

# MM0RAI Rockall – The Story

*MM0RAI/P Rockall EU-189 by Patrick ON4HIL. (Quoted from: DXCoffee<http://www.dxcffee.com/eng/2012/07/13/rockall-story/>)*

Our Rockall story takes off during the 2008 IOTA contest. We activated Goeree EU-146 as PB2M and had built ourselves a high power portable contest station. We also had a strong team, but finished only third that year because of the fierce island competition. It was clear to us that we were in need of an exclusive “most wanted” location. DX connoisseur Theo ON4ATW had one in mind: Rockall Island, good for only a few hundred contacts so far in IOTA history.

When first looking at some pictures of Rockall it dawned on us why this desolate island is one of the most difficult to activate in the whole world. In fact it is the twenty-five-meter-high apex of an extinguished volcano. The rock only measures twenty meters wide and is located four hundred eighty kilometers west of Scotland. It's safe to say that it's pretty far away from the nearest land. But there could be no doubt about it: we would activate Rockall for a change...

Right after the contest we put up a task force with our own Yahoo reflector to discuss things. We made up a team consisting of Luc ON4IA, Theo ON4ATW, Marc ON6CC, Karel ON5TN, and myself, Patrick ON4HIL. Furthermore we had support from Carlo ON4BR, Anton ON6NL, Rudi ON7YT, Henk ON4AHF, Dirk ON5GS, Jan ON6ZG, Luc ON4LU and some other club members.

It became clear that in order to complete this mission successfully, intensive preparation and training would be utterly essential. We called on Marleen ON6ZU for help, and soon after we had coaching in climbing and diving techniques. Professional help was offered by GETWET, an organization that trains for emergency situations at sea. They have a swimming pool that emulates rough sea and waves. Their training greatly enhances your chance of surviving a boat accident at sea. Since Rockall is out of range for helicopter rescue, Doctor Luc ON4LU even taught us how to stitch open wounds. After all, we would really be on our own out there – so better safe than sorry!

During our weekly meetings and workshops we saw the birth of brilliant ideas like our compressed air launcher and an on-the-fly adjustable shelter serving as QTH on top of the rock. The plan was to activate two stations simultaneously for forty eight hours.

Finding a boat was easy. Google pointed us to Agnus Smitt sailing his boat, ‘The Elinca’. He had already been around Rockall. Agnus told us that he had everything we needed for a successful landing on Rockall. By studying his log we decided that May would be the best month to head for Rockall.

After a year of hard work and intensive preparation, the day had come. Website? Check. Generator? Check. Fuel? Check. All these, including the waterproof barrels and antennas, were loaded. Henk and Dirk would drive the van and deliver our equipment safely to the boat. The operators had booked a flight to Stornoway, the port where our adventure really would start.

Agnus met us at the airport and immediately brought us the bad news: an approaching storm would limit our activity to only twenty four hours instead of the planned forty eight. There was no lack of media attention nevertheless. Radio and TV reporters came to interview us because all things Rockall are hot news in Scotland.

The trip went reasonably well though some of us were seasick because of the waves. Early morning on Day Three, Rockall was in sight. Agnus circled around the rock but issued a no-go because of the bad weather and rough sea. And the announced bad weather wasn't even here yet! That night we got acquainted with the storm that hit us earlier than expected. All pukebags got filled to the rim in one go! We had to head home without setting foot on Rockall. A huge disappointment, but one thing was sure: we would be back somehow someday.

### Das Boot

The quest for another boat wasn't obvious and took quite some time. It needed to be a motor boat with a working bench, but most of all a boat with a permit to sail in open seas. Contacting skippers is a pain: these guys are always at sea isolated from the land and thus harder to reach than the Pope. Some of them were holding the line for months only to bail out in the end: too hard, too dangerous, insufficiently equipped. Always an excuse ready. In 2010 we found someone on the Internet who was about to organize trips to Rockall and St-Kilda. His website read: "Sailing to Rockall and St. Kilda, adventure holidays, climbing ,diving and fishing."

It was clear to us that this guy never had been around Rockall. After a while we managed to get hold of a picture of his boat. It was obvious that boarding this vessel for Rockall would be a one way trip. Thanks but no thanks! Our first attempt had taught us that a small boat without the necessary tools won't pull it off. Rough seas demand a stable boat, and the odds for bad WX there are really high.

A business contact introduced me to Pim. Pim had a boat, and when he showed it we were truly impressed. The "CDT Fourcault" is an expedition vessel offering all we could dream of – and more. Work bench, cranes, jet skis and even a helicopter. With such a ship we were bound to succeed! We had overcome disappointment after disappointment finding a suitable ship in our neighboring countries, and now we finally found someone who could help us making our dream come true. We're back in business!

Preparing the endeavor went full throttle. We gathered all parts and redesigned our website. After so many letdowns we decided to make the new plans public only at the very last minute. The initial 2009 team got changed because of professional commitments for Luc ON4IA and Marc ON6CC. These guys unfortunately were unable to make it. The new team was made up of Johnny ON4VVJ, Rudi ON7YT, Theo ON4ATW, Henk ON4AHF, Karel ON5TN, Tom and myself Patrick ON4HIL. Count in, of course, Captain Pim and his crew: Sous (medic), Franky (diving instructor), Tom (cook), Peter (1st mate) Gaby (2nd mate), Leo the board technician and Angel accompanied by her three dogs and one black cat. On September 24, 2011, at eleven AM the CDT Fourcault left Antwerp to set sail for Rockall EU-189!

### D-Day

On the early morning of October 1st Theo ON4ATW woke us up. He had been the first to spot Rockall. Soon we were on the upper deck to catch a glimpse of "The Monster". The

Atlantic was rough and the waves were high. From where we were Rockall was just a centimetre big yet we could see the spume of the waves being thrown halfway up the rock. On our trip to the island we continuously downloaded weather maps to check the swell of the ocean. We experienced the weather around the island always to be 30% worse than these maps predicted.

It took Pim and the CDT Fourcault's crew another few hours to park the ship as close as possible to the rock. In the mean time the scene confirmed what we had seen coming: the waves were hitting the rock hard and we knew this wasn't going to be easy. **BUT, IF YOU WANT TO DO SOMETHING YOU NEVER DID, YOU HAVE TO DO SOMETHING YOU NEVER DID BEFORE!**

At this point the anxiety rose and everyone on board was working hard to prepare for the actual landing on Rockall. Operators and landing crew were crawling into their diving suits. The remaining crew members were hauling the equipment from below to the upper deck to load it into the boats. In advance we had agreed that Rudi ON7YT would be the first to give it a try. After all he had the most experience in climbing which gave him the best chances to land. Theo ON4ATW would follow. Then it would be Karel ON5TN's and my turn. Captain Pim decided to circle around the rock a few times to pick the best spot to land. Because of their agility, he advised to use the jet skis to face the violent waves. So the jet skis and a fast boat were lowered into the water. The boat served as a close-by emergency vessel in case something went wrong.

By this time it was already almost noon. Time flies when you're this busy. In these meteorological circumstances it was a very difficult task to keep the CDT Fourcault in place even with its anchor at 50m deep. After a short reconnaissance trip Captain Pim returned to the ship. We asked him if he thought our landing was possible. The answer left nothing to imagine: "No, I don't think so, but you can always try." Rudi left the boat and sat behind the jet ski's driver, off for the first effort. In the distance we could see them fight a Davidian battle, with Rockall being Goliath. Our fear was that the herculean waves would smack the jet ski against the rock, so we traded the jet ski for a dinghy, the small boat. But after a few failed attempts, Rudi was totally exhausted and threw in the towel. We were losing faith and feared that our adventure would come to an end here, again.

At the same time at home in Belgium our Rockall-mates were following the progression live and in real time. Henk ON4AHF was our on board pilot station operator, reporting live on 40m and sending the first pictures to webmaster Marc ON6CC, who immediately put them online. Afterwards we learned that at least hundreds of amateur radio operators had followed the conversation between ON4AHF on the boat and ON6CC at home as if they were captivated by the broadcast of the first man on the moon.

We pulled Rudi on board and changed plans. I was granted the second try. My knees were weak and I experienced an adrenaline rush. I descended the ladder and jumped into the zodiac. A second small boat joined us just in case. Full throttle off to the rock... We discussed tactics and agreed on the following scheme: I would put my legs out of the zodiac while diving instructor Sous would hold me. Driver Pim would put the zodiac against the rock and at that point Sous would pin me 'against the wall', i.e., the rock. A simple plan but the timing was crucial. The zodiac went up and down a few meters every time, and you could feel the waves bump into the rock.

Now is the time! Pim put the zodiac on a collision course with the rock. I braced and as soon as the boat hit the rock I got catapulted away by a push in my back from Sous. Time to jump! I did not hesitate because that's why we were here. For three years we had been making plans and in our dreams we had already done this a dozen times. The timing was right: I was standing on Rockall! A look over my shoulder showed the zodiac already three meter lower and I spotted a wave coming out to get me. I thought this was the end, but somehow I dodged the cold shower. I continued my climb to the top. For the lower fifteen meters the waves are your worst enemy. Higher on it's the slippery surface. The rock has little cracks and cavities to put your fingers in. These serve as a hold to climb higher. Sometimes the hole is even too small for your little finger. The ice hammer I brought served me well to pick even the smallest holes in the rock.

Halfway up was the first time I had solid ground under my feet. I yelled for Pim to throw me the rope I left in the zodiac. Pim had thought that he'd be able to throw me the rope from down in the zodiac. But the swell and gigantic waves proved him wrong. During the second half of my climb I cramped because I could not find a safe way up. The emergency crew down below suggested I'd go down again just a little bit and go up again along another route. While I was climbing the last few minutes I had to curb my enthusiasm. By trying to go fast I might slip with catastrophic consequences. Once I reached the summit I grabbed the VHF H/T and let the crew know I managed to reach the top. We waved at each other, and I was proud to be the first Belgian on top of Rockall.

By this time Rudi had recovered from his initial landing efforts. He took the launcher to fire a rope over the rock. He hit a bull's eye right away, so the rope was in place. In the meantime the sea had gotten rougher, and the waves took the rope back to the rock over and over again. This meant that Rudi and Theo had to try several times to recover it from the mighty grip of the Atlantic Ocean. Then bad luck struck as Rudi accidentally cut a huge hole in one of the zodiacs while reaching out to grab the rope. The boat started sinking and had to rush back to the CDT Fourcault. This left Rudi swinging on the rope against the steep end of the rock. For a short while there was a bit of a panic situation, but soon Rudi was able to start his one hour climb to join me at the summit. Meanwhile, Theo took the backup boat to reach the rock, but with low tide it was impossible to land on the rock. Then Rudi greeted me on top of Rockall. An emotional moment for both of us. We called our wives and kids with the satellite phone to let them know we had safely reached the top and that we would spend the night here.

The initial plan counted four persons for building the shelters and manning the radios. Since we only had half of the human resources at our disposal here we adopted an emergency scenario: one radio, one generator, and a single antenna fed with the ICOM tuner. Karel ON5TN and Theo ON4ATW brought us the generator and the barrels with all the stuff. We had to pull each of these up. During its trip up, the generator got soaked for a full minute. A good thing that Carlo ON4BR had packed it watertight. Not a single drop of salt sea water came through. We filled the generator up with oil and gas and were glad to see it running. All this left Rudi and myself completely exhausted. But we still had the radio and antenna to set up! We put up the antenna and unpacked the radio.

We wanted to start on 20 but through VHF we learned that we had to go down to 40 first. Our ham-friends at home wanted to congratulate us personally on our successful stunt. While talking to Luc ON4IA we could get a taste of what was to come. Hundreds of hams listening to our transmissions and waiting to make a contact with Europe's Most Wanted. It was touching to see Rudi talk to his wife Marleen ON6ZU and daughter Elien ON3EZ. I had a brief chat with my wife ON3BET and then all hell broke loose. We had intense pileups with

many dupes. Insurance contacts? Our signal was weak at first but it improved as the sun set. While I was running Rudi completed our camp for the night. He fixed the safety lines and installed lighting. The night was terribly cold. We only wore a coat on top of our diving suit.

The pileups went on to about four in the morning when it calmed down. We wanted to get some sleep but then we noticed the CDT Fourcault coming dangerously close. We alarmed the crew standing on guard on the vessel with the VHF radio. They lifted the anchor, but this made the ship's generator fail. No more electrical power on the boat rendering it pitch dark. The engineers fixed the problem in due time, and the CDT Fourcault got way from the rock to a safer distance. Around 5.30AM we tried to start on the twenty meter band, but this was still dead. So off to 40 again where the pileup was as fierce as the first minute.

## The Evacuation

Early in the morning we saw Theo approaching. He wanted to try to join us but had to cancel his effort because of rapidly deteriorating weather. The wind was so strong I had to hold the laptop with one hand while trying to log callsigns with the other hand. The crew on board the CDT Fourcault had downloaded the latest weather charts, and they immediately called us on the VHF radio. We had to abandon all activities right away because there was a storm front approaching that would soon reach us. Hastily we went QRT and tore down our setup. In a couple of minutes the ocean changed into a white turbulent mass of water, unlike anything we'd ever seen. The whole ocean was a surface of white foam. Pim and his crew did their best to get the barrels with our equipment on board. Our generator took a plunge a second time but this time without any water proofing. Theo tried to warn us, but we could not dodge the huge wave that hit us. It was only then we realized we were in a critical situation.

'No time to waste!' Pim yelled on the VHF H/T. We had to go down the rock. We lower ourselves on the rope to just above the water line, unhook and get picked up by the zodiac. But panic struck because we didn't expect the violent vortex of wild water beneath us. Rudi and I looked at each other. Not a word was spoken. There was no other way out. The turbulent waves and their roaring sound scared us, and I saw the tears in Rudi's eyes. Rudi is as tall as a tree, a rock you can build on, but these circumstances had punched him down. We exchanged a few words of confidence and courage and knew that the crew would not abandon us or let us down, no matter what.

Time to go. I was the first to descend. The next minutes are perhaps the darkest in my life so far. Half way down I got soaked and washed away by the waves hitting the rock. No words can describe that horrific feeling. Just above the water I tried to unhook myself from the rope, but I couldn't release the hook. I wore two life jackets over each other which limited my movements. I could not see the hook, and the swell threw me up and down several meters each time. I could not pull the rope through the hook because it was heavy, swollen and water-soaked. My efforts to release myself made me sink deeper into the water where I became a punch ball for the waves. These waves obstructed Pim and Franky from reaching me. The zodiac would simply crash, endangering even more people. They yelled "Cut you loose, Cut yourself loose!" I had a scuba knife strapped to my leg, but I could not grab it. I was held hostage by the ocean, and I was totally helpless. Minutes seemed hours.

After a few trials the zodiac managed to finally reach me. I was squeezed between zodiac and rock, still stuck to the damn rope. Franky yelled, "Gimme your leg, gimme your leg!" He took the knife from my leg and slit the rope. He and Pim pulled me in to the boat. Misery loves company: the zodiac's engine had sucked the rope into the boat's propeller which made the

engine stop. Completely out of control the zodiac got smacked against the rock. Luckily the rope was not entangled tightly around the propeller. Pim could pull it out easily releasing the motor. The zodiac was back under control. We were saved.

Now it was Rudi's turn. He had witnessed my struggle in a bird's eye view. I gave him a couple of clues and directions over the H/T. We held our breath as we saw him coming down. At the right time Rudi released the rope and fell into the water. Pim rushed the zodiac in and Franky and I grabbed Rudi and hauled him into the boat. This time we beat nature and tears of fear and relief rolled over our cheeks.

On the way back to the Fourcault we saw the large vessel's propeller pop out of the water once in a while. This was an indication of the intensity of the storm that had only just begun. Both Rockers and boat crew welcomed us after having watched our battle to get away from rock. It was an emotional get together for many of us. Henk reported the successful evacuation to the people back at home.