

BS7H 1994

The Story of the First DXpedition to Scarborough Reef, Part 2

by Tim Totten KJ4VH

[Part 1 of the BS7H story appeared in the Jan./Feb. 1995 issue. We pick up the story as the DXpedition team sails from the Philippines toward Scarborough, in the wake of a typhoon. -ed.]

Riding Out the Storm

Everyone on the ship—even the most seasoned crew member—was feeling the effects of the rough sea. That night seemed like it would never end. My arms and legs were tiring from the effort required just to keep from being tossed around the ship's cabin.

On midnight watch, I tried once again to explain the purpose of our trip to the ship's first mate. Not surprisingly, I don't think he ever quite understood. Heck, at this point, I was beginning to wonder what we were doing myself!

From time to time, we would check the GPS receiver for our current position, then relay it to one of the "control stations" on 14195 kHz. Our progress was slower than expected, as the rough seas limited the M/V Tabibuga to between five and six knots. We also got regular typhoon updates and weather forecasts from VS6CT at the Maritime Rescue Center, sometimes relayed via DU9RG or DU1KT.

The captain was very impressed with our "private line" to the center, and asked us to closely track the course of the storm. Although it was moving away from us, and the seas were slowly beginning to improve, he was concerned that the typhoon might suddenly change course, as they often do in the South China Sea.

Fortunately, this one continued to move further north, and the forecast was for improving conditions the following day. However, in the early hours of Saturday morning, DU9RG's weather report brought a new cause for concern: a second storm system was quickly forming in the southern Philippines, and it appeared that it might roughly follow the path of the first storm. Needless to say, our attention quickly shifted to this potential second typhoon, but it was too early to tell if it would pose any threat to the operation.

Sunrise was a very welcome sight. The sky was clearing, and the seas had improved markedly in just the past few hours. In fact, I could now persuade myself to let go with one hand long enough to actually enjoy a cup of coffee.



Some of the many rocks that dot Scarborough Reef.

This was truly progress!

Finally, we spotted the large shipwreck that OH2BH and DL5VJ had photographed during their aerial survey. We knew from those photographs that the wreck was very near the narrow cut in the southeast corner of the reef, and this appeared to be our best hope for entering the lagoon.

As we got closer to the reef, we saw several small fishing boats. Apparently they had ridden out the storm in the calm waters of the lagoon, but they were now back to the business of fishing the reef's outer banks.

As we passed near one of the boats, there was suddenly a loud explosion and a large splash, perhaps two hundred feet from the Tabibuga. My heart skipped a beat as I immediately recalled the ill-fated Spratly DXpedition that was shot out of the water not too many years ago. I guess my concern was obvious, because before I could get any words out of my

mouth, DL5VJ calmly explained, "Dynamite fishing." Then I recalled an article I had read months earlier about the efforts to stop this illegal practice because of the terrible damage being done to coral reefs around the world.

Entering the Lagoon

With the captain at the wheel, and the first mate strategically positioned at the bow, we cautiously inched our way through the narrow cut in the reef. The fishermen stopped and watched with amusement, apparently expecting us to

get stuck, but we made it through without incident. Once inside the lagoon, we spent the next several hours slowly and carefully searching the reef for potential operating spots. This process was excruciatingly slow, as our captain had to carefully maneuver the 70-foot ship through the shallow waters (10-20 feet deep), while avoiding the numerous coral heads. We generally couldn't get the Tabibuga any closer than about a quarter mile from the rocks on the outer edge of the reef, so we stopped from time to time to go out for a closer look

(Note that these areas should be usable for future DXpeditions with calmer seas, such as are common during the first few months of each year.)

We had checked out perhaps one fourth of the reef when we received more bad news about the weather—the second typhoon was now building strength quickly, and was starting to head in our direction. Conferring with the captain, it was agreed that we would have to leave the reef no later than early the next morning in order to make it safely back to Subic Bay, the Philip-

pines, ahead of the typhoon. We had a choice: do the best we could to work a few of the Deserving during the short window of opportunity we had, or pack it in and head back to the Philippines right away. We decided to go for it!

We found a rock that wasn't the best we'd seen—far from ideal—but it was well protected and dry. The surface was rough, not suitable for an



A People's Republic of China survey marker sits atop one of the larger rocks.

with the dingy.

We found several spots that were larger and with flatter surfaces than the one we finally selected, but they were unsuitable because they were too close to the seaward edge of the reef. The seas on the outside of the reef were still very rough. Breakers at the edge of the reef were causing salt spray at the better spots—a condition that wasn't good for us or our equipment. And since the forecast for the sea conditions was uncertain, we decided not to take any unnecessary risks with these locations.

operating table and chair. We thought about placing a smooth platform on top of it, an arrangement that would have been much less controversial, but we didn't. Why not? The platform structure we had was welded and cross-braced for strength. If we'd straddled the rock, we would have had to remove the cross bracing and attach new bracing, possibly encircling the rock, to give it enough structural strength. Although we had cutting and welding equipment with us—and in fact we did have to make some minor changes to the structure—we

simply didn't have time to make the changes that would have been required, and be able to do it before darkness set in. It was either go with what we had, or scrub the operation. We went with what we had, and make no apologies for our decision.

end. A Cushcraft R5 vertical was attached to one of the legs of the structure, and BS7H was QRV!

At 0815Z on 25 June, 1994, the honor of the first Scarborough Reef QSO went to Kan JA1BK, who had been very instrumental in organizing and supporting the DXpedition. This was quickly followed by QSOs with our support stations: BY1PK, DU9RG, and

Since we knew our operation would be very short, we decided to try to maximize the total number of QSOs by operating only SSB, and primarily just on 20 meters. Contrary to reports from some sources, we did **not** forget to pack the keyers! Another part of our strategy was to concentrate on the tough path to North America as long as it was open. For that reason, I was given the first operating shift and told to "work North America until you can't work them any more." The first page of the logbook sure contains many familiar big-gun call signs: W6GO, VE7SV, N7NG, W6OSP, W6QHS, W6RGG, W6OAT, W6ISQ, N6DX, XE1VIC, W6BIP, KE7X, WF5E, etc.

Soon after I sat down at the radio, the sun came out from behind the clouds, and I just **knew** this had to be a good omen. Then I realized that with the sun over my shoulder, I couldn't read the radio's display! I fumbled around and rearranged things so my body cast a shadow over the radio.

The wind was another challenge.

Fortunately, the platform was fairly solid, and didn't sway too much, but I was very concerned about the logbook. I constantly kept my left forearm or elbow on it, and page turns were made very carefully. I knew that if I ever lost my grip on it, those QSOs would probably be lost forever.

With the last remaining bit of daylight, the rest of the team shot pictures



The BS7H operating position, with KJ4VH operating, DL5VJ holding the DXpedition flag, and JF1IST and DU1RAA assisting.

BS7H On the Air

Once the operating site was chosen, JF1IST, OH2MAK, DL5VJ, and I began the task of getting the station on the air. We assembled and braced the scaffolding, topping it with a 4-by-8 foot sheet of plywood. The generator was firmly anchored at one end of the plywood, while the fold-up operating table and Yaesu FT-990 were placed at the other

VS6CT (DU1KT later worked us through the pileup). Apparently, the whole DX community had been patiently waiting on 14195 kHz for us to show up, because the pileup was instantaneous, and **huge**! Propagation was incredibly good, with the band simultaneously open to all of North America, South America, Europe, the Pacific, and, of course, Asia.

and took video, while I continued to work the Deserving back in North America. I couldn't believe the incredible propagation. Signals were very loud, even for the stations where it was two or three hours before local sunrise. And I was amazed that I was apparently being heard so well on the other end, running just 100 Watts to the R5. I was later told by several stations on the East Coast that my signal was S7 to S9 for about three hours.

At sunset, everyone else went back to the ship for dinner. I soon realized that I had left my lantern back on the boat, but the radio's display provided enough light to log by. What a strange feeling it was to be all alone in the darkness, on a remote reef in the middle of the South China Sea, seeing nothing but the lights from the Tabibuga off in the distance. Yet, thanks to the magic of DX, I was far from alone. The familiar voices of friends half way around the world were more than enough encouragement to keep me going!

By midnight, signals from the West Coast were finally beginning to fade, and the rest of the DX world was becoming increasingly restless, waiting for their shot at a new one. I called the gang back at the Tabibuga, and told them it was time to send out the JA and Europe specialists.

JF1IST came out on the dingy, which was now no simple task as we approached low tide. The outboard motor was useless in such shallow water, and he finally had to walk the last couple hundred feet to reach the operating site. While I worked the last few State-side stations, I noticed Jin stringing up a long inverted-vee. When I finally turned the stage over to him, he announced that he was making a brief excursion to 75 meters, where he began to quickly hand out "go kyus" to his fellow countrymen.

When I finally got back to the boat, the cook was putting the finishing touches on my dinner, which I was glad to

see! As I ate, I excitedly recounted the stories of the pileup to the rest of the group. I didn't realize they had been listening on one of the other radios the whole time.

As OH2BH, OH2MAK, and DL5VJ headed out to the operating site to finally give the Europeans their chance, I suddenly realized it had been a long time since I'd had any real sleep. I crawled into the bunk, and the next sound I heard was the ship's engine firing up for departure shortly after sunrise. BS7H was QRT, and we had begun the race back to the Philippines, hoping to beat the second typhoon.

The return trip was uneventful, giving us time to relax a bit. By now, the seas were back to normal, making for a much more pleasant ride. We took the opportunity to type the logbook into a laptop computer, as well as prepare a brief post-operation report. The crew even caught a small tuna, which made for a nice lunch. JF1IST had his portion "JA style" while the rest of us preferred it hot off the grill!

Summary

While our trip was cut very short, and the QSO total (just under 2000) was not nearly what we had hoped, we did accomplish our primary goal: to gather the information necessary to conduct a large-scale Scarborough Reef DXpedition in the near future. Based on the information and experience gained during this trip, we are now fully confident that such an operation can indeed be safely conducted, with several stations operating around the clock.

This trip would not have been possible without a lot of teamwork. I am honored to have had the opportunity to work with such a dedicated group of DXers who have remained focused on one mission: promoting international goodwill through amateur radio.

Every member of the team lent some invaluable skill or contributed in some special way to the DXpedition.

BZ1HAM, as the CRSA's International Affairs Chairman, arranged the licensing and landing permission. He has also done a tremendous job of publicizing this event and the DX aspect of amateur radio, within both the BY amateur radio community and the general population of China. DL5VJ has operated from several countries in and around the South China Sea, and is an experienced sailor. He and 9V1YW made all the arrangements with the M/V Tabibuga. DU1IOG and DU1RAA—both enthusiastic new amateurs—gathered all the necessary supplies and equipment that were purchased in Manila. JF1IST is a highly experienced DXpeditioner (including Bouvet 3Y5X). He was our JA pileup specialist. OH2MAK has a solid background in electronics, and is a veteran of Spratly 9M0S and several other DXpeditions in the region. And, of course, OH2BH/VR2BH is a famous author and DX philosopher, but we discovered that he is also a pretty good operator!

The 1994 BS7H DXpedition team would like to invite you to join us at the **First Beijing DX Convention** to be held in early October. Details will be announced soon. Come meet the growing number of new BY Believers and catch a glimpse of the exciting future of DX in China.

Finally, we would like to thank the Islands On The Air (IOTA) administrators for quickly adding Scarborough to the IOTA list as island AS-116. Though the first Scarborough DXpedition is now history, the story is far from over. This remote reef has been the subject of much discussion among the Deserving. It has forced us to re-examine and challenge our paradigms. And we come back to that fundamental question: what is DX?

[Tim Totten can be reached via his Internet address: KJ4VH@IGLOU.COM.]