 35 full members. The 15 are those who are preparing for their radio and morse exams or who have yet to acquire their own sets.

The society's honorary secretary, Mr. Tan Liang Huat, says it is possible for a radio ham to project a still picture of himself onto the television screen of another ham he is in contact with if both have the necessary equipment.

Part of the language of hams may sound unintelligible to the uninitiated but the jargon is easily picked up.

For example, 73 (either spoken or in morse) means "best regards and good wishes," 88 is "love and kisses" which is normally said to a YL (young lady) or XYL (ex-young lady) which refers to the wife.

And many hams have often said: "Eyeball QSO" to one another before they end their conversations. This means, "Hope to see you in person."

Value

But whatever lingo, or jargon the ham uses, it invariably expresses on sentiment - friendship.

Friendship aside, radio can be of tremendous value, especially in times of national disaster

Says Mr. Tan: "For example, in times of famine or earthquake when victims of the stricken countries need food and medical supplies, hams can initiate immediate calls to other countries for help.

"This can often be achieved faster than through the normal telecoms channels," he said

To establish "Eyeball QSO" with other hams in Asia, about 15 SARTS members will attend the 5th SEANET (Southeast Asian Network) conference of radio amateurs in Kuala Lumpur next month.

The convention to be held at the Hotel Equatorial there will be attended by hams from the Middle East to Japan.

The three-day meet from Nov. 7 is sponsored by the Malaysian Amateur Radio Transmitting Society (MARTS).

By Philip Lee