



## Who you callin' a ham?

Originally considered an insult to describe an inconsiderate and selfish performer (ham actor), or an incompetent landline telegraph operator, the term "ham" in operator speak mainly referred to an operator's ability to jam other operators out of the conversation or from the ability to transmit.

Alternative explanations are that ham is a shortened version of "ham-fisted," meaning clumsy.

"Amateur" refers to the prohibition by law from accepting monetary or material compensation of any kind for any activities performed as radio operators.

For more information on amateur radio, visit <http://www.arrl.org>. For information on KSTYP, visit <http://www.kstyp.org>.

Retired Master Sgt. Don Martin, left, looks on as Sergeant Collings, 338th TRS, repairs a Heath Kit HF transceiver. The two men are part of the newly revived KSTYP, the call letters for the base's amateur radio club.

Photos by Adam Bond

# Fans revive amateur radio club

By Angela Cutrer  
Keesler News staff

The July 21 graduation of the final radio operations class at Keesler Air Force Base may have brought to close 61 years of instruction, but don't think that radio operations are now mute in this area. Local enthusiasts are attempting to bring back the long-lived KSTYP, the call letters for the base's amateur radio club.

"(This) place was a real part in the storm in the old days, and I think it can be again," said Master Sgt. Kenneth Collings, 338th Training Squadron, who's helping spearhead the revival of the radio club.

"The camaraderie can't be beaten. (That's) not to mention what an asset I believe the club could be in an emergency. It is a real tragedy the club was dormant during Katrina.

"I'm hoping it's an 'if you build it, they will come' situation," he added.

The American Radio Relay League, Inc. reports that there are more than 660,000 amateur radio operators in the United States and more than 2 million in nearly every country in the world. Many American astronauts have ham licenses.

But what exactly is amateur "ham" radio, you ask?

As a ham radio enthusiast informative Web site "We Do That" notes, "ham radio supplies the most extensive and most powerful wireless communications capability available to any private citizen anywhere in the world." Further, "the Amateur Radio Service frequency bands are the place where you as an individual can develop and experiment with wireless communications."

This means anyone with the right equipment can participate.

The history of ham radio traces its roots to many inventors, including Samuel Morse, who formulated the elements of a relay system. By 1837, the improved system uses Morse code, an electronic alphabet that could carry messages, and the first message, sent on May 24, 1844, was "What hath God wrought." In the 1890s,

Guglielmo Marconi started tinkering with wireless telegraphy and by 1912, the United States government was issuing licenses for amateur radio operators. Thousands of enthusiasts existed by 1914 and Hiram Percy Maxim founded the American

Radio Relay League that same year to band operators together in a common organization.

Richard Barlett explains in his 2007 book, *The World of Ham Radio, 1901-1950: A Social History*, that "... during the first 50 years of the 20th century, ham radio went from being an experiment to virtually an art form. Because of the few government restrictions and the low monetary investment required, the concept of ham radio appealed to various people. More than just a simple hobby, however, ham radio required its operators to understand radio theory, be able to trace a schematic and know how to build a transmitter and receiver with whatever material they might have available."

"By World War II, the U.S. government had an increased need for cutting-edge communications, so it turned to the "considerable knowledge and skill of amateur ham radio operators, validating the fact that ham radio was here to stay," Barlett notes. "The FCC provides bands at intervals from just above the AM broadcast band to the high microwave frequencies for use by ham radio operators. The FCC

created this 'service' for emergency backup communication."

Bil Munsil, 65, of Mesa, Arizona was stationed at Keesler in 1965 and in 1969 and he says that Keesler's is arguably the first amateur radio club on any military base in the United States. The clubs came in handy during times of war; soldiers and their sweethearts found ways to communicate, and there were even marriages conducted over the airwaves.

But if you aren't allowed to make any money, and you have to take a test to get a license, why would anyone be interested in such an activity? Hear it from the devotees themselves.

J. K. Skelton, 44, is an Air Force retiree who teaches air traffic control in the 334th Training Squadron. His involvement with amateur radio primarily began in 1996 when he was stationed in Hawaii and a number of his golfing buddies had 2-meter radios. He earned his license to be able to communicate with them, and, soon after, with a good number of military members. Later, he upgraded his license, bought a HF radio, and began making long-distance contacts.

"It was fun to do, and people

all over wanted to make contact with Hawaii," he said. Mr. Skelton uses his radio skills currently by his involvement with disaster relief through the Southern Baptist Convention and emergency net practice with the Salvation Army.

Sergeant Collings, 43, of Biloxi has 19 years active duty with the Air Force. One of his assignments, at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, had him using his ham gear to assist dog sled races, which led to him shaking hands with legends of the Iditarod Trail.

A ground radio maintenance technician by trade, Sergeant Collings is now an instructor here at Keesler. "(For me), radio is like magic," he said. "I tell my students 'You are working on a box that talks. Less than 200 years ago, that would have gotten you burned for witchcraft."

Sergeant Collings' experience in Alaska not only allowed him to learn the meaning of the word "cold," but it offered him insight into extreme living conditions: "Ever use an outhouse at 20 below zero?" Sergeant Collings

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asked. "They don't have hot running water that far out there, so you learn that the most important thing to have in the Alaskan bush -- speed!"

Sergeant Collings said that his skills and license helped race officials promote a safer race on the trail.

"If someone left a checkpoint and didn't arrive at the next in a certain prescribed time, a search and rescue could be initiated that much quicker," he noted. "We were also able to coordinate the movement of dogs that had been dropped off on the trail to be picked up by small aircraft and taken back to civilization for medical care."

Gilbert Gibbs, 65, of Port Aransas, Texas, is a semi-retired innkeeper. He earned his first license in 1958.

"The most remarkable aspect of radio is that there's always something to learn every day, so the hobby only gets dull if you want it to," he said.

Thus began his long love affair with ham radio. He's been licensed for more than 50 years, and counts his most memorable situation as the hours, days,



Photo by Adam Bond

Mr. Martin demonstrates the use of radio equipment at the Locker House, where radio club members meet the second Monday of each month.

months and full year following Hurricane Celia in 1970.

"That storm all but wiped out my home town of Port Aransas, but the interesting part is that my ham radio

antennas survived," Mr. Gibbs said.

"When the Houston hams arrived to help out with emergency relief communications, I loaned my antennas to them and I've been active in emergency com-

munications preparations every year since.

"This hobby is far better than any other I've tried, much more rewarding. I get a lot of satisfaction with it. The remarkable part of my experience is that hams are always helping hams, (which is) a very distinct difference from other hobbies.

"I've learned a lot in 50 years, and I'll continue to do so until my earthly time is up."

Sergeant Collings calls on the active-duty members of Keesler and surrounding areas to join up with the club the second Monday of each month at the Locker House to make it the strong, tight-knit organization it used to be.

"I've really enjoy putting a station (back) together like this," he said.

"(The club was) a place you can go and relax without any of the stressors in your life. Working ham radio is sort of a nice, 'comfort food' thing to do.

"We were born here in 1948, when the original radar school was washed out of Florida in a hurricane and moved to Keesler.

"We'll still be here in 2048."

<http://www.keesler.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-090909-052.pdf>