

THE MELLISH REEF SAGA—VK9JW

By DON MARSHALL,* VK4ZAF

● Four Australian operators have added a new chapter to the history of Amateur Radio. They are John Martin, VK3JW, of Balmisdale, Vic.; George Down, VK4XY, of Everton Park, Brisbane; Keith Schleicher, VK4KS, of Aspley, Brisbane, and Roy Baxter, VK4EJ, of Camp Hill, Brisbane.

When John used the special call VK9JW to contact JA1KW on 20 metres s.s.b. at 0910z on July 13 last, Mellish Reef became yet another country to be worked by Amateur operators. The contact and another 11,000 in the following six days was a triumph for organisation and co-operation by the Amateur operator with limited resources. "The buzz of stations calling that night was music in our ears," party leader and prime mover of the expedition, John, said.

But why Mellish Reef—a tiny 900 ft. by 600 ft. atoll in the Coral Sea some 560 miles north-east of Bundaberg and roughly 700 miles east of Cairns (see map).

John was a member of the group which last year reached Willis Island but failed to get to Mellish Reef. He felt he owed something to the Amateur world, so set about organising his own DX-pedition.

The problems, not to mention the cost of such an operation, were formidable. But John had a sense of national pride which pushed him into making the effort.

Early this year, he and his friend Alf Matthews, VK3ZT, in Melbourne, started making plans. Six months of letter writing and calls followed for assistance of various kinds. Alf was to go along with John. Keith and Roy were invited to join in. Alf worked on official details in Melbourne while George, Keith and Roy sorted out the essentials in Brisbane. John was fortunate to receive a VK9 call sign with his VK3 letters. He also arranged for the services of launch skipper and owner Bob Poulson, a man very experienced in the treacherous Coral Sea waters and an expert navigator.

Who was to know what was on a coral sandbank a long way from anywhere? What were the dangers? As far as possible, all had to be foreseen. John spent a week in Brisbane arranging food and cooking, water, shelter, bedding, a liferaft and communications had to be planned, not to mention the stations, beams, power supplies and fuel.

One beam came from Laurie VK3BBX and another from VK4XK. John VK4QA provided a pole and both Alf and Arthur VK4PX each lent a tent, poles and pegs, with S.W.I. Ray loaning a tent and furniture. At the last minute, Alf had to pull out for family reasons and George took his place.

All details hopefully solved, the party drove to Bundaberg and left at 2 a.m. on July 11. Mellish Reef is a speck in the ocean yet the navigator was only one-third of a mile out when the reef and the Herald's Beacon islet were seen about 11 a.m. on Thursday, July 13. The 40-mile radar picked up the islet at only five miles. Yet the waters were treacherous with coral bommies and pinnacles and it was not until 4.30 p.m. that the first dinghy load reached shore with the launch half a mile off. The four worked by torch light to erect two tents, beams and stations, and fill and start the generator before that first call. George's 80 metre aerial stretched from high tide mark on the east to high tide mark on the west! It was midnight before 20 metres and the JAs and Ws dropped out. But what an achievement.

The weather, the governing factor of the DX-pedition, was good—probably the best period of the year so far—and remained fair for most of the stay.

Friday was a busy day. The rest of the gear including hundreds of yards of power and coaxial cable was brought ashore by dinghy with the great help of the launch crew and the operation went into full swing.

John had his Swan 500 with an outboard v.f.o. feeding a TA33 junior beam, George his FTDX-100 feeding a folded dipole on 40, 80 and 15 metres, and Roy his FT101 with outboard v.f.o. also feeding a TA33 junior beam.

For power, there was a 2½ k.v.a. generator and a 1 k.v.a. generator as spare. Seventy gallons of fuel was available for days and nights of hard working.

Tents occupied the southern half of the islet with nests among sparse vegetation and a stench that had to be smelled to be believed. And did they squawk! The tents were set up therefore at the bare northern end about 100 yards apart on the flat-topped coral bank only a few feet above sea level, spots probably awash during cyclones.

Then the calls from an eventual 103 countries started pouring in and some 3,000 contacts were made in the first two days! Unlike expeditions in the past, two or three transmitters were operating simultaneously. Frequencies were re-set and were adhered to wherever possible to facilitate monitoring by Ws and VEs.

Trouble came on the second day, almost in darkness. The carburettor on the main generator fell off after a stud broke and VK9JW was off the air. Chaos! By torchlight they worked. The remaining stud was tightened and a hefty piece of copper wire inserted and twisted home. Then the power was on again and there were no more failures.

The average day started at 5 or 6 a.m. with contacts on 20 metres to Europe. Despite repeated requests, there were dogpiles all the time so that a total of only 400 to 500 Europeans was reached.

Breakfast was taken during a quiet time around 7 a.m. Roy then operated c.w. on 15 metres up to 4 p.m., though 20 metres was the band in the afternoon. Operators pulled out for lunch when they could or worked through.

Early afternoons were particularly good for South America and Mexico with 5 and 9 signals. Then came dinner.

Keith worked many JAs on 15 metres between 7 p.m. and 11 p.m., during which time the American phone band was also open with many Canadian and American contributors contacting him. Europeans were coming through as late as 1 a.m. with 5 and 9 signals on the last day.

Keith and John normally worked on the Swan; s.s.b. with George and Roy on c.w. George was heard around 3660 kHz. at 8 p.m. each night reporting to VK4 on the day's progress. As one operator got tired, another took over. Cooking (on a gas stove) and other chores by John and George, such as re-filling the generator regularly was not an easy job in the wind. But the excitements were on for 99 per cent. of the time.

Most contacts were made on 15 and 20 metres though there were some openings on 10 metres where about 500 to 600 contacts were made. Operating was of a very high standard and immediately stations got a report they would clear the frequency. There was no time for the operators to chat with friends. But reports indicated that the Mellish Reef expedition was the most well-organised DX-pedition yet heard.

Of course, Mellish was not all Amateur Radio, but partly a holiday and the operators had

their fun. The fishing had to be seen to be believed. Anything under 2½ or 3 ft. was thrown back and all stopped fishing when they realised the fish would only have to be left on the beach. A big coral trout caught on the first day provided so many meals they were almost sick of it! The water was so clear you could choose your variety. Keith caught a 5 ft. moray eel by dropping a line down its open mouth.

There were no health problems. Fresh water was limited so the operators were pretty dirty with a splash in the shallows the only safe bathing. Temperatures were decidedly tropical and operators merely wore shorts and took on mid-winter sunbans.

A south-east wind gusting to 28 knots caused some chaos. Have you ever tried working Europe when one end of the beam is in the sand? Coarse coral sand provided little anchorage for the pegs used for the beams and tents. Some hefty gannets perching on the beam elements did not help either! A wrecked Spanish galleon, some wrecked Japanese trawlers and shell collecting were other diversions.

The DX-pedition was recorded on scores of slides and 250 ft. of movie film.

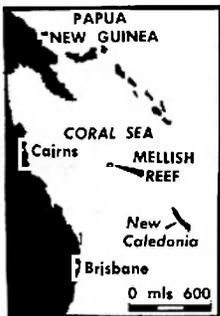
Too soon did the weather indicate it was time to leave Mellish. The honour of the last contact went to George who had done so much of the organisation and was with K8RTW at 1220z on the 19th. He called a KW8 about 1245z on Wednesday, July 19, to end almost a week of operation.

The party returned to Bundaberg safely on Sunday, July 23. When the logs were checked, all continents had been worked and a few rare African countries were among the list. The highlight had been the call from VK0CR. With not as much time as at Willis Island, twice as many calls were made. There had been no equipment failure and only 17 gallons of fuel for the generator remained.

For the operators, Mellish was the culmination of their Amateur Radio careers. In all, the DX-pedition was most successful and something Australian Amateurs can be proud of as a group.

Now John has the job of preparing the special QSL card. Be patient if you have to wait a while. Hundreds of QSLs are arriving for him daily.

When John is through, he hopes to get working on another DX-pedition still on the secret list!



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Write to: The Manager, P.O. Box 67, East Melbourne, Vic., 3002.

From left: John Martin, VK3JW; George Down, VK4XY; Keith Schleicher, VK4KS; and Roy Baxter, VK4EJ.



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