

# AHOY ALDABRA!

## The Story of VQ9AA



BY SIR GUS BROWNING\*, Ph. D(X), W4BPD

*Ole Gus he's been doing just fine,  
and this month he's called VQ9 . . .  
Oh grateful are we, for '4BPD,  
for Aldabra we sure stood on line.*

**I**F YOU look at your world atlas, and if it's a good one, you'll observe a small dot a little to the northwest of the island of Madagascar. This is the island of Aldabra. This little spot remained vacant on everyone's country list for all these years; I always wondered why someone had not operated from there. Well—after getting there and experiencing the treacherous trip it is, I can see why it has not been done before and why it will be a long time before it's done again.

You'll notice that Aldabra is quite near the Malagasy Republic as well as being quite near the east coast of Africa. It always looked to me like an easy spot to get to—but brother—I have news; it ain't that easy.

On this "Round The World" DXpedition, Ack, (manager and "contribution acceptor") and I discussed the many places from which I should try to operate. Aldabra was always tops on the list.

The first difficult problem to overcome was that of licensing. You may remember that Lee, WØAIW; Mike, WØMAF; Mac, WØUQV, and myself tried a previous unsuccessful try at Aldabra.<sup>1</sup> While we were in the Seychelle Islands during that ill-fated trip I made several friends who came to my aid during time of need and who interceded on my behalf with the Postal Dept. licensing authority. Consequently, through them, a license was promised when I arrived at Aldabra.

### Travel Problems

Even getting to the Seychelles, from which I planned to reach Aldabra, presented a problem! Every reservation, from every ship leaving Africa

was sold out for one full year in advance. It seemed as though all the Indian nationals in Africa were going home on a one-way trip. I was forced to book passage on the S.S. *Karanja* from Bombay, India. This is really getting to the Seychelles via the "long path."

Due to last minute delays, strikes, etc., all the radio equipment, which was shipped in January, we found, wouldn't arrive in the Seychelles until some time in June.

The Mosoons which sweep down across the Indian Ocean start in late May and blow for nine continuous months with winds frequently as high as 60 m.p.h. In simple words, this means you go to Aldabra before June 1st or you might become a Silent Key.

To complicate matters we had to purchase a brand new power plant, and along with other large items of radio gear, *air expressed* this whole mess from New York City to Bombay! This really flattened the bankroll but it had to be done.

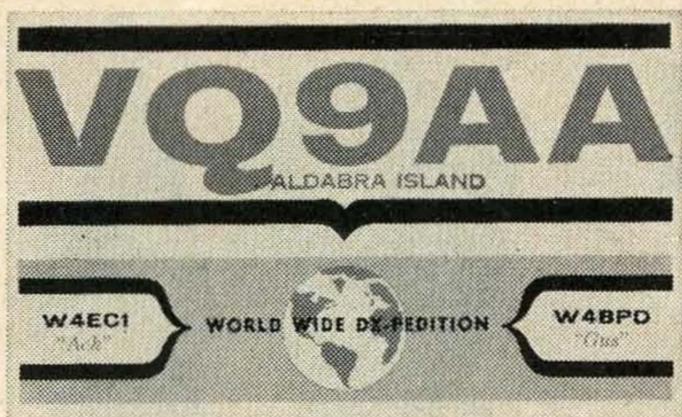
### On To The Seychelles

After a very smooth five-day voyage from Bombay, I arrived at Port Victoria. When you see the Seychelles from a distance you want to start taking pictures. Don't do it though, because after you land, everywhere you look you see the best picture material ever. Port Victoria is a small village of about 1,500 to 2,000 population; however, it's the biggest in the Seychelles. I was told that women outnumber the men approximately 9 to 1, so I say, young man, go to the Seychelles.

The islands are a group of mountain peaks emerging from the Indian Ocean. You're at the mountains and beaches at the same time and you can swim and mountain climb every day of the year. The natives are all colors, from black to white, mostly somewhere in between and they

\*c/o The World Radio Propagation Study Association, Ack Radio Supply Co., Birmingham 5, Alabama.

<sup>1</sup>The unsuccessful VQ9AIW operation occurred during September, 1959—Ed.



are the most friendly people I have ever met. Cigarettes and gasoline are very high priced while labor is very inexpensive and plentiful.

When the steamer arrived from Bombay, I was expecting the usual customs trouble, especially since I had all the radio gear. Surprisingly enough they didn't open a single package; they didn't even ask what the boxes contained.

Harvey, VQ9HB met me at the dock as the ship arrived and asked me when I wanted to leave for the Aldabras. I, of course, replied, "yesterday."

### Preparations For Aldabra

Even with a license and transportation, one very important point still remained, that of receiving permission from the owner of the island to land and operate.<sup>2</sup> Without that all important letter of introduction to the island manager, landing permission is not obtainable even after you arrive.

The owner of Aldabra, who is a business man in the Seychelles, was introduced to me. After many hours of talking, he gave me the all-important letter of introduction. This letter requested that I be their guest as long as I wanted to stay. After all these matters were attended to we were all set to go.

As soon as the news got out that someone was going to the Aldabras we were given mail to deliver to a few of the lesser islands enroute.

### Anchors Away

Usual island slowness began to crop up, but on the fourth day after my arrival, the *Lua-Lua* put to sea. There were three of us aboard; Ben, the owner of the boat, Harvey, and myself.

The *Lua-Lua* is 35 feet long and has a beam of 10 feet. It was designed and built by the owner and I must say every inch of space is used. It sleeps three very comfortably and can sleep five in a pinch. It has an eating table, gasoline cooking stove, diesel engine and three sails.

The pantry was loaded with food, the diesel tanks were filled with oil, 80 gallons of water was aboard and I had 52 gallons of high-test gasoline for the generator spread all over the deck. The gasoline, by the way, cost me one buck per gallon. The 75S-3 and 32S-1 were strapped to the eating table and the all-band (7-28 mc) vertical was mounted two feet from the sail mast. The feed line was only 5 feet long

<sup>2</sup>Although Aldabra comes under the jurisdiction of the British Crown it is leased by the English Government to a private owner who has complete authority on the island.—Ed.

and should have been 52-ohm coax instead of the 72-ohm cable I had. This was probably the cause of the high s.w.r. It wouldn't load on 40 at all but certainly worked fine on 15 and 20 meters.

I signed VQ9A/MM until the half-way point to Aldabra was reached and from there VQ9AA/MM. Many contacts were made during the voyage and the schedule with Ack clicked every day.

The arrival of a ship, any ship, is something the natives look forward to and is cause of much jubilation. One such stop was Des Roaches Island where we decided to spend the night in the lagoon aboard the *Lua-Lua*.

### A Funny Thing Happened To Me . . .

After staying up for the long path opening to the U. S. which was 4:00 A.M. local time, I intended sleeping on a small bunk at the rear of the boat.

After lying down for a while and wondering about the 5-9 plus 20 db signal that signs W3CRA when all the others on the band are S7, I came to the conclusion that Frank must have the world's best QTH. When the band is dead he's always S7 and when the W-boys are S7 Frank is always over S9. This just isn't once in a while, it's an every day occurrence.

Just then I heard a sloshing noise about eight feet from my bunk. I opened my eyes and the moon was up. As I looked in the direction of the noise I saw a long, black, wet, shining, sort of thing which looked like a l-o-n-g elephant trunk entering the boat from the sea. I jumped up hollering bloody murder and some unprintable stuff too. Harvey and Ben came tearing out from below decks and one of them had a flashlight in his hand. He pointed it at the thing which seemed to be coming on board and Harvey quickly spotted it as an octopus. He grabbed the lifeboat paddle and started pounding on the tenacle to pry it loose. Finally, it dropped back into the lagoon.

Ben and Harvey went back to their bunks. I suppose to sleep. As for me, this time I went to another bunk, *inside* the boat.

It was a long time before I fell asleep, for it seemed every time the boat rocked, I heard that same sloshing noise. I still wonder what would have happened if that octopus' tentacle had reached around me. It was an eerie feeling, believe me, and I was beginning to wonder if Aldabra was really worth all the trouble.

### Off Again To VQ9

The next morning bright and early we were again under sail for Aldabra. It was quite a sight to see Harvey's cat pounce on flying fish as they landed on deck. That cat of Harvey's was a real flying fish catcher.

At each of our additional island stops we were given two or three cooked chickens when we departed. This was about the darndest chicken-eating DXpedition I ever heard of.

After about three days of real smooth sailing

the ocean got rough. Harvey told me this was due to the Mozambique and Madagascar ocean currents as well as the gradual build-up of the monsoon winds.

We did some fishing and caught a few big ones, I guess 35 to 60 pounds. We would hook a pretty big one and then, wham-bang, the line was ripped apart by one of the many sharks which were our constant companions.

At one of the islands, I think it was Alphonse, I was shown exactly how a Copra plantation was run. This is a story within itself and I hope to describe it in a book I'm going to write when this DXpedition is completed.

The swells at this point were running about 10 to 15 feet. The boat and its passengers took a beating on those last few days and it was a good thing the Collins equipment was strapped down on the eating table. It was also good that I had a small, transistorized bug that Ed, W3KVQ, built especially for this trip. A regular mechanical bug would have been utterly useless with the boat pitching and tossing as it was. My c.w. would have been a mess and it is enough of a mess as it is now. I soon learned to go along with the pitching and tossing of the boat. I really became part of the boat and this is quite hard in itself. You fellows sitting back in the States in fancy office chairs in your air conditioned apartments could not possibly picture me on that boat operating under those trying conditions.

An enjoyable sight was Harvey and Ben with their sextants trying to shoot a star on that tossing and pitching boat. First they would assume our position by dead reckoning which was by a water-speed meter and estimates of currents and winds. Then they would prove to themselves, with their sextants, that they were right. Many times they proved that we were in the middle Atlantic or the South Pacific. All they could do was to take a new shot and do a lot of calculating until each of them came up with the same answer. All this time I was listening to WWV or WWVH and calling out the exact time. The exact time of each spot is just as important as the sextant shot. A second or two of time means miles and miles. All of this was quite interesting to me.

The islands around Aldabra can only be seen five to seven miles away even in the daytime. A mistake of a few miles means that you may completely miss an island and brother, it might mean it's another story. You can very easily get shipwrecked on the coral reefs around the islands. You always *plan* to arrive at the island in the daytime. I said you plan to do this but it is dark 50% of the time and we arrived at some of these islands at night. We saw quite a few remains of wrecked ships.

As I have said earlier, departing time came, and by now the Southeast Monsoon had started. We had a devil of a time getting the equipment from the island into the *Lua-Lua*. The boat was anchored about 600 feet from

Aldabra, well beyond the reef. In deep water the swells were about 10 feet and each wave was breaking with a white cap. Can you imagine trying to transfer equipment from a twelve foot native boat and putting it aboard the *Lua-Lua* under these conditions while at the same time keeping it dry? I thought it was absolutely impossible but we managed to do it.

### And Now, Back "Home"

At last we were on our way back to Mahe in the Seychelles. Aldabra and VQ9AA were now ancient ham history.

I thought coming down was a rough trip but that was a Sunday afternoon outing compared to the return trip. When we were a few miles from Aldabra the seas really began to get mean. The first wave completely washed over the boat and I mean completely. It hit from stem to stern and dumped about five gallons of sea water right smack on the radio equipment. For the next eight days everything in the boat, including us, got completely and thoroughly soaked. There was no chance of drying out the equipment. My Collins gear was completely soused. Those waves were 25 to 35 feet high and we were in a 35 foot boat. We were almost in a vertical position at times. Sometimes the wind velocity would be as high as 40 to 50 m.p.h. A terrible time was had by all. This was a most trying experience. I did not have time to worry; I was too busy trying to stay put. After eight days, we finally saw VQ9 in the distance. What a relief that was. The return trip had been very trying on everyone and we were extremely glad to know it was over.

It took me five days and nights and one gallon of carbon tet to get all the sea water and salt from the radio gear. Now you can see why I have predicted that it will be a long time before anyone operates an Aldabra station again.

In closing, I would like to personally thank everyone who has made this "round the World" DXpedition possible. The list is much too long to mention them all. No. 1—I would like to thank my wife, Peggy, for being so nice and letting me go. Boys, this proves that you must train them early, hi. No. 2—I would like to thank Ack for the 1000 or more things he has done and is still doing. I am sure he will be cussing me before the QSLs for those 7280 QSOs are sent out. No. 3—I would like to thank Collins for the fine equipment.

At future stops, please, no more than one QSO per band per mode and please remember that I have no place in my log for names, QTHs, power, etc. All I want is a signal report and please QRQ.

I could go on and on thanking all who made this trip possible. You all know what you did so I would like to thank each and every one of you from the bottom of my Coca-Cola drinking heart. ■