

BS7H 1994

The Story of the First DXpedition to Scarborough Reef, Part 1

by Tim Totten KJ4VH

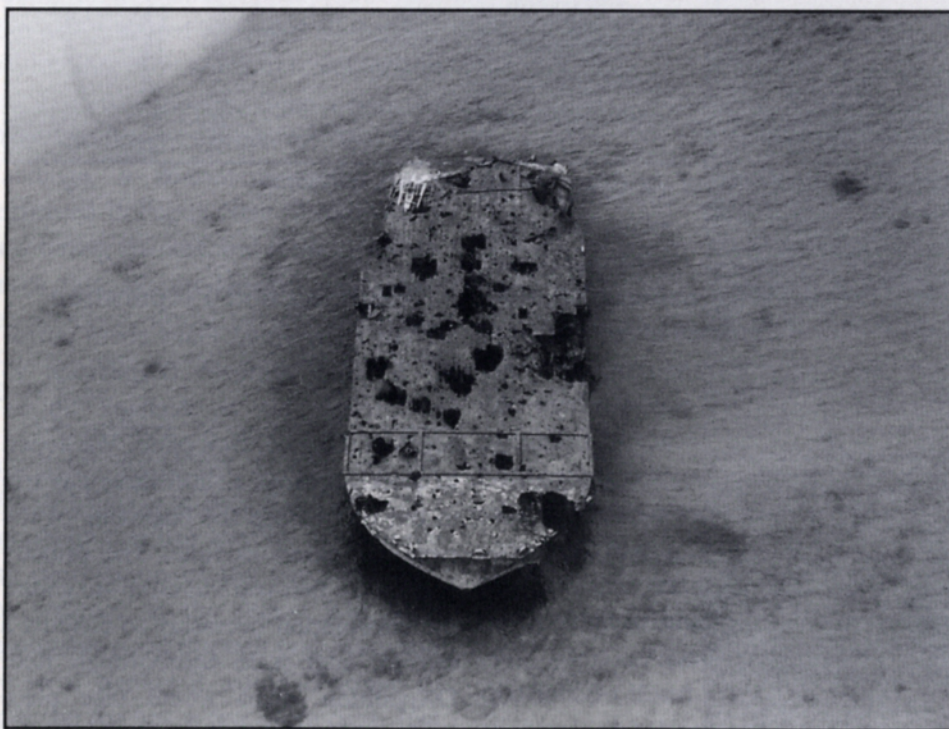
Scarborough Reef is located in the South China Sea at 15.1° North, 117.5° East, and is territory of the People's Republic of China. Also known as Huang Yan Dao (which literally means Yellow Rock Island), the reef lies more than 500 statute miles from the PRC mainland. Scarborough qualifies for separate DXCC country status under Point 2(a) of the DXCC criteria—it is an island separated by more than 225 miles of open water from its parent country.

In late June, Scarborough was briefly activated by an international group of DXers led by Chen Ping BZ1HAM, of the Chinese Radio Sports Association (CRSA). The team included Claus DL5VJ; Vincent DU1IOG; Joye DU1RAA; Jin JF1IST; Martti OH2BH; Lasse OH2MAK; and myself. The special callsign BS7H was issued by the PRC authorities for use during our operation.

Early History

Stateside DXers first heard of Hans Hannappel DK9KX's petition for separate DXCC country status for Scarborough Reef in the January 7, 1994, issue of *The DX Bulletin*, in a description of the petition from a late December, 1993, issue of RSGB's *DX News Sheet*. For most DXers, this was the first they had ever heard of the place, but Scarborough soon became a hot topic among DXers around the world. While in Hong Kong after the 1994 WPX SSB contest, I was involved in a lively discussion about Scarborough. The members of the VS6WO contest team had gathered at one of Hong Kong's most famous restaurants to celebrate our new Asian multi/multi record, and we were joined by Martti VR2BH/OH2BH, and Marko VR2NJ/OH6DO. After all the contest "war stories" had been recounted, conversation turned to Pratas Island. Marko had just returned from the BV9P operation the week before, and told the fascinating story of that adventure. Then someone asked about "the other potential new one in the South China Sea." Had anyone heard anything about Scarborough Reef's chances of making the list? No one had. But that didn't stop the questions!

How much land is really there? Is it enough to support a major DXpedition? Is the reef above water at all times, or is



A ship wrecked on Scarborough Reef has been used for target practice. Photo taken during the aerial survey of the Reef by OH2BH.

it submerged at high tide? Do the Philippines also claim the reef? No one had any real answers, but there was a lot of speculation.

The discussion that evening had really piqued my interest in Scarborough Reef. After returning to the States, I began to look for a detailed map of the area, and to research the PRC claim. After dozens of telephone calls, faxes, emails, and several trips to libraries and map stores, I still had not come up with a map sufficiently accurate to answer the questions that had been raised. Even the best navigational charts I could find, printed by the U.S. Defense Mapping Agency, showed only rough details of the reef. I also found no evidence of any country disputing the PRC's claim to Scarborough.

I reported my findings (or perhaps more accurately, the lack of findings) to Martti via fax. He replied that he had also been unable to find a detailed map of the reef. Rumors were beginning to circulate in the DX community that perhaps Scarborough was totally submerged at high tide, thus not meeting the DXCC criteria. I was beginning to wonder if this might not be true, though I couldn't find any hard evidence either way.

The Survey Flight

On 24 April, Martti and Claus, who were both in Manila on business, decided to get a firsthand look at Scarborough. They chartered a small twin engine aircraft out of Manila for aerial observations of the reef at high tide. Flying as low as 100 feet above the surface at times, they photographed approximately 30 different rocks or coral heads protruding above the water.

It was clear that at least some portions of the reef are above water at all times. However, the rocks were found to be widely scattered along the 30-35 mile circumference of the reef, and the largest rocks were estimated to be only a few feet wide and perhaps six feet above

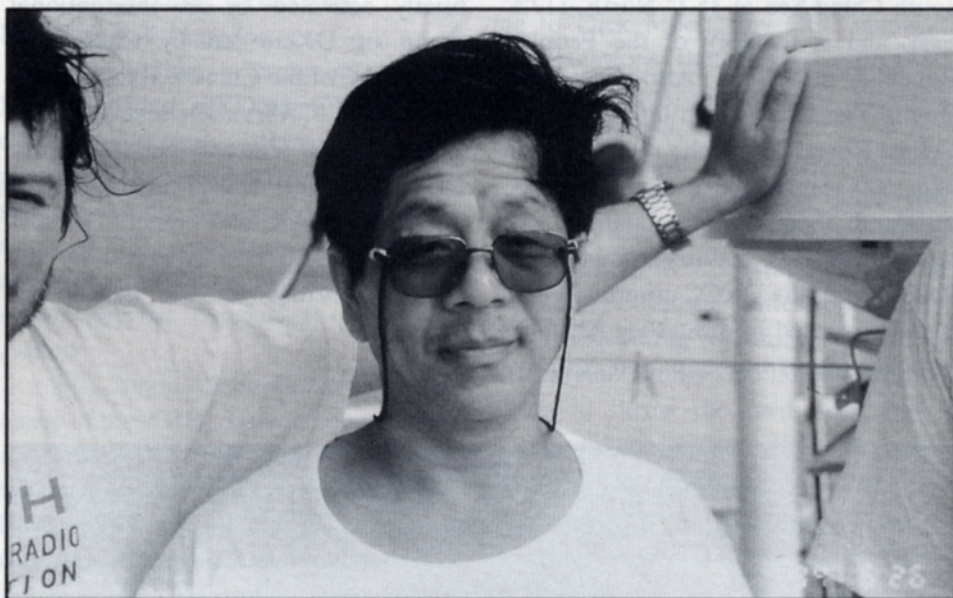
the surface at high tide.

Martti and Claus also documented another potentially important feature of Scarborough—a narrow cut in the reef, apparently big enough to allow passage of a small ship into the lagoon. Their aerial photographs of this feature later proved to be very helpful.

The return flight from the reef was a little more exciting than Martti and Claus had bargained for. Following is an excerpt from Martti's survey report, which was sent along with pictures to the DX Advisory Committee:

"There is often adventure present

later DXpedition. Though the survey flight provided some critical information, a few questions remained. What would the reef look like at low tide? How much additional surface area might be exposed? How difficult would it be to find the cut, and successfully enter the lagoon? What would be the best way to set up the stations? How close to the breakers would the rocks be during rough sea conditions? The answers to these questions might mean the difference between success and failure of a major DXpedition.



Chen Ping BZ1HAM, of the Chinese Radio Sports Association.

when DX is in the making, but this survey trip was supposed to be an exception. Having just left the reef, the control panel of the plane was seemingly on fire, with smoke and smell. All electricity went off, including that for the radios and navigation equipment. But the engines were still running, and we were able to find and reach the west coast of the Philippines and land at Subic Bay, the ex-U.S. military base."

Apparently as a result of Martti's survey report, Hans decided to abandon his immediate plans to activate Scarborough, although he didn't rule out a

Planning and Preparation

We approached Hans about pursuing a "joint venture" DXpedition to Scarborough, but he declined. So we began making our own plans. We hoped to quickly arrange a short three-day trip to the reef before the beginning of the typhoon season in June. The primary goal of this first trip was clear—to gather the information necessary to conduct a second, large-scale Scarborough Reef DXpedition which would take place during the optimal weather and propagation conditions between January and March.

Of course, we also hoped to make at least a respectable number of QSOs during this first trip, but given all the uncertainties involved, we weren't sure what to expect. Indeed, it was entirely possible that we might not be able to enter the lagoon, or that weather or other conditions might prevent us from landing. We also knew that with each passing day, the likelihood of stormy weather was increasing.

Chen went right to work on securing the landing permission, the special BS7H license, and operating permits for each of the team members. Owing to the strong relationships which the CRSA have developed with PRC authorities in recent years, Chen was able to make these arrangements quickly. Claus, Martti, and Simo 9V1YW, began the search for a charter boat to carry us to the reef and back. Meanwhile, the rest of us quickly made arrangements to transport all the necessary equipment, supplies, and ourselves to Manila.

One of the most difficult tasks was finding a suitable ship. Of course, there is no shortage of boats in the area, but finding an available, appropriate-sized ship with a skilled crew and all the necessary navigation and safety equipment was not easy. Finally, Simo contacted Tony Hookway, captain of the M/V Tabibuga, a 70-foot research vessel registered in Papua New Guinea. After negotiating the cost, and receiving assurances that all our logistics and safety requirements would be met, a charter contract was signed for the dates of 23-27 June.

We realized, of course, that these late dates would put us well into the official typhoon season, and there was a possibility that bad weather would force the cancellation of the trip. However, the weather in the region had been reasonably good through mid-June, and we were hoping it would continue to hold out for just a few more days. Just in case, we made arrangements with four "control stations"—Phil VS6CT; Roger

DU1KT; Robin DU9RG; and the BY1PK club station—to maintain radio contact with the vessel at all times and provide real-time weather information, as well as to keep the DX community informed about the progress of the operation. Scarborough Reef is within the coverage area of the Hong Kong Maritime Rescue Centre, which is headed by Phil VS6CT.

Subic Bay and the First Typhoon

By Wednesday, 22 June, all the equipment, supplies, and operators had arrived in Manila. Even though it had been steadily raining, almost non-stop, since Monday afternoon, we still anticipated a departure from Subic Bay early the next morning. We agreed to meet in the hotel lobby at 3 a.m. and begin the drive north. Unfortunately, Simo had managed to catch some kind of flu, and would not be able to make the trip with us.

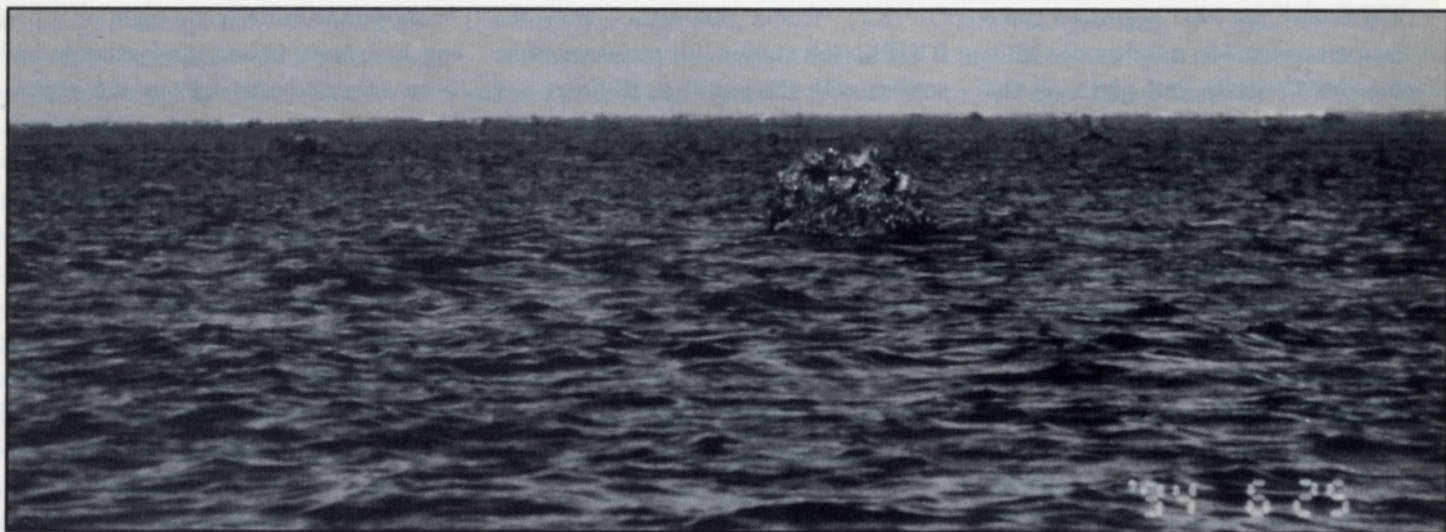
The scene Thursday morning was almost surreal. After 2-1/2 days of rain, the streets were seriously flooded—up to two feet deep in some spots—and abandoned cars were everywhere. About half way to Subic, we

heard on the radio that a typhoon warning had been issued, and schools had been canceled throughout the region. Our hopes for a successful DXpedition were waning, but we continued to press on. Thanks to the skilled drivers which Roger had hired for us, we finally managed to reach Subic Bay at about 7 a.m.

Subic is now primarily a large duty-free port and discount shopping district, but it didn't take very much imagination to visualize the day when it was one of the United States' largest overseas military bases. As the only American on the team, I guess I was the only one struck with this strange sense of nostalgia as we made our way past all the shops to the



Departure from Subic Bay at sunrise, following the passage of the first typhoon.



A few of the many rocks above high tide at Scarborough Reef.

harbor.

When we arrived, there was no sign of the M/V Tabibuga. We asked around, but no one had seen her. Calls on the marine radio went unanswered. They should have arrived at Subic several hours earlier, but we could only assume they had been delayed by the first typhoon of the season. We had no choice but to wait.

Finally, the ship reached the harbor about mid-morning. Captain Hookway apologized for the delay, and explained that the sea was getting quite rough. After checking the latest weather charts, and conferring with VS6CT, everyone agreed that it was too dangerous to leave that day. We decided to set our sites on a departure at 6 a.m. Friday morning, if the weather improved sufficiently by then.

That afternoon, Claus boarded the Tabibuga for a thorough inspection of all the ship's major systems and safety equipment. After agreeing that it met all the requirements we had specified in the contract, we began the task of loading the ship. Fortunately, the rain had lightened up slightly, but we all still got soaked.

Once the equipment was on board, we began to set up the BS7H/MM station. Lasse installed the R5 vertical on

the roof, while Jin climbed the mast to attach the wire antenna. We quickly checked in with BY1PK and DU9RG, got the latest weather information, and updated them on our status. Then we all went to the local hotel and changed into some dry clothes!

After a short rest, and a very nice dinner, Lasse and I returned to the ship, while the rest of the team went back to the hotel to spend the night. When morning came, the rain had finally stopped, and there were even signs of a few breaks in the dark clouds. The latest weather from Hong Kong indicated that the storm was blowing out to sea. So with high hopes, we pulled up the anchor and set off for Scarborough Reef, "only" about 24 hours behind our original schedule.

By the time we reached the mouth of the bay, the reality was sinking in that this was going to be no pleasure cruise. Indeed, the next thirty hours were torturous. The typhoon had caused the seas to be quite rough, and a strong wind was blowing out of the south west, off the port side of the ship. The Tabibuga began to roll side to side, sometimes as much as 50 degrees! From time to time, we would encounter a brief rain squall, just for good measure. Sleep was out of the question, and I knew if I ate anything, it would just end up being fish food a few minutes later. All we could do was hang on.

[We'll continue the story of the first DXpedition to Scarborough Reef in the next issue. -ed.]

1995 Callbooks

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