

## *the Polarmail man*

# Old link standing by: any takers?

By Josh Landis  
*Sun staff*

In the days before e-mail, internet access and direct phone lines were available here, one man helped put Antarctica in touch with the world. Rick Johnson spent decades at his ham radio keeping thousands of people on the Ice connected with friends and loved ones at home. With the help of his wife, Louise, he did it during his spare time, and he did it for free.

"I didn't drink or smoke, so I figured I might as well do something," Johnson said.

Today he still stands by, ready to help anyone in the U.S. Antarctic Program reach out and touch someone, now through the internet. But lately he hasn't been getting much business.

Rick and Louise started the messaging service that would eventually be called "Polarmail" more than 16 years ago. Rick was an amateur ham radio operator with high-frequency wanderlust. Antarctic radio operators were looking for a way to get more messages off the Ice. When Johnson made contact and announced he was a member of the Military Affiliate Radio System, which is more powerful than regular ham radio, and willing to put in the hours, the pieces clicked.

"There are quite a few folks out there that used my services extensively over the years," said the 73 year-old Johnson, who's never been to Antarctica. "They would remember it well."

From his home in eastern Pennsylvania, Johnson would work into the night, acting as a human relay in the transcontinental communique. He would patch phone calls through his high-frequency (HF) radio and flip the

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*- Rick Johnson  
on his ham radio hobby*

transmission switch each time someone said, "over."

Johnson also transcribed short letters read to him by operators on the Ice. He said many of the messages he passed on weren't very enthusiastic.

"Most of them didn't like it down there and wanted to come home," he said. "They would say what a big mistake it was to go there."

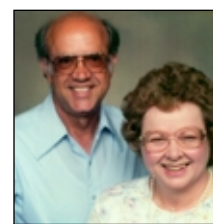
One night, Johnson said two FBI agents knocked on the front door and started asking questions about his contact with Antarctica. At first, he and Louise didn't know what they were after.

"They were investigating a drug ring in McMurdo and had traced some phone calls to my location," Johnson remembered. "Much to my disbelief I was making phone patches for (the suspects). After they investigated us they went away."

Over the years, Rick and Louise used many different systems to pass messages along. The phone patches were popular, but the Johnsons also typed and mailed messages by hand. In a busy week they would relay up to 300 messages.

In later years, Louise introduced a service called "Polargifts." She would order flowers and other gifts to send on

special occasions, before internet shopping or phone orders were available to people on the Ice. Now Rick scans photos and prints out e-mails, operating almost exclusively via the internet.



*Rick Johnson and  
his late wife,  
Louise.*

Ultimately, the evolution of Polarmail reflected the changing face of technology. The increasing popularity of the internet and e-mail means Polarmail may soon go the way of the Pony Express. Raytheon is currently evaluating whether it will continue to spend \$32 each month to reimburse the cost of Johnson's phone line. He receives no payment for his services.

Either way, Johnson says he'll stay in business.

"It won't end Polarmail. I'll pay for it myself," he said.

Still, he says, times are changing. "I think it's going to be the end of an era here."

Louise Johnson died in December, 1999, but Rick is still ready to make the intercontinental connection. Polarmail is free and Johnson can be reached at polar@epix.net. ■

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impact the area where the sea ice runway usually goes.

But researchers would jump at the chance to come in for a few months during the austral winter, a time when their universities are on summer break anyway, said Randall Davis of Texas A & M University. He is eager to use new technology to follow

up on research he did in 1981, when he wintered-over to study Weddell seal behavior. In the 20 years since, he has become a professor and father, making it difficult to winter in Antarctica.

"A great number of PIs (principle investigators) have the same problem," Davis said. "They have commitments

which just don't allow them to leave for practically a year."

If an icebreaker were able to divide the winter in half, Davis and other researchers could commit three months instead of six.

"Really it opens up McMurdo to a whole range of activities," Davis said, "as occurs in the summer." ■