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**The 1990
1SØXV Spratly DXpedition**
DX Clubs, New Products, Awards
QSL Information and More

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The 1SØXV Spratly DXpedition

The Inside Story of How One of the Rarest Countries in DX Finally Came On The Air

by Romeo Stepanenko UJ5JBB
and Edward Kritsky NT2X

The authors wish to thank Richard Gelber, K2WR, for his assistance and advice with the writing of this story.

Part 1

by Romeo Stepanenko UB5JBB

Last year, when my attempts to obtain a license in North Korea failed, I started looking around for an opportunity to get another 'good' country on the air. Through some friends of mine, I found a joint Soviet-Vietnamese company called 'Kiulong' and met Yuri Brazhenko, its Commercial Director. Earlier that year I had graduated from Simferopol University majoring in Math and computer programming, put the diploma on the wall and for some time worked for Mountain Rescue Service -- mountain climbing is my second hobby. But I wanted something more, so sometime later in 1989, with the help of Kiulong, I went to Vietnam, where, as it turned out, they were already waiting for me. The Minister of Telecommunications of that country wanted to create an Amateur Radio society, so after a little thinking I accepted job to conduct courses for new hams, create a club station, produce rules and regulations for the Vietnamese -- in one word -- make hams out of the locals. The Kiulong company really wasn't getting anything monetarily, but they wanted to spread some goodwill. Since they had to pay my expenses -- hotel, food, and all -- in hard currency -- I very soon had to

move out of the hotel and into my club station, to save money. Hot and humid atmosphere, no air conditioner, water shortages, frequent electricity shutdowns -- these were my accommodations in XV. I didn't mind, though. During the day I taught my hams-to-be, at night -- got on the air and operated. For half a year I hadn't seen a Caucasian face. My students soon were accepting me as one of them. This helped tremendously, when the time came for the 'Spratly Affair.' We had a Japanese group come down in December '89 -- XV2A with JH3DPB and others, and got very friendly, even though I don't speak any English, only French, besides Russian. We had a great time operating XV2A. Once they left I put in an effort to get their equipment for our club station. After that I used my own UW3DI transceiver and an amplifier I had brought from Russia to make a showcase for my students, who were now learning how to build things. Vietnam isn't a rich country and no one can buy even the cheapest transceiver, so building is the only way to go. The departments of Telecommunications of Vietnam and especially of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh) were very happy with my work and even paid me twice -- 25 and 7 dollars, respectively -- I used the money to fix a motorcycle and get around. It wasn't the money, rather an opportunity to do something for Amateur Radio, that guided me.

In January of 1990 we had another Japanese group, 3W5JA, visit, and they also left some antennas. The club station was now fully set up and at the end of the month the exams were held for the first group of Vietnamese. Five people passed, they got licenses XV2AAA-AAD and AYL, (the first woman op), allowed to operate all bands but 20. They could use our club station under my supervision. The youngest -- 38, the oldest -- 60, smart 'kids,' eagerly grasping new knowledge. Then there was a second group, then the third one and then I had to put everything aside to get ready for Spratly. I really wanted them to have home-built equipment but to do that I needed another year. Things were progressing faster than I expected, though.

By February I had established some good connections with the local officials in Saigon and started gathering information about 'The Trip,' and even asked my 'boys' to look into the possibility of a Spratly operation. Alex UL7PCZ also gave me a 'boost' on the air. It took me about 2 months to collect the necessary permissions -- at times I was ready to lose all hope after talking to some 'influential people' here. Finally it was becoming clear that this matter could be resolved only in Hanoi, at the highest level. On March 17th, XV2AAA ran to

me at 2 am with a telex -- there was a meeting and the Ministers of Defense, Telecommunications, Internal and Foreign Affairs okayed the idea in general. This sounded absolutely unbelievable -- in such a short period of time!

Soon after, logistic problems began to settle in -- bombarding Hanoi with telexes, obtaining helicopters and boats for the trip -- since nobody wanted to fly or sail there, it being too risky. JH3DPB and JE3MAS who were invited couldn't come due to work obligations, RB5IJ, who was supposed to bring equipment, couldn't be found. Good thing INDEXA took on a major chunk of our load of problems! Alex and Yuri tried their best to help, Kiulong had its own worries. At one point we were ready to quit because all we got was a thousand dollars from INDEXA, but not much more, only promissory notes. I'm glad Yuri Brazhenko vouched for the undertaking and they borrowed money for the expedition.

Another meeting was held with the General Director of Kiulong, and the Minister of Telecommunications, Yuri

was there, too. Because of this meeting in a matter of days we had a ship and all permits. Food, generators, fuel, and supplies were purchased in a terrible rush. We were trying to save money, too. A 3-KW generator in Saigon cost \$1200-1800. Much food was gotten on credit from a local food supplier. Two weeks before departure to the islands Alex UL7PCZ arrived from Moscow with INDEXA's equipment. Alex also brought his home-made RTTY gear. Meanwhile I obtained the XVØSU license for ops to QRV prior to the expedition.

There wasn't a single foreigner on the Vietnamese part of the Spratly Archipelago before we went there. On the larger islands there are military bases, where from time to time Vietnamese have shootouts with the Chinese. Well, at least the place we were going to was deserted! We departed from Cam Ranh Bay by transport vessel, well equipped for sailing in the dangerous waters. Our trip took two full days. The weather was great and the Vietnamese couldn't believe our luck. The landing was worse than the weather -- no boat -- everything had to be taken ashore by hand in low tide, but

the guys were great. The wind was blowing for the first few days, but after that the air didn't move a bit, and all the operators but me got sunburned several times. (I was already conditioned to local climate).

So there we were, in the middle of nowhere: Romeo Stepanenko, 3W3RR -- low/high bands, phone/cw; Yuri Loparev, RL8PY -- low bands, WARC, phone/cw; Alex Lebedev, UL7PCZ -- high bands, phone/RTTY; Anatoly Lazarev, RL8PZ -- high bands, low bands, phone; Yuri Brazhenko, Kiulong Commercial Director -- interpreter and video-man; Yuri Meshalkin -- interpreter, photographer; Victor Levashev -- unbelievable handyman.

We also had with us XV2AAB Trieu, XV2AAC Hoa, and our cook XV2AAD Da -- these men didn't operator but were of tremendous help.

We got truly lucky for the first few days -- great conditions on HF -- W1's, 2's, 3's were coming in loud and clear and then as if someone closed the curtain -- no more East Coast, only occasional



The 1SØXV Spratly DXpedition.



On the last day, the Spratly operators signed 1S1RR.

signals from that part of the world. That's why we operated on phone only in the first few days -- I felt sure that the propagation was going to end and at that point we were looking for quantity of contacts. At the end we had 40% of all QSOs on CW anyway.

A small observation about HF: if there is ever another expedition to Spratly, it should be done in November or December. On 160/80 we almost couldn't hear the USA from 1S. On the other hand, there is at least a 2-hour North American opening on 80 from Vietnam throughout the winter.

We were very happy with the Mosley

antennas -- one was up 4 meters, another -- even higher: easy to assemble and very effective. Our 160/80/40 dipoles sat on top of bamboo sticks, same for 10 MHz; we made a Quad for 6 meters and used 3W5JA's yagi for 18/24 MHz. There were 2 operating positions with 4 radios total.

The operation was going all the time but those relieved of duties tried their best to find alternative 'entertainment' -- RL8PY was fishing off the island in a small inflatable boat, UL7PCZ and RL8PZ swam, I dove for shells and coral, managed to catch moray eels and some octopuses for the dinner table.

Starting at 6 am local time, we would lose all propagation for 5-6 hours. Nothing was coming in, except VK/ZL on 28 MHz, and at first I blamed the equipment. In Vietnam about 4-5 am local time you get W's coming in for a few hours but here we were in a 'black hole' indeed. Sometime on the fifth or sixth day of operation the generators overheated, and we had to get them fixed in a hurry. They continued to misbehave throughout the operation, forcing us off the air. At one point we were running out of fuel -- not enough was brought because of the money shortage. Because of an oversight, the vessel that brought us, left with a 60-gallon barrel of our fuel. For the next 8 days we were off the air, waiting for the ship to return.

The ship finally came and brought more fuel, a new generator and we QRVed for 6 more days. The equipment operated under the most demanding conditions and mishaps occurred -- inevitably: one of the radios blew the power transformer, the power supply for another failed and RL8PZ's radio gave up three days before the expedition was over. Alex's RTTY unit had its own problems, but he managed over 400 QSOs. When everything was loaded onto the ship and only one operating position remained, I got on with my 1S1RR call and in 6 hours made 1027 contacts. By the time we were leaving -- it was a long month indeed, we were exhausted, physically and emotionally, it rained, the only rain we saw there.

Yuri, RL8PY, managed an SSB QSO on 160 with OH1XX! We did our best on all modes and bands, even WARC. Whenever Alex, UL7PCZ, operated, he asked for Stateside, especially the East Coast, mindful of NT2X's requests.

For the next two weeks we were stuck in Vietnam, and couldn't buy a return ticket to Moscow. With no money left, five of us lived at the club station 3W8AA all this time, almost starving. To

cheer up the guys, I helped them get their own Vietnamese calls, but these were two very tough weeks. Thanks to the generosity of the PTT Director who gave us some money we got through it.

There is a chance that I will go back to Vietnam soon, to finish the second club station, to fix equipment we left behind and to continue with the teaching project.

My wife is waiting for me at home -- I was away for many months. In order to talk to me, she even passed her exams and got a call, UT5JDA. Recently graduated from college and raising our daughter, she is my 'major asset' in life, and I feel sorry at times for being such a 'hobo.'

This may interest you, too: we had a 'black list' and out of 60 calls -- not a single USA station -- just 'thank you, W's', for being so disciplined on the air!

With good propagation we managed 4 QSOs per minute on the average, with maximum speed of 6 QSO/minute for the entire hour. A maximum of 11 QSOs per minute rate was achieved.

We want to thank INDEXA, NCDXF, Mosley Electronics, XV2A and 3W5JA gangs, JH3DPB, RW3AH, JA2JPA, XV2AAA, XV2AYL, UA3AB, UA3CT, Vietnamese Telecommunications Ministry, Director of Saigon PTT Bac Ai, for their assistance.

Part 2

by Ed Kritsky NT2X,
INDEXA DX Coordinator

My involvement with the Spratly expedition started with a telephone call from an American amateur, who was speaking to Alex UL7PCZ at a club station RL8PYL in the city of Temirtau, in the Kazakh Republic of the USSR. Alex wanted me to get on the air, but I

wasn't home, so the message was left on my answering machine. Then came another call, and another a few days later and then finally we had the on-air conversation that led to this effort. We had known each other before, since two years prior he had been on 3W0A/3W1A expedition. He wasn't a major participant then, but he proved to be an important player in the whole affair. As it turned out, preparations for this one were no 'stroll on the beach.' Alex had received a letter from his friend Romeo, 3W3RR/UB5JRR, who was in Vietnam and who was asking Alex to get ready for the expedition to Spratly. Among the invitees were RB5IJ (who never went), UL7PCZ, RL8PY, RL8PZ. Romeo was in Vietnam working for the joint Soviet-Vietnamese company 'Cuulong' (Kiulong). The company was going to sponsor the expedition because it would give them exposure in the country it was doing business, but it was Romeo who orchestrated the whole deal, spearheaded

Band	Total QSOs	First QSO	First JA	First USA
160-Meter CW	23	OH1XX	JA6IEF	
160-Meter SSB	2	OH1XX		
80 Meters	252	JA1JRK	JA1JRK	KC7EM
75 Meters	149	JG6QZO	JG6QZO	
40 Meters	1670	JA3MNP	JA3MNP	W6KUT
30 Meters	36	JA1IFP	JA1IFP	W6GG
20 Meters	11201	DU1KT	JA1RQD	W6ENZ
17 Meters	511	RB5FF	JA3MKS	WA2SPL/1
15 Meters	17020	JA1VWJ	JA1VWJ	WC5E
12 Meters	683	SM0AJU	JA7FEZ	N4MM
10 Meters	10912	JS6CEU	JS6CEU	W6YA
6 Meters	318	JR6HI	JR6HI	
RTTY	488	JA0HHW	JA0HHW	K2ENT

The band break-down for the Spratly DXpedition: 43,245 total contacts.

the efforts to get permission from the authorities, and consulted with Vietnamese officials and Kiulong management, who were not sure until the last moment whether to approve the project.

In order to make the trip Romeo and his gang needed the money, hard currency to pay for goods and services since Vietnamese weren't going to accept Soviet rubles. The Soviet ops were also going to bring and help set up a club station in Vietnam. But they lacked the equipment and the funds. By the time we started discussing the subject, Romeo was very low on money and had to save on everything he could to continue his preparatory work. And, as it almost invariably happens with anything involving the Soviet Union and Soviet ops, we got the word about a month and a half before

the expedition was to begin. With no time to waste, I called Murph Ratterree W4WMO, President of the International DX Association, for help with these matters. I worked with INDEXA on the 3WØA affair and they are a logical group to turn to. Being a DX Coordinator gives you freedom to make you own decisions on behalf of INDEXA and an added sense of responsibility for the success of the undertaking. As you are about to learn, I needed both.

Well, to get the wheels turning was no small thing. First of all, you need a written request directly from the operators for the support. Even though Murph may have believed me, it wasn't going to fly with INDEXA, based on the word alone. So the appeal went out: "Romeo, please submit a request for assistance,

either by mail or by FAX." The info I had been given on the expedition had to come from either Russia or Vietnam in order to be considered. Since this expedition required a lot of money there was no way that INDEXA could have pulled it all by itself. So it was necessary to ask for the Northern California DX Foundation's assistance. This is how from the very beginning Bruce Butler W6OSP got involved in the negotiations. It was important to determine the level of support and the state of preparedness of the Soviet ops. Basically, it boiled down to this: will the expedition happen, if they don't get financial help from the outside, or will they fall on their faces? It is common knowledge that most expeditions finance themselves to a large degree and then, with funds on hand, turn to organizations like INDEXA and NCDXF for help. This wasn't the case. The Soviets could spend their own money but they didn't have hard currency. Their only hope was to get assistance from the outside. Nobody here really knew Romeo from prior expeditions, Alex had been vaguely associated with the 3WØA effort, but that wasn't carrying much weight anywhere. But somebody had to listen and believe that it was all happening and was true.

That person was Murph. I feel sorry that this man had to put up with so much when the news got out: 'What, INDEXA wants to help the Russians, well they must be crazy! The Russkis are going to take the money and run! Don't give them anything!... And who is NT2X, do you know him well, can he be trusted?... They will never get to Spratly... If they do, it will never count for DXCC...' Turns out, the first reaction is almost always negative; people are more likely to believe in failure than success. Since the Coordinator is always in the middle of the whole thing, I had to answer the questions: who is going, when are they going, how are they getting there, who is in charge, where are they getting their money from, do they have licenses, can I

Vietnam Awards Programme

Vietnam Award: Confirmed two QSOs with two different stations or with one station on two radio amateur bands. Any mode, all bands since January 1, 1976. No QSLs, only GCR list. Cost is 18 IRCs or US\$7.

Vietnam Plaque: Confirmed QSOs with Vietnamese stations since January 1, 1976, on three radio amateur bands: 160, 80, 40, 30, 20, 17, 15, 12, 10, and 6 meters. No QSLs, only GCR list. Cost is 150 IRCs or US\$75.

Siagon Plaque: Confirmed two QSOs with two different stations from Siagon (Ho Chi Minh City) since January 1, 1976, or with one station in Saigon on three bands. No QSLs, only GCR list. Cost is 150 IRCs or US\$75. Stations active from Siagon include: XV2A, XV2AAA-AAK, 3W8AA, 3W1PZ, 3W2YL, 3W3RR, 3W5JA, 3W6PY, 3W7A, 3W8GP, 3W1ØØHCM, XVØSU, XV1ØØHCM, XV2AYL, and XV2BYL.

Vietnam RTTY Plaque: Confirmed two RTTY QSOs with two different stations or with one station on two radio amateur bands. All bands since January 1, 1976. No QSLs, only GCR list. Cost is 100 IRCs or US\$50. Stations active on RTTY from Veitnam include: 3W1A, 3W3RR, XVØSU.

Five-Band Vietnam Super Plaque: Confirmed QSOs stations worked from Vietnam since January 1, 1976, on any five radio amateur bands, 160-10 meters. Any mode. Send GCR list and QSLs (copies acceptable). Cost is 300 IRCs or US\$150.

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please ask them the following... so I asked. My nightly skeds with RL8PYL were helpful in exchanging valuable information on the views of both sides. I tried to convey as much as possible the existing sentiment and the behind-the-scenes attitude, to give Alex and Romeo something to work with. Without a clear understanding what we wanted it would have been very difficult to keep them going. The same was absolutely imperative in the other direction - I had to convey the minutest details to INDEXA and present them in such way that everyone understood what was involved.

I am very happy Murph was a good listener and could persuade others, once he understood the difficult situation. After the skeds on the air I spent literally hours with him on the telephone. A couple of times I brought Murph on frequency to ask Alex questions himself, and acted as interpreter. Of course,

knowing a thing or two about the Soviet Union and its ways helped immensely. I knew my audience was tremendous, both in the USSR and in this country. I would normally get a U-stations' pile-up after I completed a sked with RL8PYL. Many didn't call, but they listened, I knew, for tidbits of information to be had. I understand that a certain amateur affiliated with a DX publication called one of the groups involved in this matter and told them: 'You may not know it, but there is a FAX coming to you from the USSR. Since I'm the one telling you this, would you let me know what is in it???' My including in a Russian-language conversation a name of an organization and the word 'FAX' was enough to prompt such a telephone call. It's incredible how the amateur community is hungry to learn just about anything on a subject of interest, even if the language spoken isn't the one they understand. (The request, by the way, was denied.)

As I said earlier, the negativism persisted. Even the DX publications reported on the developments with a good dose of skepticism. I now had to convince the parties to give the operators a chance. The first step was to provide a copy of a license for the Spratly operation, and Romeo had it. There was one small problem -- there are absolutely no telephone ties between Vietnam and this country. Somehow, a FAX transmission was still possible, through a third country, as we got a copy of his licensing documentation from the Vietnamese authorities, allowing the operators to depart from Vietnam and go to an uninhabited island in the Spratly group. It was forwarded to the DXCC desk for consideration. Now came the financial part. We had to have the budget for the expedition to be able to give them the support they needed. I got most of the items and their cost -- but these were rounded estimates

and it didn't make a good impression. There was a moment when my belief in any positive outcome was almost totally shattered. For the first time I regretted I ever got involved. This was the time to stick to my guns and firmly decide that I wouldn't let anyone ruin this expedition! This attitude was correct, I didn't quit. Additional consultations followed - with INDEXA, NCDXF, Alex, and Romeo. We needed precise figures and I had to explain why.

I was pressing the Soviets for the proper information. The biggest item of discussion was the sum of money needed for transportation: Romeo found helicopters to fly to the islands but these were extremely expensive -- \$750/hour per helicopter and he needed two of these to fly the crew, the supplies and the equipment. The estimated bill was approaching \$30,000. The reason why this mode of transportation had to be used was the danger lurking in the warm waters of the South China Sea. These waterways are infested with pirates who assault passing ships, killing and pillaging. Discussing the money was most difficult. I had to go back to Alex and ask for clarification. Alex was my 'relay' point as Romeo couldn't always be reached directly, he had his own problems to contend with -- more official meetings, explaining the expedition to the government of Vietnam, calling Moscow for consultations. Turned out, he was also asking people all over the world for help. Not everyone he talked to was helpful. One man called Murph and told him: 'INDEXA must provide 2 stations or the expedition is off.' This sounded like blackmail and it was rightfully turned down as such. In reality, Romeo simply asked this man to get help and this is how he chose to 'assist.'

We came to contend with a question of leadership for the DXpedition -- who is really in charge over there, is it Alex or Romeo? When you have many people leading the same thing, then nobody is in



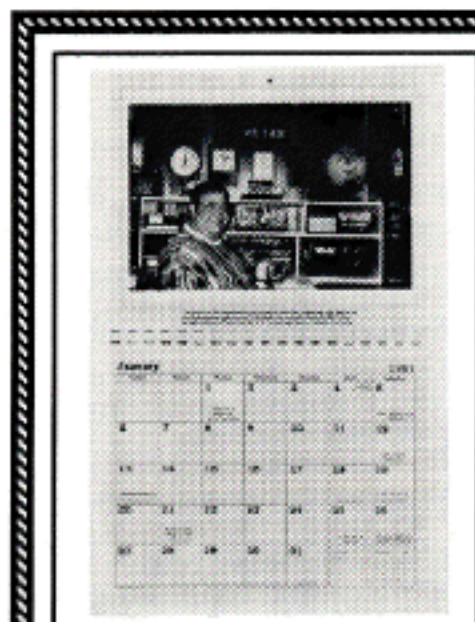
charge. And that spells 'f-a-i-l-u-r-e.' After some heated discussion the sponsors decided to pull out -- unless Romeo and Alex were ready to clean up their act and start it anew. With a heavy heart I had to tell Alex that neither group could support them because of the disarray. I asked them to please 'cool it for a month or so -- we'll have time to get the thing rolling again. There is nothing we can do for you now.'

I was under the impression that it was all over -- and for about two weeks I actually believed this. Then came a 'distress call' from Romeo in Vietnam -- 3 weeks before the expedition was scheduled to begin. 'Ed, we are going no matter what -- if your people still want to join the cause, fine -- if not, well, we're leaving anyway, even though we're planning to postpone the start a little bit.'

We could not allow that to happen. Back to INDEXA and NCDXF -- 'Can we help? Romeo found a boat, they are trying to arrange permission extensions from the Vietnamese, if we can get the equipment and some money to help them pay the cost. They will take a promissory note and some money now, the moment is absolutely critical.'

Meanwhile, UL7PCZ had flown to Moscow, where the Kiulong people were not sure whether to give their blessing to the expedition, since they were going to foot the bill for transportation and other things. More discussions with Alex (now at UZ3AZZ) and Andy RW3AH who was helping him run errands for the upcoming trip. One morning I was talking to them on 21 MHz, our Packet Cluster announced that 3W3RR was on the band -- a quick QSY, to bring Romeo to our frequency. As luck would have it, the RL8PYL gang was there also, so this was the most important meeting of them all. I gave them my part of the story, Romeo, Alex, and other ops discussed their matters. Then Alex made a recording of me speaking, where I explained in great detail what is being done and how we intended to collect the funds for the expedition. Finances were very much on the minds of Kiulong management and Alex wanted to play a tape for them, to help persuade them to give a green light to the expedition. Promissory notes were FAXed to Moscow from INDEXA, NCDXF, and JA1ELY -- all of them guaranteeing funds upon successful completion of the expedition and DXCC acceptance.

I found out a little later that all that work paid off -- the management believed 'the choir' and went as far as borrowing hard currency at the bank, to pay for this undertaking. The money must be repaid since Romeo and others promised to return the funds after replying to all cards received as a result of the expedition.



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But my involvement in this chess game wasn't over. First there was the transfer of funds. INDEXA chose to donate \$1000 which had to be sent to Moscow. Banks in South Carolina don't often wire money to Russia. I helped Murph locate a bank that didn't charge an arm and a leg for a wire transfer. Then the monies were wired -- and guess what? The Soviet ops couldn't get their funds at the Vneshtorgbank in Moscow (a.k.a. The USSR Bank of Foreign Trade). It took longer than we expected. (Murphy's law: 'If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong.' I always remember this saying when I look back at everything involving this expedition and its place of origin -- the USSR. Murph, pun intended!)

Now there comes equipment. INDEXA was providing two complete stations for the expedition: 2 TS-520S's with VFO's, 2 SB-200's, 2 Mosley tri-banders, courtesy of Mosley Electronics, and assorted accessories. All 127 kilos of this had to be shipped to Moscow -- 10 days before the expedition was to begin. John Parrott W4FRU in Virginia, had

the equipment tested and ready to be shipped. Since Andy Fyodorov RW3AH was a resident of Moscow, we decided to have the equipment shipped to him (Alex UL7PCZ would have departed for Vietnam already and the other ops from Temirtau were to pick up equipment the following week as they were flying to Moscow to change planes for Vietnam). I called Andy on the phone (no time to waste now -- 3 am in Moscow, his 'cheerful' wife answered), gave him serial numbers of all the equipment, so that the Central Radio Club could provide an official request to Customs to let the transmitting equipment into the country without further delay -- a familiar procedure. The shipping company got the load on Tuesday and we were expecting the equipment in Moscow by the following Monday, at the earliest. John W4FRU had to go away for a few days and I was assigned the task of looking after the equipment as it traveled from the USA to Frankfurt, West Germany, and on to Moscow. Well, the shipping company could track the shipment only as far as Germany, where the boxes were transferred to the Soviet airline 'Aeroflot'

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to be flown to Moscow. One Saturday Andy told me 'Ed, the boxes have arrived, we are picking them up on Monday.' Sigh of relief.

On Monday, at work my phone rings. An amateur from New Jersey inquires: 'Are you Mr. Kritsky? I got a guy in Moscow who wants to talk to you. Can you get to the radio?' Me? No, I'm at work. 'What is going on? Tell him to speak in Russian, I'm just going to listen.' Andy doesn't understand what I'm doing at the other end but he speaks: 'Ed, we are in very serious trouble here. The people at Moscow airport Customs absolutely refuse to give us the INDEXA equipment. We need a copy of the shipping invoice, also a statement from INDEXA that this is a gift, and the list of all prices -- or Customs won't know how to assess the duty.' But wait a minute, there should be no duty! The equipment isn't even destined to the USSR, it's only a transit point to Vietnam! 'Help, as they are keeping it at their warehouse and are going to charge a ruble a day per kilo.

(127 rubles is somewhat below the average monthly salary in the USSR.) If we don't get it in a day or so, we won't be able to take the equipment, the government will impound it all as we have no money to pay for this highway robbery!' A frantic call to INDEXA -- what are we going to do? Murph sends me a FAX with all the data and I immediately re-send it all to Moscow the same night. In addition, my friend Leo WN2L who was coincidentally flying to the Soviet Union the next evening, took a copy of all the paperwork requested, to give it to Andy in Moscow, just as a backup. I'm not giving up, no way. That same night Andy is informing me that the forms I sent were received and Customs wasn't impressed. They were invoking some vague Soviet law of 1937 that stated that 'no Soviet citizen can receive parcels and gifts from organizations abroad.' But Andy isn't getting it for himself, he is simply responsible for picking the equipment up! The Central Radio Club calls, the Ministry of Telecommunications of the USSR is involved, but nothing gives.

The whole nightmarish situation was further complicated by the Soviet airline. It appeared the cargo service of Aeroflot (called 'Aeroservice' -- should have been renamed 'Aero-Disservice') had removed all the packing slips with Andy's name on them and replaced them with their own paperwork -- I still have no idea why. When the equipment arrived in Moscow, they promptly refused any knowledge or responsibility of 'those boxes,' but Andy couldn't touch them either, his name was nowhere to be found. And again, INDEXA to the rescue -- I found out that they always include a copy of an invoice with recipient's name in the first box, just in case, and this was the case! Back to the microphone, Andy, here's what you do...

The situation was absolutely insane, and I wanted to fight to the end, but was too far away to do anything myself. You can't win over bureaucracy by being nice and polite. I was at my last line of defense now. I didn't care for myself, I just wanted them to release our equipment. So the Soviet Customs wants a scandal, a nice loud international scandal. I'd be very happy to arrange one if this matter can't be resolved reasonably. I tell Andy: 'Do you guys know who is visiting Washington, DC, now? Your Foreign Minister. Do you think it would be embarrassing during his visit to see a letter from a reader in the 'New York Times' or the 'Wall Street Journal' about the escapades of your Customs service in the age of perestroika? You bet it would. Well, I'm prepared to do just that, write several letters, and nothing is going to stop me! If you don't get the equipment in the morning I'm doing it.' Why, why, do I have to fight the Soviet Customs? It's a dream, a terrible nightmare, let me wake up!

The next morning Andy told me that they got the equipment, after some loud arguments and fist pounding. There was also a call from 'Pravda' to the

Sheremetyevo (Moscow airport) Customs, inquiring about the situation. The equipment was in order and working, though the antennas looked like someone walked over them. No problem.

Just before this happened, I talked to Romeo, who wasn't wasting any time in Vietnam. He was now going full steam to get things done for the arrival of the operators. One morning I caught him on 21 signing 3W3RR/MM, from a supply boat that makes runs between the oil rigs in the South China Sea. Romeo was heading in the direction of Spratly, perhaps to find a suitable spot to operate from. I chose to 'exploit' his appearance on the air to give this cause some more publicity. I ran a 'mini-net,' let the guys in the USA and in EU work him and then explained what was going on and how much the support was needed for this expedition. John W4FRU was designated by INDEXA to collect donations and I tried to tell the world just that -- we need your help, please! 'Well spoken, OM, I'll send my bit' said someone State-side. Oh, thank you! Information was supplied to DX bulletins, posted on packet worldwide and retransmitted as RTTY bulletins, I called people I know in this country and Japan and asked them to spread the word, bang on every door. I don't really know if it made any difference, but I want to think that it did.

I also came up on W2MIG's net on 14.165 every morning to fill the world in on the latest Spratly developments and the information spread with no less than lightning speed. One morning, just as I was on, my radio decided to quit, I could listen, but it wouldn't transmit. Carmelo WA2SPG patched me onto the frequency by telephone -- a weird feeling to hear my voice on the radio, but listening to the rest of the airwaves as if it wasn't me speaking. I called for help -- I needed a spare quick if I was to continue my efforts and Peter WN2WOW drove into New York City and brought his TS-940S for me to use, and even left me carfare

to take the radio home after work. ('Don't take the subway,' he said). Meanwhile, rumors transpired and reverberated in the ionosphere, people who had no real knowledge of events were telling horror stories, causing me to deny the outrageous ones. I finally refused to listen to any rumors. The only things to believe in were the ones I heard myself from Moscow, Temirtau, or Vietnam.

The operators were in Vietnam -- finally -- and they were waiting for the second group to arrive from Moscow. In the meantime, XVØSU was on, giving me hope that they weren't wasting any time down there. Purchased were supplies, gasoline, necessities. Everything was to be transported on a chartered ship, paid for by the Kiulong company, the only safe way to get to the islands. There was much concern over the acceptance of the operation. But since the only operators were the Soviets and the transportation was all paid for, Spratly operation would be legal. They were also warned not to sign /1S with Vietnamese call sign since this would imply the Vietnamese ownership of the islands and such operation wouldn't be acceptable to the DXCC Desk.

1SØXV was selected for the group call and Romeo got himself 1S1RR. Now I had to wait like everybody else -- no one knew anything in Moscow and even stations from the Asiatic Russia weren't telling me much. Then suddenly, the operation was on. First, the Soviets told me they had worked 1SØXV, then they were heard in Europe. But I had to identify them myself -- until that moment I was very cautious. Then there was a call from Toshi-san, JA1ELY -- 'Ed, it is them, I talked to Romeo.' He even let me listen (on the telephone) to the JA pile-up and Romeo's voice. Hip-Hip-Hurray!

I was exhausted but this still wasn't the end of it. I started to get calls from people who wanted me to tell the ops: 'More phone, CW, low bands, General frequencies, East Coast openings...' On a few occasions I passed the word to the ops -- and they listened. Messages were left on our Tri-State PacketCluster System to let the amateurs locally know what is happening on the other side -- the facts, not rumors, as I knew them. I later found out that all these messages were picked up by one of the system users and retransmitted world-wide through RTTY bulletins. I made my first



Romeo UB5JBB operating as 1S1RR from Spratly.

QSO with the Spratly's on 21 MHz, worked 1SØXV and then Romeo immediately said 'NT2X, this is 1S1RR, you're 59, QSO number 1.' I was deeply touched and wished them luck.

As you may have guessed, this wasn't the end. A week later, I started getting calls at work. The calls came from people I knew: 'Ed, they are calling for you in the blind. They just stop the pileup on 15 meters and ask for you. Can you come up?' In 2 hours, I said, and left work early. My answering machine had another 10 or so calls from all over the United States, asking the same. Warm the amplifier, get on 21 MHz, call once, twice, three times on their frequency. The squall of upset amateurs who didn't know what I was doing: 'You lid...get off...split operation...what are you doing, you are on top of the DXpedition!!!' Fortunately, Romeo also listens on his transmit frequency or someone tells him that I'm

there. 'QRX, QRX everybody, I must speak to NT2X!' 'Ed, we are running low on fuel, we are going to make a run to the mainland for food and water, but we have no more money to buy fuel for the generators. Can you help us to get some funds?' I know I can't let them down and promise to help. Another call to INDEXA -- what can we do in this situation? NCDXF can help, they already pledged money, perhaps they can release some funds now. And a few days later Bruce informs me that the funds had been sent to Moscow. In the meantime a representative of Kiulong who went to Vietnam with the operators had returned to Moscow to collect some money for the fuel and other necessities. Our funds should be arriving shortly.

The expedition wasn't without its problems. The ops disappeared off the air at times instead of staying on until the propagation ran out, they worked people

without giving full call signs out (contest style) -- and that caused many repeated contacts as amateurs wanted to be in that log for sure. 1SØXV men later told me that there was no propagation towards the USA several days after they started the operation. In the mornings I sat on 20 meters and heard DU, YB, JA -- all of them loud and clear, and couldn't understand why the Spratly group didn't use the propagation to get at the East Coast. Then there was not enough CW -- or so many amateurs here on the East Coast claimed. Turned out, there was an almost 60-40 split between SSB and Morse. Impressions are often very subjective, they depend on where you live and whom you listen to. I chose to keep my mouth shut -- don't criticize, always give the benefit of the doubt to someone who is in that faraway land, you never know what sort of problems may arise -- the 3WØA operation taught me that and I kept my thoughts to myself, even though I was upset at times. The frequent disappearances of the 1S-gang caused many comments, one from a friend of mine, who tried to convince me (and himself, perhaps) that the operation wasn't really legal -- 'they must be sitting in Vietnam someplace, or better yet -- in Siberia -- and get on infrequently, to avoid being detected by direction-finding equipment!'

Then there was the question of QSL cards, a big point of discussion for any expedition. Once the expedition is supported by organizations like INDEXA or NCDXF, they want their logos on the cards. For that reason I told Alex that we were going to print the cards here and send them to Moscow, if they insist on having their own manager. They were also insisting on processing the cards in Moscow and nowhere else. No amount of persuasion was helpful. Until the expedition got underway, I was trying to influence people in Moscow to let us do the QSLing here. No luck. Then, we decided to tell people to hold off on sending QSLs to Box 308, Moscow, until the question was resolved, I believed we

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could do it, that there was something that the Soviets didn't understand about the importance of reliable QSLing that we and the rest of the world had to tell them. Once the Spratly's were on the air, I decided to give it one more try. INDEXA sent a FAX to Moscow asking for clarification -- why not? Back came the reply -- 'we have it all under control and besides we are going to print the cards ourselves, not to worry.' Seems like Romeo didn't fully inform the Kiulong people on the importance of our printing the cards here. Another acute pain inducer for Murph and INDEXA. We had too much riding on this one to take any chances. There were a couple of angry letters ready to be FAXed to Moscow -- and then we decided to try calling them on the phone first. First try, no luck. Find UA6HZ, my old pal Larry, ask him to do the same. He succeeds, talks to someone in Moscow who knows what the story is. Comes back and tells me 'Ed, this man wants you to give him a land-line.' I spent 10 minutes on the telephone with Kiulong's General Director, patiently explaining why it is important and why we are upset. He assured me that they are a reputable outfit and wouldn't cause any hardship on anyone, so he would hold up their end of the bargain, even though he didn't know about the deal being made in the first place. A frequent problem in the USSR -- lack of communication among the people. Misunderstanding cleared, we're doing the cards. Another abyss avoided.

Many managed to work Spratly. They made over 40,000 QSOs with one sick operator, one broken generator, and another malfunctioning. Some were happy with them, others weren't, but that is true with just about any expedition. The expedition cost the Soviets \$36,000, the operators themselves spent about



Before his Spratly operation, Romeo operated as 3W3RR from Saigon.

1000 rubles -- roughly the annual salary for some of them, in order to go. Romeo dipped into the family savings for 1500 rubles. The Kiulong company borrowed \$25,000 at the bank, and they now have to repay the sum (as of this writing \$19,000 are still outstanding). Yuri Brazhenko, Commercial Director of Cuulong company who was in this country, brought me a great looking seashell from Spratly, which now proudly sits on the shelf above my station.

At the end I didn't mind losing sleep, spending \$350 on phone calls and worrying too much about what else could go wrong. It was an expedition to which I gave my mind and a part of my soul. I wanted to see the people who undertook it and believed in it succeed, despite all the problems. This was an unusual expedition in many ways -- how they obtained licenses, sponsorship, and transportation. Very likely it won't be repeated, not with a company acting as a sponsor. Even learned a few things about myself -- I can do a lot for a good cause. This certainly was one, benefiting the Amateur Radio worldwide and INDEXA. No less importantly, it showed the world that the Soviets, given the opportunity,

are as capable as anyone else. I just hope there will be others to take the risks and fight the odds, going to a faraway island or a remote area. You can't blame me for taking this cause. Even though I'm an American now, I was born there, speak their language, and at time feel sorry for the good people over in that country where many things -- material and otherwise aren't available or not allowed. I sincerely hope to see it change.

The Spratly DXpedition '90 is now part of the history of Amateur Radio and a part of my own life story. Copyright 1990 by Ed Kritsky, NT2X.

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