

Sprately has my special interest as I still remember very well the tragic attempt by four German operators who wanted to activate Sprately from Aboyna Cay. I followed the voyage of the Germans when on their way to their destination in the South China Sea. There were daily skeds with operators around the world but also with US stations at a military base in the Philippines. It was a shocking moment when we learned that they had been fired at and the boat caught fire. Since that moment there was no communication anymore with the team....

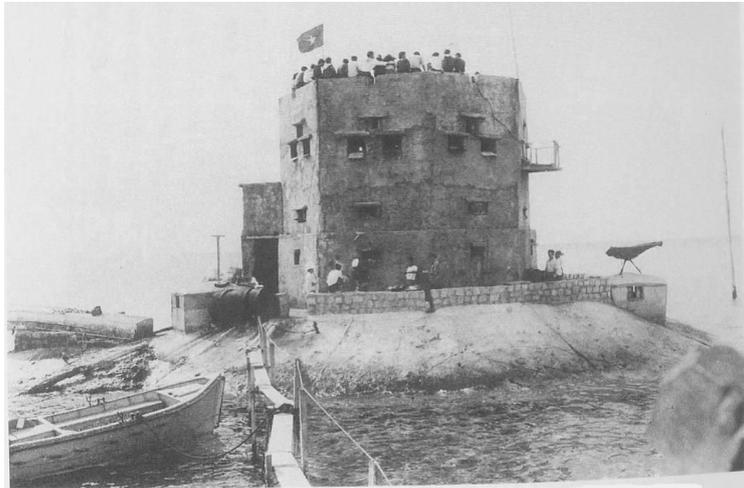
In the June 2017 issue I wrote about disputed areas and the impact for amateur radio. The most disputed area with great impact on many countries and even with worldwide concern is the South China Sea. Most amateurs will immediately think about the Spratly Islands as this is a DXCC entity that can be activated under call signs from different countries. The South China Sea is surrounded by the following countries China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines and Taiwan and each of them claiming part of the area.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, any country can claim a 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around every island that it controls, usually splitting the differences with the EEZs of other countries that have territories, insular or otherwise, within those limits. It is not so difficult to imagine that having, or claiming some outlying island will increase the EEZ with all the related benefits (oil and minerals). So that is why there are so many claims on islands or even on dots in the South China Sea that can hardly be called an island. To strengthen the claims, old documents and charts are referred to in recent history, small coral rocks of just a few square meters are now converted in artificial islands large enough to support air strips, hangars, fortresses, etc.



The maps above are just two examples of how the different territories are claimed and who occupies what. There are many maps and all show something different, depending who drafted the map. If you google on Sprately, you can see yourself the great number of maps available and all showing a different picture, depending on who created the maps. The outposts and facilities currently present in the region vary from small islands and coral rocks, to large fortified platforms and islands, including in some case airstrips for large planes. Here will follow some pictures of the kind of old and new outposts that have been established by the different countries that make their claims in the area.





Due to the tension in the region, it becomes more and more complicated to undertake amateur radio operations from some of the islands. Several operations took place over the last two decades and in more recent history it was mostly operations licensed by Malaysia and Philippines. Obviously, getting permission to land on one of the islands is the most difficult obstacle but even with permissions on hand, the situation can change at the last moment.

I have experienced it myself when applying for an operation from Pulau Layang Layang (also known as Swallow Reef and called Danwan Jiao by China and Đá Hoa Lau by Vietnam), an island occupied by Malaysia and housing a naval base and diving resort. Finally the permission came through at the moment I just wanted to cancel the trip. For me it was a special experience to operate from the area where nearly 25 years earlier a tragedy took place when trying to air Spratly. That particular story has been documented by DokuFunk from Austria which I will share here with the courtesy of Wolf Harranth, OE1WHC, with some additional materials from my own archive.

Failed attempt - DJ3HG, DJ4EI, DF6FK, DJ6SI - The Spratly Tragedy

Team: Gero Band, DJ3NG; Diethelm Müller, DJ4EI; Norbert Willand, DF6FK; Baldur Drobnic, DJ6SI. Skipper: Peter Marx and his xyl Jenny. On 31 March 1983 the team left for Singapore, where they were met by Henner, 9V1WC, who would help the team with their planning and last-minute details. The team found a German skipper, Peter Marx, and his catamaran, to provide transportation to Barque Canada - an island in the Spratly Group. The team, including Jenny, the wife of the captain, left on Easter morning, sailing through the Singapore Strait on their way to the Spratlys. As they neared Amboyna Cay, near Barque Canada, they slowed their speed, since they knew that either Malaysian or Filipino soldiers may be present. Their information told them that Amboyna Cay was in the hands of the Malaysians. As they got closer to the island, a hut-like building appeared, but no sign of soldiers. On closer observation, the team saw a watch-tower, and immediately changed course to avoid any chance of contact. As they changed course, they noticed a man in the tower, giving hand signals and in a few seconds the shelling began.

The first shot fell short, but the next shot struck the captain and he threw himself on the floor, although bleeding badly, as he tried to keep the ship on course. Baldur was also hit in the arm, and was bleeding, as was Norbert. Gero was in contact with another station on 20 meters, and advised him that they were under attack. As Gero left his position, they noticed that Diethelm was missing. It was not actually known if he was shot or thrown overboard. Their dinghy had fallen into the water, and everyone climbed into it, while the boat burned. The shelling continued, as they drifted farther away from the island. They had hoped that the message Gero had sent out on 20 meters had been received okay, and they would be rescued by U.S. Air Force planes in a few days. They believed that the Vietcong had shelled them, and soon discovered their dinghy had also been hit, but they were able to plug the hole with cloth. The bad news was that they had no water, and nothing to eat, and all were only partially clothed with no shoes. They used a small basket to catch tiny fish, which they ate, along with a few mussels from the bottom of the dinghy, but still no water. After about eight days, Gero tried drinking some sea water during the night, and he was dead by morning. They buried him at sea. Since the Spratly Group consists of so many reefs, sandbars and shallow areas, there is very little shipping nearby, so they had to wait until they got close to the shipping lanes for any hope of rescue.

Everyone was suffering terribly from thirst - there was little hunger. The skipper and Norbert were both in bad condition, and everyone's hope centered on a vision Baldur had had a few nights before, when he believed he heard a voice calling through dense fog: "On the tenth day you will be rescued." (which later became the title of Baldur's book) After several ships passed, indeed on the tenth day (April 19) they were finally spotted by a Japanese ship, the freighter "Linden" under Captain Inose. On arriving in Hong Kong, they were taken to a hospital, where they recovered from their ordeal at sea.

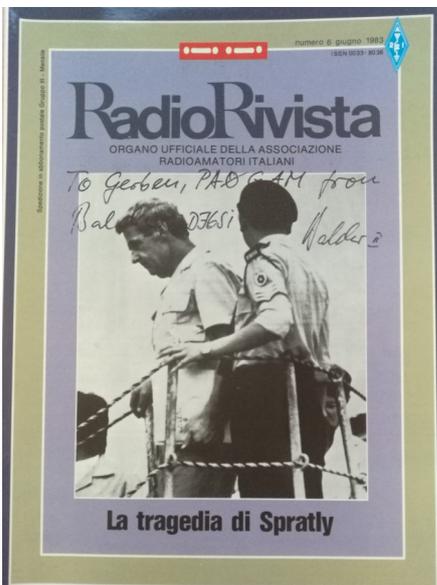
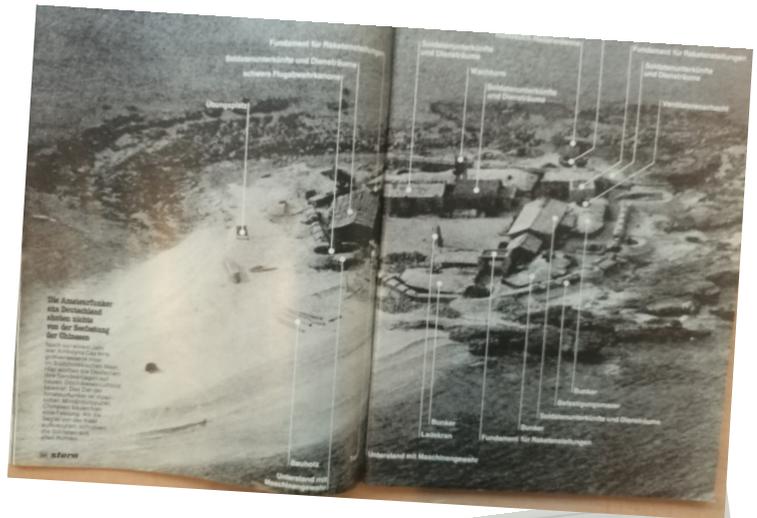


The GDR exploits the tragedy for Cold War propaganda

Press coverage, particularly in Germany, was heavy (see our documenta-tion), and some hardliners in the German Democratic Republic seized the opportunity to launch an attack against their western counterpart. Baldur Drobnic , officially employed by the German Federal Republic's Office of the Interior, was indeed working for its Bundesnachrichtendienst, the Intelli-gence Service's Section IV (Counter Intelligence). His occupational back-ground - and the fact that GDR intelligence was aware of it - was to be "leaked" to selected press and political sources in the GFR, alleging that the Spratly expedition was a spying conspiracy operation under the disguise of an amateur radio activity. For that purpose, the GST (Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik) – the Society for Sports and Technics, (in charge of amateur radio) was ordered to publish a pamphlet "for restricted circulation" listing all accusations and suspicions. The records of this meeting, unfortunately, have not yet been released for public use. But there is no doubt that Harry

Radke, a member of the ham magazine's editorial staff, when ordered to author the brochure, just followed the list of instructions, adding more or less only ham-related terms. (See our reproduction, in German). Everything went as planned – even the renowned "Spiegel" Magazine took the bait: Under the headline "Men from the Rhine" it wrote in its edition of 9 May 1983: "Is it possible that a German intel-ligence officer survives ten days without water and bread? This miracle happened, purportedly, in the South Chinese Sea. After the de-mise of the GDR, Harry was heavily blamed and reproached for his participation in a shoddy propaganda war. Here a link to "[The expedition in the grip of cold war east-west propaganda](#)" (German) [PDF , 2.4 MB].

Below some other examples of media coverage from my own archive; Der Spiegel (black and white and Radio Rivista that covered the whole story, including a comic strip style summary.



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