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'OUR MAN IN ALDABRA'

(A further chapter in the life of John Walker compiled by the Editor)

PHASE 1

The Royal Society "Phase I" party (some twenty strong) landed at Settlement, Aldabra on 13th August 1967 and it wasn't very long before the KW 2000A was carefully unpacked and set up, together with the vertical, which was secured to a pole 15' high alongside the "Guesthouse" a small wooden shack destined to be our home for the next seven and a half months. Checks were completed, lighting arranged, generators proved and late on the next day the rig was "fired up" and the first QSO with the outside world was attempted. Imagine our delight to make contact with G4RS at Blandford where the HQ Station, which had been patiently listening, came through at S4 on CW. A forty five minute QSO ensued with Les (G3VYZ) who was on the key, equally as elated as we were on the Island and just before midnight local, we closed down knowing that all was well.

During Phase I, the first three week period, whilst awaiting the arrival of the main party and supplies, contact was kept with the outside world by means of daily skeds with VS9MB In Gan and twice weekly skeds with G4RS at Blandford. I was extremely grateful for the help given me by VS9MB. Between these two outlets from Aldabra various points and tricky situations were smoothly settled. At the same time trips were made to the far end of the Island and the small portable sets were tested out but found to be lacking in power, considerable trouble being caused by the strong broadcast stations which were to be heard during the evening and the powerful teleprinter stations during daylight. The sets themselves were not in the peak of condition due to an unexpected dunking they received when rough weather swamped the "Gemini" in which they were travelling, capsizing it. However Sgt Harry Stickley, officially the repair man for the Expedition, agreed to go to each Island in turn and see what he could do to improve communications. By dint of sensible aerial sighting and painstaking work on the wet equipments Harry achieved what he had hoped and each of the Island posts, Cinq Cases, Anse Cedres and East Channel were able to override the heavy local QRM. Harry stayed at East Channel until the main party arrived, checking all things to his satisfaction before returning to Settlement.

PHASE II

This phase commenced when "Vidal" arrived on 28th August and brought the rest of the party and the long awaited stores, some thirty-eight crates of various sizes and weights. After unloading and unpacking, the main station was set up, comprising a C11 and R210 with both AC and DC power supplies, together with a Redifon GR 410. The C11/R210 gave me AM and CW facilities anywhere between 2 and 16 Mc/s with an output of about 50 watts, whilst a Redifon GR 410 offered CW and SSB facilities on certain spot frequencies. (A photo of the equipment was shown in the December '67 Mercury - Ed). Twice daily skeds were soon established with the Royal Navy in Mauritius and a daily one with the Meteorological Bureau, also in Mauritius, so the KW 2000A could now relax and be used for pleasure only!!!

"Vidal" left three weeks later, taking with her most of the Phase I party, and with final farewells on the Aldis lamp she sailed out of sight, bound for Mombassa, Durban, Capetown and finally England. We were now left on our own, radio being our only means of contact with the outside world.

The same week found me appointed "Weather Forecaster/Met. Man-in-Chief" and with an excellent Met office handbook together with the instructions supplied with the various instruments but absolutely no experience at all, I set about becoming the expert on clouds, wind

and rain. (Some four months later I can safely report that there have been no complaints yet so it seems that a course at Bracknell is not vital!!!) So life assumed a steady pattern and Phase III started.

PHASE III

The long term party soon settled down to their studies and getting out into the field. Contact was maintained between each party and the base at Settlement over the portable transceivers, which had been carefully sited and cared for by Harry. His care brought dividends as virtually no trouble occurred and regular and constant phone reports were received and collated at base day by day. As Harry was unable to fully occupy his day (faults were not unknown but certainly not sufficient to keep him occupied all the time) he agreed to act as assistant to one of the party, Tony Diamond, and generally made himself useful digging and probing, studying the habits of the giant tortoises and other unique species of wild life on the Island. Unfortunately this kind of work is not included under any specific trade classification in the Service, not even in the Veterinary Corps, so Harry will have to be content to leave it as an entry on his Service documents as "Other Specialist qualifications"!! For myself I was well occupied with the three skeds each day to Mauritius, regular weather measurements to collate, reports to take from the other Islands (In case any readers thought that Aldabra was only one island, it is in fact broken up into four separate islets, none of which can be reached without some form of boat) and occasional safaris to the outback of Picard island for the purpose of procuring fresh goat meat for the main base cookhouse!! There were some fifty Islanders resident together with a further half a dozen members of the Expedition, so a goat did not last very long!!! As the weeks rolled by I began to wonder whether I would keep up with all of the Amateur Radio skeds being asked of me - through regular contact with G4RS numerous requests were being made and operating hours became more and more difficult. From the first week in December the Met Office requested an additional report at 1200 GMT, also one at midnight if conditions were cyclonic. Luckily, due to lack of official traffic, I was able to drop one of the daily skeds with the Navy on the understanding that a listening watch was being kept on a guard frequency on which I could call in the event of an emergency. This meant only an hour each day (as against the previous two) commencing at 1000 GMT and so balanced the load a little, as operating times had to be geared to "generating" times due to a fair restriction of fuel. I was able to charge the battery banks each day and occasionally operated the KW from it's DC PSU to enable operation during the quiet periods.

And so the days passed by and Christmas Eve arrived. All members of the Expedition attended Mass in the Catholic church at Settlement and this was followed by a party in "Seychelles" style which lasted until a quarter past five the next morning, Christmas Day. It would have carried on longer. but one of the locals broke a string on the guitar and that put paid to the festivities. At least this was what I assumed to be the reason, it was quite a coincidence that the free booze for the locals had also run out!

So to the New Year, heralded on New Years Eve with the arrival of the "MANAHINE" carrying supplies for the last Phase of the Expedition and also relief expeditioners from the Royal Society. The C11/R210 made contact with the "Manahine" and met info was gratefully exchanged between stations, as she slowly made her way toward the Island. On board were numerous clean shaven pale faces who looked quite incongruous against the old timers!! Amongst the supplies were large quantities of beer (Don't get the wrong idea, the daily ration was one tin per man and each tin only held 12 fluid ounces) as well as some very welcome spirits. This allowed all of us to welcome in 1968 in excellent style until a native of the Island, one extremely accurate rat, whose shooting prowess could well be taken as an example by our intrepid Corps shots, succeeded in topping up my vodka and orange with deadly accuracy from a range of some twelve feet.

This caused great amusement from the assembled company, except yours truly. I am glad to be able to report that the rat was unable to repeat the performance as I had the great pleasure of despatching it to where ever accurate rats depart, with the help of a .22 bullet the following morning. The hole in the ceiling is very apparent about noon each day when the sun is high !!

And so to the end of Phase III. The "Manahine" sailed away with the lucky ones on their way back to their families in G land and Phase IV commenced. This phase should last until the end of March when the Island will once again be left to the few locals and Nature. But meanwhile activity on the Islands proceeds at a great rate and yours truly is kept very busy with preparing met reports, sending most unusual traffic back to the Royal Society, the odd meat procurement and of course Amateur Radio.

To that end, and possibly to the annoyance of some amateur operators the score to the end of last year from 15th August was 2478 QSOs on all bands Top thru' to Ten. One hundred and thirty-eight countries have been worked and average WAC time is 57 seconds !!! I have been lucky enough to offer QSOs to people all over the world, of all races and creeds and have made hundreds of friends. In particular the thrill of working on 160 metres to the States was one of the moments that will live in my memory. Apparently this made the 98th Top Band country for W1BB - I hope Stew manages to get the other two for his DXCC on Top!!! My sincere thanks to Des Barry, G3ONU, who has coped with the flow of QSLs and to Roli, ZC4RB, who has helped in passing back the station logs from here each week. That is why many QSL cards have been acknowledged so quickly and effectively. And last but by no means least, my thanks to G4RS, whose regular QSOs have enabled me to keep reasonably sane, with news of my family and the many friends left behind at Blandford. The final report on this saga will appear in due course, meanwhile 73's to you all and good DX !!

(Up to 31 Dec. 67 1200 QSL cards had been despatched by G3ONU).

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COMMONWEALTH CALL AREAS

I expect some of you noticed in the January issue of the "Radio Communication" ("Bull" to most of us) that it carried a list of Commonwealth call areas.

Aldabra was shown as VQ7 and as I have been in correspondence with the ARRL about Aldabra, and they (the ARRL) consider it's prefix to be VQ9, I queried the VQ7 prefix with the RSGB.

Their reply is shown below.

Mr, R.A. Webb, G3EKL
Royal Signals Amateur Radio Society,
Blandford Camp, Dorset.

18th

January, 1968

Dear Mr. Webb,

In reply to your letter of 11 January enquiring the prefix for Aldabra Island, I would advise you that this is not a prefix issued by the I.T.U. but is one derived locally. Some years ago a station operated from Aldabra using the VQ7 prefix, but recent licences issued by the Seychelles Authority incorporate a VQ9 prefix.

Yours sincerely,

R.F. Stevens, G2BVN