

INDEXA

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The following words are the story written using the diary style filled with notes and comments regarding the operation. I hope to convey to you the marvelous adventure of 3B7A on the island "île du Sud" on the archipelago of St Brandon through my memories and my feelings.

Chapter 1: A new challenge

After the undeniable success of FT4TA Tromelin 2014 and FT4JA Juan de Nova 2016, the team decided to undertake another challenge.

All this formidable operation was organized to perfection by Sebastien F5UFX and Florent F5CWU, and supplemented by the proven experience of Vincent F4BKV. Michel F6AGM provided us helpful commentary based on his experience of 3B7C in 2007.

Chapter 2: A long-awaited rendezvous

The time is Sunday April 1st 2018. The team meets at the Orly airport in Paris. In spite of some transport difficulties which could have complicated our schedule, everyone arrives in the afternoon, smiling, ready to leave for a new adventure!

Patrick F2DX announces to us that Jean-Baptiste F8DQL has offered to keep the website up to date during our absence. Laurent F8ATM, our new "Rookie", joins the team and everyone welcomes him warmly! After a

(Continued on page 2)

Saint Brandon Archipelago 2018 (3B7A) By Diégo Thobie, F4HAU



The 3B7A Team: F4HAU-Diego, F8ATM-Laurent, F4FET-Gil, F2DX-Patrick, F4BKV-Vincent, F5UFX-Sebastien, F5PTM-Pascal, F5CWU-Florent

Saint Brandon Archipelago 2018 (3B7A) (con'd)



The traditional airport gathering, less one member who had departed a few days earlier.

(Continued from page 1)

last checklist before departure, we distribute all equipment into different suitcases to avoid extra luggage fees. The most fragile equipment has been carefully stowed in the carry-on bags. The boarding starts on time at great pleasure to the team. See you later from the Indian Ocean!

Once seated in the aircraft, a long wait starts. With no announcements for a long time, the atmosphere becomes tense. Mechanical problems on the plane are finally confirmed but cannot be fixed in a timely manner by the technicians. The crew informs us of the cancellation of the flight and asks us to deplane. Our flight will be deferred to the evening of the next day.

Monday, April 2, 2018

Vincent F4BKV, had departed from Barcelona a few days earlier. He is already in Mauritius after a short visit to Rodrigues (3B9) during the week-end. As for our group, we slept in a hotel near to the airport. After a short night, we return to the airport for our flights—a first leg toward Réunion Island (FR), then a second flight to Mauritius. With this delay of 24 hours, the schedule is tightened, the pressure goes up, but the morale of the team is excellent.

With relief, the airplane takes off around 1800 local time toward the Indian Ocean. While pleasant thoughts towards our families emerge, our eyes are riveted on the information screens. Some questions need to be answered and some crucial activities need to be completed before the departure of the

first boat—yet fatigue finally sets in and we succumb to some sleep.

Tuesday, April 3, 2018

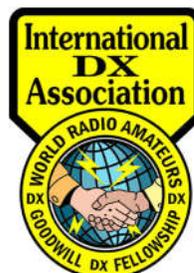
We arrive at Réunion Island for a stopover. On the ground, the sky is blocked by the clouds and that prevents us from enjoying the splendid mountain vistas we know are present. We then undergo a second flight postponement which obliges us to quickly reorganize some logistical matters with Vincent F4BKV by telephone. Thanks to the help of a Mauritian friend, we remotely reschedule our transfer from the airport to the harbor area as well as to arrange for the purchase of some equipment necessary for the success of the DXpedition.

The pressure goes up a bit with our second delay, but we remain lucid and hope that the airline quickly finds a solution. After another long wait and a short flight, we finally arrive at our destination with a total delay of twenty-seven hours! We then leave directly by taxi toward the harbor on the other side of the island. Our first boat leaves Port Louis in the evening.

With our travel delays, our schedule flexibility has been reduced to nothing. Therefore, Florent F5CWU and Pascal F5PTM embark immediately on one of the fishing boats of the “Raphaël Fishing Company”. They carry with them food, water, fuel, an amazing quantity of ice, but also our crates of equipment sent several weeks before. Each crate has been unpacked and checked to be certain that nothing is missed and nothing is damaged.

(Continued on page 3)

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Saint Brandon Archipelago 2018 (3B7A) (con'd)



Every piece of equipment is carefully stowed after ensuring all pieces are present.

(Continued from page 2)

The preliminary work upstream by Florent F5CWU on the logistical points and the assistance by Patrick F2DX on the administrative matters enabled many problems to be met and managed throughout the months of preparation. At this point, we well knew their efforts were worthwhile.

Other tasks were distributed between the various members of the team, the whole being orchestrated by our leader Sebastien F5UFX. All the members of the team involved themselves in the test and the configuration of the stations, in particular the TRX SunSDR2 PRO (software defined radio) during several weeks of shakedown testing. We dared to field a 100% SDR expedition, but we had already much positive feedback (including our own from FT4JA) that we were on firm ground. We also tested our secondary equipment such as our coaxial "Messi & Paolini", Low Band System bandpass filters, laptops (during contests) to approve their reliability and to accustom ourselves with their use.

As for the antennas, we again chose the two element vertical dipole array built by Vincent F4BKV for high bands, and the usual low band configurations which showed their efficiency during our last expeditions under similar conditions. Our principle concern was related to electricity. We had arranged to use rented generators? How had they been maintained and under what conditions had they been used? On the islands, equipment suffers a lot from heat and salt air.

Unlike FT4JA, where we had new generators, tested, approved and maintained under our care, this time we chose a different configuration. We were to put our trust in equipment which was to be the keystone of our mission but without any control before the start of the operation. Realizing this might be our "Achilles Heel", we had several alternative solutions while keeping an eye on our expenditure. As the saying goes: Caution is the mother of safety!



Our well-used, rented generators were found to be well maintained and operated flawlessly.

Chapter 3: We are ready!

Thursday, April 5, 2018

Most of the team members are still in Mauritius. The day started with several good news items! Florent F5CWU and Pascal F5PTM had arrived at Saint Brandon in the night and went ashore in the morning with all equipment after twenty-six hours at sea. The site was found to be almost identical to the photographs with which we worked to prepare for the DXpedition. They were able check and start the generators. Everything runs smoothly. In Port-Louis (3B8), we embark into the "Paille en Queue" ("white tailed"), a vessel named in reference to these splendid birds of the Indian Ocean. This boat is smaller than the first one but well equipped for our journey.

Friday, April 6, 2018

11h30 UTC after twenty-six hours at sea, we can see the island just above the horizon and identify the imposing wreck of a boat which sank on the

(Continued on page 4)

Saint Brandon Archipelago 2018 (3B7A) (con'd)

(Continued from page 3)

reef. Here we are! With great pleasure for the team, the "île du Sud" of the archipelago St Brandon appears above the coral reef where the lagoon radiates with its turquoise blue.



Aerial view of the islet to be our home.

This archipelago is composed of small islands and sand banks. It is also known under the name Cargados Carajos, is located approximately 420 kilometers from Mauritius and is managed by "Raphaël Fishing Company" since 2008. It is a long sand bank just a few meters above the sea level with many tropical bushes. Birds are everywhere, and are nesting at that time of the year. Close to the house of the three coastguards, some palm trees draw up a path. There are three other small concrete buildings on the islet where the company workers are living. One of them is the guesthouse. This small paradise is a haven of peace for the bird nesting species which come to reproduce here. The main specie is the Gygis Alba with which we coexisted throughout the stay. As usual with our operations, we did our best to minimize disrupting the environment and limited the deployment of equipment in order not to disturb the birds which nested nearby. We did not use certain areas due to the presence of too many birds. Several females even tended their eggs on the edges of the windows of our small house. Towards the end of the stay, several births took place . . . magical moments, indeed! We quickly realized that on this archipelago it is the human who is a guest—not the birds! We live temporarily on their territory and consequently we are humble and respectful of the place.

RESPECT of the nature is a paramount and fundamental value of our team.

R like Respect of the places where we plan to organize our expeditions. We study the feasibility and the impact of our activities.

E like Environment to reduce the impact of our presence on nature and the living organisms.

S like Sharing. Before starting a project we exchange a lot of information with authorities to find proper solutions. We often ask advice of operators who have visited the places in the past.

P like Professionalism, because in spite of term "amateur" in our hobby, we want to operate professionally.

E like Educative. All these operations are very interesting due to the different subjects broached. We have to admit that we had to open books and do extensive research to present our applications to various administrations, especially regarding subjects very far from radio.

C like Cohabitation because where we go it is very important to coexist with Fauna and Flora.

T like Transparency because we transmit all documents or parts necessary to prove our good faith and our codes of conduct.

(Continued on page 5)



Landing on our island requires negotiating through the various reefs and sand bars.

Saint Brandon Archipelago 2018 (3B7A) (con'd)



Once through the sand bars, back and forth trips from boat to land gets all our equipment ashore.

(Continued from page 4)

Quickly we unload the remaining luggage and observe some vertical dipole arrays (VDAs) already installed as well as the 30m four-square on the northern beach of the island. On the ground, other antennas are already prepared and wait to be erected. Excellent work had been done by Florent F5CWU and Pascal F5PTM who arrived one day earlier and had already advanced the assembly of the stations. The morale and the motivation are good and the cohesion of the group is fantastic. Without losing a minute, the team starts working despite of the heat.



Some of the antennas had already been installed by our "advance team".



Meanwhile the birds inspect the "invaders" of their space with curiosity.

The first QSO is completed on 20m SSB at 19h00 UTC with EA7/OH3ELB. We also start our activity on 17m SSB, 40m CW and 30m RTTY. All operators are smiling as soon as the pileups intensify. Our concentration is maximum in spite of the fatigue of the team and the 30 degrees C. (86 degrees F.) on the patio.

Saturday, April 7, 2018

It is 04h00 UTC. Gil F4FET announces to all that the four-square installed on the beach works like a charm and that propagation at sunrise with U.S. is great. It is excellent news! Before the temperatures climb we have to assemble the verticals for 80m and 160m, and to set up the receiving antennas for EU/US and JA. The objective is to start low band operations the coming evening. The day was excellent in spite of propagation predictions not being very positive. At 20h30 UTC, the log shows 9,000 QSOs. We are very satisfied and encouraged by these results of the first hours.

Sunday, April 8, 2018

This day is marked by the birthday of Patrick F2DX who celebrates his 60th with team members on this splendid island lost in the Indian Ocean. We take a short break to toast with a typical sparkling drink. We also take advantage of that off-radio moment to have a briefing and share the first comments received from our pilots. Our Chief Pilot Michel F6AGM, gives us important information using the satellite connections. He is in touch with other pilots

(Continued on page 6)

Saint Brandon Archipelago 2018 (3B7A) (con'd)

(Continued from page 5)

and makes an excellent summary of the requests and remarks coming from those trying to work us. This allows us to adjust our schedules and our plans.

The SunSDR2 PRO radios work marvelously well (what a powerful product in a small box). The settings chosen prior to the DXpedition give satisfaction. No one seems disconcerted by this new technology. The VFO (E-coder) gives access to the main functions. The interoperation of the SDR is perfect with our lightweight amplifiers (Expert SPE 1.3K) whatever traffic mode is being used. The visualization of the pile-up via the spectrum displayed on the laptop is impressive and extremely useful to manage the traffic. We are feeling good and we will give the maximum to fulfill the wishes of the amateur radio community.



The operating positions in the guest house were actually quite comfortable in comparison to some venues found on remote islands.

We observe excellent openings toward Europe and our Japanese friends. Their signals are impressive on the different bands. The traffic is fluid, much more so than compared to our previous operations, thanks to fewer call repetitions—most of which were not necessary. Great!

The evening, around 17h00 UTC, a short opening toward the U.S. appeared on 17m and 20m. Some of them are very loud! While some are busy with pileups, others are trying to improve our RX antennas. A phasing of KD9SV flag has been added during the afternoon. Vertical dipoles have been in-

stalled to give us the opportunity to work with two stations on 20m and 15m, which are the most productive bands. We must be present as long as the band is open to give a chance to all, in particular for the most difficult zones.

The 80m and the 160m stations are active and log many stations. The propagation on the high bands is in conformity with what we were expecting. In the evening we already logged 15000 QSOs.

Monday, April 9, 2018

The last night was difficult and the conditions on the high bands were far from being identical to the previous days. The North American stations are very weak. We are conscious of the situation and re-double attention. JA, NA, EU pileups are sometimes on the top of each other and the management of the situation is a bit complicated from time to time. We reach the 25000 QSO mark by greeting our buddy, Cédric F5UKW, who was our control station during FT4JA.

Tuesday, April 10, 2018

The low bands were productive to all the continents, but we always undergo difficulties on the high bands, particularly on SSB. But, we did not feel we could throw in the sponge!

Wednesday, April 11, 2018

The conditions evolve positively, in particular on 10m which was under constant monitoring. Lastly, we can use it and work many stations on CW and SSB. On the other hand, the 20m and 17m bands closed prematurely and do not allow us the opportunity to exploit them during the night.

Thursday, April 12, 2018

Fatigue is obviously being felt. For one week we have slept only by sequences of a few hours in heat. Undoubtedly the cohesion of the group and the attention of the each toward the other is omnipresent. This cohesiveness makes it possible to combine a relaxed environment and effectiveness during our shifts. The tide of the ocean became suddenly stronger. Installed on the beach, we have to regularly check the guying of our masts. Some anchor points have been reinforced. Sebastien F5UFX continuously points out the instructions and the propagation slots regarding who should not be

(Continued on page 7)

Saint Brandon Archipelago 2018 (3B7A) (con'd)

(Continued from page 6)

missed in certain areas of the globe. Each station has a document prepared by Pat F2DX which shows the VOACAP/K6TU predictions. With such information, we know where to listen. The signals on 80m are weak and the noise level is very high. The 160m station is close to 1000 contacts, using a Spiderbeam 18m mast with a wire hat also provided by our friend Cornelius DF4SA. We undergo some DQRM, that makes the pileup difficult to control. It is a pity especially when the bands are favorable to offer many an ATNO. We can only regret and condemn this behavior. Throughout the day, Laurent F8ATM and Gil F4FET blacken the logbook in RTTY at a good rate, helped by the spectral visualization of the SDR. This is a real plus!

We approach the 50,000 QSOs and it will be necessary to continue the efforts to achieve the goal of 70,000 QSOs!

Friday, April 13, 2018

The tide is always strong and the waves come up to the steps of our small house. The inspection of guy anchors becomes more regular to anticipate any problem. The conditions of propagation remain average but the perseverance of the CW operators during the night lets us cross the 1000 contact point on the Top Band! The 20m band was also prolific with the American stations as well as the 80m band in CW/SSB. The 15m and 12m bands are rather good; strange how from one day to another the conditions of propagation evolve. At 19h00 UTC we are close to the 55,000 QSO mark and we are more than ever motivated to push up to our goal!

Saturday, April 14, 2018

The morale is still excellent in spite of the difficulties and fatigue. We want to give our maximum for this last week-end! The CW rate is higher than SSB, especially when the conditions are not very good. We do not hesitate to exploit most of the bands on CW to keep a good rate. As soon as the signals grew, we switch to SSB. The weekend is ideal to give a chance to all those who did not have the opportunity to make a contact with us yet. Unfortunately, this Saturday evening the conditions are particularly bad. The 17m and 20m close suddenly rather early. Sebastien F5UFX, Patrick F2DX, Florent F5CWU and Pascal F5PTM give their maximum in CW in spite of the disturbances and those which are calling obstinately even when a QRX is announced.

I take advantage in writing this article to share some observations with you. Those conclusions have been noted all along the operations and are shared by all the operators of our group. They must be interpreted positively like constructive annotations:

- We voluntarily operated with a rather broad "split" so that the stations having small installations can contact us easily. It is often their only chance.
- On SSB, many of frequencies between the decimal 0 and 5 are not used. When operating at home, you may have the feeling that there are stations calling everywhere but at the other end of the pileup it sounds much different! Do not hesitate to use *ALL* the split range, not only by 5khz steps.
- Sometimes, it may have appeared that our rhythm dropped a little bit. This is because we were in search of small signals. Honestly, we can tell you that many have been logged because we saw the signal peak on the spectral visualization of the SDR. We are quite certain that if we were using a classic VFO, their signal would not have been detected so easily.
- To help the operators, please always call with your complete callsign instead of 2 or 3 suffix letters. It is a BIG waste of time and makes the operators slow down to request the full callsign, anyway.
- The requests of QRX to listen to a continent in particular are not made to annoy people! We understand that it can be frustrating to listen to a DX station with large signals working other continents. But, that's the game! Certain zones of the world do not have the chance to hear us almost around the clock but have only a one or two hour propagation window! Sorry if this window happens when you are back from your workday!

Sunday, April 15, 2018

While some among us continue handling traffic, others start disassembling the camp. We keep only antennas which will be used by the two operators who will leave two days later with the other boat. All the equipment must be arranged properly so that all can fit in the crates for the return voyage.

(Continued on page 8)

Saint Brandon Archipelago 2018 (3B7A) (con'd)

(Continued from page 7)

Once back at the originating harbor, we will not have time to rearrange everything.

In the evening we reached 69,000 QSOs. We hope to work the missing thousand on the last night.

Monday, April 16, 2018

Propagation has been very bad during the last night and we have not been able to keep all stations on the air. This is the last day of the operation for most of the operators. Only F4FET Gil and F4HAU Diego will remain on the island. Our six friends leave the islands in the morning. Suddenly, a silence after ten days of intensive activity! The usual peace of this place reappears and it is as pleasant as perturbing. However, our six friends entrusted us with the mission to go beyond the desired 70,000 contacts and complete the logistical operational goal. So, a lot of work remains for our two-person team! We sit down again at our radio stations to live our last moments on this IOTA lost in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Contacted on 30m RTTY, PA0MDB will be our 71,158th and last QSO.



Six of our team leave early via one of our serving boats while two remain for a last night's operation.

We have a general feeling of relief, satisfaction and joy. All this adventure was carried out as a team, and what a team!

Wednesday, April 18, 2018

Once the crates were transferred from the shore to the boat of Raphaël Fishing Co., we leave St Bran-

don and head for Maurice. The trip again took twenty-six hours at sea accompanied by a crew of fishermen. The seas were somewhat rough, as they were on the outward journey, roughly handling our stomachs.

Thursday, April 19, 2018

We arrive at Port Louis at sunrise. The rest of the team is awaiting us. Without wasting a second, we unload the boat. Equipment is spread out on the gate and a final equipment inventory is carried out to make sure that packing is in conformity with the documents of import/export. Lastly, we prepared our personal gear for air transport toward France and complete some documents for customs.

Chapter 4: Thanks

We very sincerely make a point of thanking all our sponsors for their confidence and their fidelity! Although each operator finances his own sums of money for his travel, his housing and an important part of the expenses related to the expedition, another significant part is covered by the sponsors, professionals, associations & clubs, and individuals. This support is essential in this kind of adventure and we take our hat off to all those who have been involved in the adventure and made this project a success. Thank you also at our pilot stations (F6AGM, N6PSE, JJ3PRT, LU5FF, ON9CFG), our families and friends who always answered present when we needed some help.

On behalf of the team, I write these last words to greet and thank Sebastien F5UFX, Florent F5CWU, Vincent F4BKV and Patrick F2DX for their remarkable work so that this project became a reality. I would like to thank the rest of the team made up of Pascal F5PTM, Laurent F8ATM, Gil F4FET and obviously, the support of Michel F6AGM and Jacques F6BEE.

I appreciate this team—a small and true family. For sure these people are more than simple friends. Thank you for the good moments in this so peaceful place and for the attention that each one gave to the others.

Only one question remains since our return to France: With this cohesion and this desire of going always further, over our own limits . . . where will it carry us the next time?

—73 *Diégo Thobie*

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