

End of an Era for Telex Transmission of Weather Reports  
from Hong Kong Voluntary Observing Ships

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The telex address of the Hong Kong Observatory “54777 GEOPHHX”, used for decades for ship weather report transmission, will be consigned to history and to the memory of the captains of the Hong Kong Voluntary Observing Ships. The reports are now transmitted from ships via Inmarsat to a ground station in Japan and then relayed to the Observatory using emails.

In the development of marine meteorological services for ocean-going vessels, the Observatory began collecting weather observations recorded by ships plying the data-sparse oceans soon after its establishment in 1883. In the early years, most of the weather observations recorded in logbooks or extracts of logbooks were sent to the Observatory by the ship captains or owners, and a small number of them were transcribed by Observatory staff (Port Meteorological Officers or PMO) on board the ships when they came into the harbour. The first PMO was first appointed in 1892 with specific duty of visiting ships in port to collect the weather observations recorded as well as to check and calibrate the clocks carried onboard.

With the advent of wireless technology, the weather observations made on board the British naval fleets were transmitted to the Observatory by wireless telegraphy in 1908. With more coastal wireless telegraphy stations established in Hong Kong, more and more ships sailing close to Hong Kong could then make use of radio waves to transmit weather reports to the Observatory, providing timely weather information over the seas for reference by the forecasters. However, wireless telegraphy required ships to be near the coastal stations in Hong Kong for the messages to be picked up.

The situation was greatly improved with the introduction of telex in the 1930s. Telex was a network of teleprinters, similar to the telephone network, for transmission of text messages. Weather reports transmitted by ships travelling to other ports and received by the coastal wireless telegraphy stations near those ports could then be relayed to the Observatory using telex. With the Inmarsat (International Maritime Satellite) entering the scene in the early 1990s, ships at faraway ports could also transmit weather reports to the Observatory in a much more

real-time manner, through the Inmarsat communication channel via a ground station at Singapore and then relayed to the Observatory by telex. Overtaken by the rapid development of information technology, telex transmission of ship reports to the Observatory finally came to an end after its decommissioning on 31 December 2014.



Figure 1 - Typing up weather report for telex transmission.

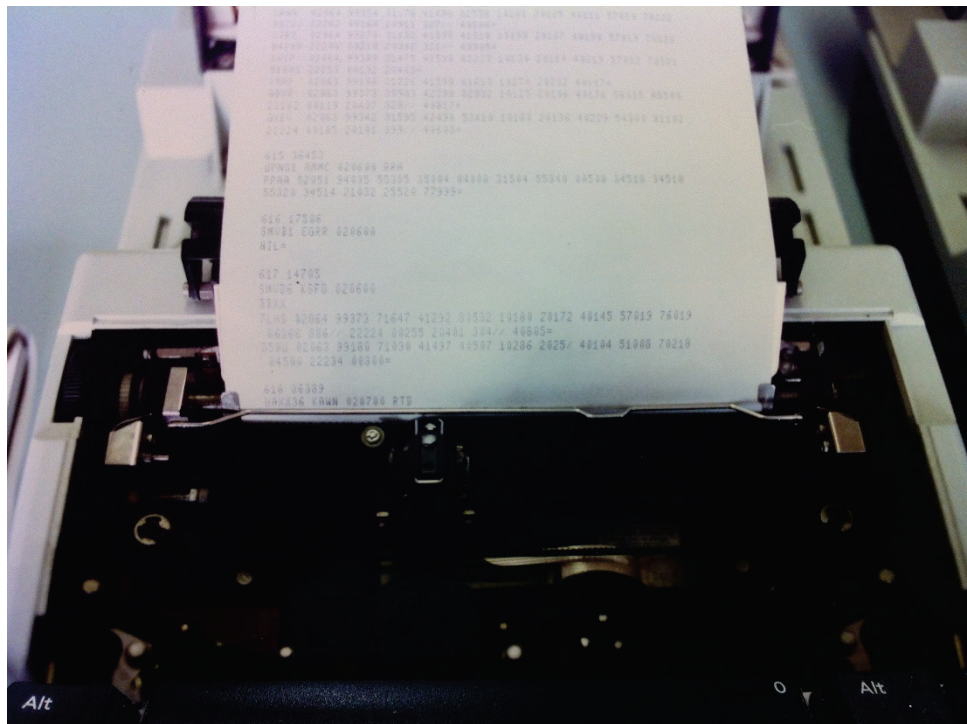


Figure 2 - Receiving ship weather reports from a teleprinter

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54777 GEOPH HX
447702753=VRGO X
CI

KDD INMARSAT-C SERVICE 5-DEC-2014 23:25:33 UTC REF:255953
447702753=VRGO X (POR)BBXX VRG06 052333 99031 11083 41598 63208 10272
20217 40135
5511770022 8/ 766 22284 02231 2 //// 30000 80233=

54777 GEOPH HX
447702753=VRGO X
TOD 060726

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Figure 3 – The last HKVOS weather report received by telex at the Hong Kong Observatory.

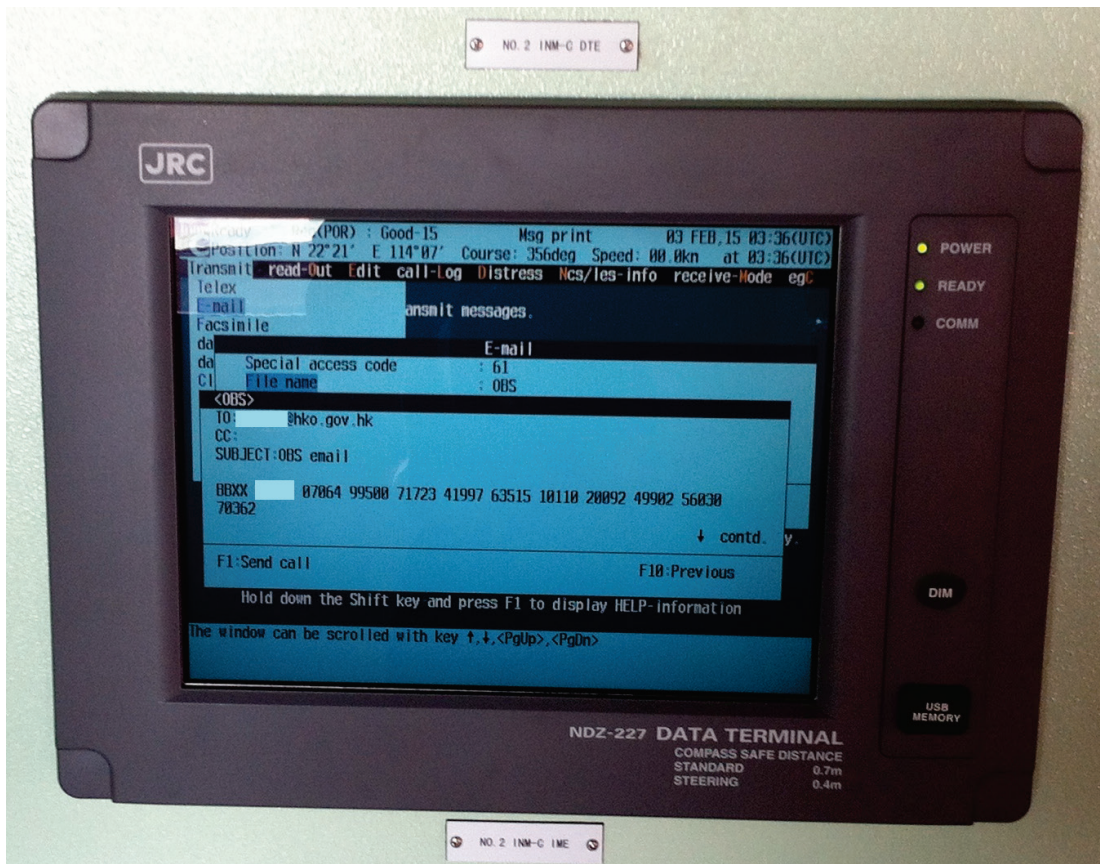


Figure 4 - Sending weather observation via the email service on Inmarsat C terminal on board a Hong Kong Voluntary Observing Ship.