

A picturesque view of the waters off Agalega. The small boat was used to haul batteries back and forth to the Marsouin for charging.

Voyage To Agalega

BY V. C. HARVEY-BRAIN*, VQ9HB/VQ8BFA

IT WAS Thursday evening, May 30, 1963. This was to be the second attempt to reach Agalega. Very late in the season to undertake such a voyage in a rather small vessel; for in the ordinary course of events one could be almost certain of meeting a stiff South East Monsoon before reaching Agalega.

Clear of the Seychelles, nevertheless, I found only a moderate southeast swell, and only a light southerly breeze. Enough swell, however, to upset the ship's black cat who was very soon sick in the middle of my bunk. Enough swell, besides, to spoil my appetite; to dictate a spartan supper of hard tack, baked beans, and coffee.

Hard tack, baked beans, and coffee. The hours passed. The vessel rolled. I snatched uneasy intervals of sleep, while the helmsman steered S.S.E.

Saturday, June 1. 1000 Local time. Even though a stiff S.E. breeze strums through the rigging the vessel rolls no more.

VQ4AQ DE VQ9HB/MM GM GEORGE GLD CUA QTH NOW COETIVY LEAVING FOR AGALEGA PM TODAY VQ9HB/MM DE VQ4AQ GOOD MORNING HARVEY GLAD TO MAKE THIS CONTACT WAS GETTING ANXIOUS YOUR CONTINUED SILENCE YOUR SIGNAL IS 589 HERE IN NAIROBI HARVEY FINE BUSINESS FINE BUSINESS ALSO YOUR QTH ALL THE BOYS GETTING VERY EXCITED THOUSANDS OF HAMS AWAITING YOUR ARRIVAL AT AGALEGA

190 miles to Agalega. Before us now, perhaps, the most difficult part of the voyage. We are entering an area which seems feline to me; treacherous and uncertain; breeding ground of cyclones.

Astern Is Coetivy

The sunset was misty but the sea was calm. And later the moon floated like some huge tranquil pearl in a cloudless but hazy sky. We were pushing on at our best speed. The direct

course to Agalega was 177° true but I, taking full advantage of this unexpected calm, had set a course 152° true and so was gaining precious miles to windward. Like this, I hoped to gain an advantageous position from where I might meet anything which the brooding S.E. Monsoon later had to offer.

0700 hours the next day. The scene had changed. The sky was overcast and a strong breeze whined through the rigging. Storm Petrels, considered by sailors as unwelcome visitors for they are said to be the harbingers of strong winds and storms flew about. All plain sail had been set and now, well up to windward of Agalega, we were making fair weather of what might have been a foul breeze.

VQ4AQ DE VQ9HB/MM GE GEORGE GLD CUA UR 5 ES 8 NICE SIG FB WX SO ROUGH HARD TO CONTROL THE KEY TELL THE BOYS AGALEGA NW ABT 33 MILES ES 208 DEGS TRUE HPE ARRIVE TMW IF STILL AFLOAT CHEERIO GEORGE ES 73

0650 hours, Monday, June 3rd. A yell from the masthead. Benoit the boatswain had seen Agalega. "Agalega right ahead."

0900 hours.

VQ4AQ DE VQ9HB/MM GM GEORGE STILL AFLOAT HI UR 5 ES 9 FB ALL EXCITEMENT HERE TELL THE BOYS CAN SEE THE BREAKERS ASHORE AT VQ8BFA

Approaching The Island

Rounding the northern tip of the island one immediately notices a very prominent landmark. A black painted ship's mast complete with crow's nest and rigging. It stands near the end of the iron-pile jetty, and as I was to discover later, is almost 70 feet high. A somewhat melancholy reminder, no doubt, of a disaster which occurred many years ago in the breakers—but, quite naturally, the only thought which crossed my mind at that moment was, what a gift for a ham's antenna!

*Bel Eau, Mahe, Seychelles, Indian Ocean.

I entered the anchorage slowly until I could discern through the crystal clear water the white sand and seaweed on the bottom. Then I let go in 5 fathoms. Even though close up to land, as close as I dare go, the ocean swells passing the protecting horns of the reefs to the north and south of us, meeting in the midst of the anchorage in the form of uneasy mounds of water, caused our small vessel to roll and pitch. I could see at a glance that during bad weather—especially with the wind, anything west of south—our position would become untenable.

Shorewards, all along the edge of the reef the swell broke in a smother of foam on jagged coral. The moment hardly seemed fit for a landing; nevertheless, I hadn't time to lose. The boys were all waiting for VQ8BFA, and moreover the weather might deteriorate at almost any time. I therefore decided to launch the pirogue and proceed ashore.

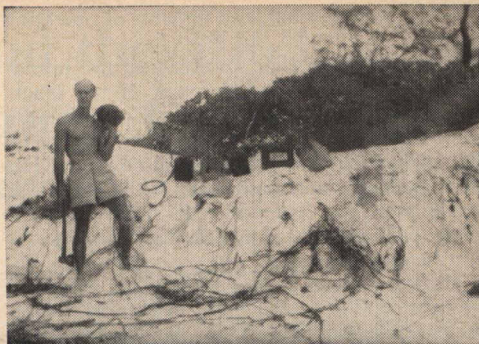
It was half tide. Near the entrance to the channel we found that we had to contend with the fierce current still pouring out from the lagoon. Soon heavy breakers foamed over the coral on both sides of us. We were now struggling in the midst of alarming rip tide. Suddenly a huge hissing breaker reared up astern, and gathering the pirogue on its back, surf-boarded us into the channel at a fierce speed. Then there was an appalling crash; a vast smother of water amidst which the pirogue broached-to. We lay almost on our beam on the back of a huge slanting coral head where, as the wave receded, we were left momentarily high and dry. Realizing in a flash that there was no serious damage; that the next comber might fill us, capsize us, and so perhaps finish us all, we leapt from the boat onto the rock and into the surge, and managed by frantic shoving to slide the pirogue off just in the nick of time before the next breaker arrived.

VQ8BFA had started off somewhat inauspiciously; and this experience was more than enough to convince me that no attempt should be made to land any heavy equipment until the weather moderated. I therefore decided to await more favourable conditions, at the turn of the tide, and even then, only to ferry ashore the small battery rig that day.

Operations Begin

Fortunately there were no more setbacks. And by 1500 hours GMT the rig had been set up ashore in a small shack conveniently placed at the edge of the beach, and kindly put at my disposal by the Administrator.

I suppose that most hams will find the rig rudimentary. The transmitter, an old TCS-12, converted to bring it on to the 20 meter band by the simple process of peaking up the v.f.o. inductance; broad-banding the v.f.o. and buffer-doubler plate inductors; and modifying the p.a. output and antenna-coupling circuits. In this instance a 132 foot long wire was brought down to the shack from the 70 foot ship's mast, already mentioned. This was end fed, being simply clipped on to the p.a. tank. The antenna was orientated in



Some of the equipment, batteries, etc. on the vine-covered, sandy beach at VQ8BFA.

an east-west direction. (Needless to say, no TVI or other similar problems existed). Power was supplied from 12 volt accumulators through conventional dynamotors for both the transmitter and receiver.

The big snag about this set-up was that in order to avoid continuous demands on the batteries, the tx could only be left switched on during actual periods of transmission. Hence, when the band was open and speedy operation essential, many precious minutes were lost waiting for the tx heaters to warm up. Again, under these circumstances, the tx could never be worked at its optimum temperature and this of course resulted in considerable frequency drift. (All this was later corrected by separating the heater circuit and running it off a separate battery. The heaters were then left on continuously, and only the B-plus power was cut during receive.) But there remained still one other difficulty; owing to the rough weather, no battery charger had yet been landed. We had to ferry all the batteries onboard the *Marsouin* every morning for re-charging, and back ashore again later in the day. This delay was responsible for the loss of a considerable amount of operating time.

So at 1505 GMT, the day of our arrival at Agalega, I switched on and VQ8BFA was on the air. A thrill of expectation ran right through me, even to my finger tips, as I tapped out the first CQ.

CQ CQ CQ DE VQ8BFA AT AGALEGA

Sixty watts was going into the p.a. and the neon was glowing splendidly. The response was immediate, though not overwhelming. No pile up but plenty of calls. VQ4AQ, VQ4ERR, followed by G8KS, (QSL Manager), all three on s.s.b. VQ4ERR was putting in a terrific signal, but bursting through came HB9KO.

GE DR HANS GLD CUA UR RST 589 AT AGALEGA.

Even in spite of Robbie, who is burning up the shack!

So much to do. Demands on my time onboard the *Marsouin*. Running and maintaining machinery. Charging batteries. Keeping the rig in good operational order. Erecting antennas. Often even cooking my own meals—for the culinary department onboard left much to be desired. All

this was good fun but used up a lot of operating time.

A.M. the 5th of June. Constructed two primitive ladders and scaled the roof of the shack. Spent most of the morning up there erecting a Mini-Quad twenty-meter beam. My helpers on the ground, to whom this operation meant less than nothing, consistently sent up parts in the wrong sequence. Nuts and bolts rolled down the steep roof and plunged into the sand some twenty feet beneath.

Having omitted to don a shirt, my back was in the process of being cooked to a cinder. Nevertheless there was always the compensation of a fine view. The sparkling sea where the *Marsouin*, riding to two anchors, bobbed in the swell.

In terms of radio operation a very ineffective afternoon. A thick haze of QRN—a real “peasouper.” Towards evening, however, signal began to rasp out, and by 1715 GMT the veil of static was slowly lifting. One by one, stations started to break out.

VQ8BFA DE W2AGW DE W2JT DE W2JNQ. The beginning of a small unbroken run of Ws. I worked like fury.

VQ8BFA DE W2ZX DE W2HTI DE W1FH.

And then, just before 1830 GMT—they had gone—vanished back into the QRN. Soon, the band was dead.

Midnight and the band was still closed. I set up my camp bed in the shack. My slumbers would have been unbroken but for the scurrying of many rats. Tomorrow I must bring the Black Cat.

Sunday, June 9. Yesterday being fine and calm, we succeeded in landing the heavy 1½ kw generator. So to-day, at 0350 GMT, it was running and the Harvey-Wells T-90 was at last on the air. The Mini-Quad Twenty was beamed on the U.S.A. Another flood of Ws. Reports came in fast and were mostly good.

VQBFA DE K3PCJ VQ8BFA DE W4ECI GM HARVEY UR 579 FB VQ8BFA DE K4ICK DE W2BOK DE W8PQQ—HARVEY UR 579 IN CHARLESTON DE K8YBK

The generator was kicking up so much hash it was almost impossible to copy weak signals. I tried screening it with corrugated iron sheeting—some slight improvement. I doubled the suppressor capacitors, both on the exciter and the a.c. side. I shielded the ignition cable and fixed a 500-ohm suppressor resistor. If anything, the row was worse. I set up a twenty meters folded dipole especially for the receiver at some distance away, but this was still no good. One thing

remained—the breaker points capacitor. As this was right inside the works and to get at it meant stripping down the engine, I was reluctant to tackle the job as the generator was on loan.

Conditions at Agalaga

Every day from about 0300 GMT until 0530 there was nearly always a fine run of Ws. The Europeans were usually found at about 1700 GMT. The VKs, ZLs and the VEs were hardly ever heard at all. I was forced, for reasons already mentioned, to use the TCS-12 much more often than the T-90. But now that the heaters were on a separate circuit the TCS-12 put up an excellent performance. However, at about this time there were complaints; “VQ8BFA is putting in a good workable signal, (provided that one could read Harvey’s morse).” The particular complaint was that my dashes were being clipped. George, VQ4AQ, suggested that the antenna relay was the villain, but it wasn’t. So I changed over to the T-90. To my consternation I was given the same report. The only items common to both transmitters which could have caused the trouble were, presumably, the key, and perhaps, sloppy operating. I hoped not the latter. I examined the key contacts and found them badly burnt. After grinding them down carefully with an oil stone I did not receive any further complaint. Neither from G8KS, nor even G2DC—Hi.

Every morning the Black Cat, now that he had got the knack of it, jumped into the pirogue and accompanied me ashore. He remained with me all night in the shack. As for the rats—why that Black Cat and the rats—they were all buddies together. He never touched one of them!

A Run of Trouble

Tuesday, 11 June. Arriving on board in the morning with the batteries I discovered that the battery charger was kaput. I changed the coil and re-set the breaker gap. It started but now there was no load on the dynamo. Found a short in the control box. Found a broken brush connection. Repaired both. The engine then started and the meter indicated 15 amps. But then the engine stopped. Now the gear timing had shifted. Dismantled engine and found that the gear key had sheared. Made another key and re-assembled. The engine started at the first pull, but next the coupling spring between engine and dynamo broke. I had no spare. The time was now 1800 and Malbrouk the mechanic, and myself, skipped our lunch. We were tired, we were disgruntled, we were covered with oil and grease. And Malbrouk, looking uneasily over his shoulder muttered, “now I know that the devil is around.” VQ8BFA was not on the air that night. VQ8BFA was not on the air the next morning.

Early the next day we ferried the uncharged batteries back ashore. And by using the exciter side of the 1½ kw. a.c. generator I was able to get three of them charged. Then, having little or nothing to do, I borrowed a bicycle and set out to see something of the island.

[Continued on page 92]

Synopsis of Prefixes Worked

W, K	332	4X4	6	VK	3
G, GI, GM,		PA	5	CE	2
GW	46	JA	5	OH	2
DL, DJ, DM	44	LA	4	PY	2
VQ	20	SP	4	YU	2
SM	16	ZE	4	ZB	2
HB	14	I	3	601	2
ZS	11	OK	3	UA, UB, UC,	
OE	8	OZ	3	HA, F ... 1 ca.	
ON	8	VE	3		
				Total	564



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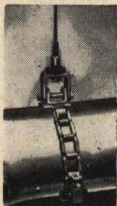
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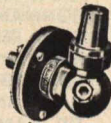
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which scientists from more than 50 countries are expected to participate, will provide data to complement the research work carried out during the 1957/58 IGY. During the IQSY, many experiments and observations of geophysical phenomena, including the ionosphere, which have not been possible before due to the high level of solar activity will be made. No doubt, propagation observations made by radio amateurs throughout the world will play an important role in the IQSY as they did during the IGY.

160 Meter Tests

W1BB reports the following:

"Reminiscent and symbolic of the original pioneering trans-Atlantic crossings by DeLoy, Schnell, Reinart and Godley in 1921, and held every year since 1932, this yearly operating activity will be held on 60 meters this season on the following *Sunday* mornings from 0500-0730 GMT (Midnight—2:30 A.M., EST), and at other appropriate DX times for other than trans-Atlantic DX:

December 1 and 15

(received too late for publication)

January 5 and 19, 1964

February 2 and 16, 1964

"During these tests special efforts will be made by all to establish new records on 160 meters. W/VE stations will call *CQ* DX TEST first five minutes of each hour and then 2nd, 4th, 6th five minute period, etc., listening in between. W/VE stations send reports for TESTS to W1BB. Working DX on 160 meters is challenging and extremely interesting, and there is a real reward in the thrill of working DX on this band. Also don't forget the *CQ* 160 meter c.w. contest scheduled for January 25-26 (see W1WY'S CONTEST CALENDAR in *CQ* for more information."

With conditions on 160 meters expected to be better during this coming year than ever before, participation in this year's 160 meter tests may be extremely worthwhile and rewarding. It is also quite possible that observations made during this year's test periods may prove valuable to IQSY studies.

73, George, W3ASK

Agalega [from page 42]

And now Monday, 17 June. 0245 GMT and a tremendous run of Ws. I was glad of this, for the weather is cracking up badly. A large swell was rolling into the anchorage from the s.s.w. and there were heavy breakers growling on the reef. Most of the baggage had already been sent back on board. I was now using the 132 foot long wire (the beam having been dismantled and packed), with the TCS-12. This was almost certainly going to be my last morning.

Forty-two Ws in two hours and twenty minutes. Nothing very impressive about that, but it was the best I could do, for at times there was such a pile up it became a wall of solid screaming QRM. I was constantly frustrated by the kind of DX chaser who continually repeats the DX stations call before signing. Not only does he create much needless QRM, but also by the time he signs, his signal will probably have been blotted out by someone else, or faded out by QSB. Personally, I always give precedence to those who have the initiative to get out into "the clear," and a very bad second place to those who work spot-on my frequency.

For further information, check number 36, on page 110