
Memoirs of Pierre D. Tromp ZS8M

21 May 2012

The joke amongst my family and friends is that my wife, **Louise ZS1ONI**, was instrumental in getting me out the house for a year, as it was a sign of something wrong in my marriage. When, it wasn't like that at all. Being deployed to either Gough or Marion Islands was a passion from as far back as 1986.

Responding to an advert placed by the Dept of Environmental Affairs in the Sunday Times, I applied for the position of Radio Technician for Gough Island. They told me they would prefer to have me take the position up on Marion Island as my commercial and military HF radio training and experience would be of better use.

I attended fire fighting, first aid and cooking classes with my new team members in March 2010, thereafter boarding the world famous SA Agulhas on 8 April 2010 bound for Marion Island. I would be the radio technician for the 67th Over Wintering Team 2010 / 2011 as well as be operating ZS8M for the next year.

The team consisted of 18 team members; medic, diesel mechanic, radio technician, three weather observers, two geologists, four seal experts, three bird experts, one engineer from HMO (now called the SA Space Agency), a gogga expert and a mouse expert. We gained a base engineer in November 2010 when we migrated to the new base, expanding out team now to 19.

I need to give credit to a fantastic team, successfully lead by our **Medic and Team Leader Simon Avis** and **Deputy Team Leader and Diesel Mechanic Vincent Rademeyer** for a job well done.

Some of these positions might raise an eye brow, but for interest sake the mouse expert is part of an intense program to gather information on the mice that have become a major problem on the island. The gogga (insects and bugs) expert was investigating the relationship of a certain insect that lives inside the Kerguelen Cabbage.

The trip to Marion was interesting, with lots of sea sickness and parties. On the second day into our trip one of the two engines packed up. Management decided to continue the trip and placed a tug on standby just in case we needed help. Luckily the remaining engine performed well and the ship returned to Cape Town 6 weeks later without incident. On the morning of the sixth day we awoke to the beautiful sight of Marion Island and penguins flying through the waves next to the ship.

For the next 4 weeks we were all involved in the massive logistical exercise of restocking the base with food, diesel, spares, medical supplies, etc. We also restocked the 9 over night huts that dotted the island. These huts are used by the field assistants and scientific staff while working away from the base.



We occupied the old base for the first six months before moving into the new base. The old base has served many over wintering teams for a number of years, but sadly has served her time and needed to be replaced with a new high tech base that can serve the new requirements for the next 30 or so years.

The SA Agulhas returned to Marion Island in September with a 60 man construction and maintenance team from the National Dept of Public Works (NDPW). The ship dropped them off with all their equipment and then returned to Cape Town. The NDPW team stayed until the middle of November before returning to Cape Town. Their task was to complete the new base which had been under construction for the last 5 or 6 years. Our team moved into the new base on 1 November 2010. The new base is a truly high tech base with laboratories, medical facilities, accommodation, workshops, etc for 110 people and kitchen facilities to support such a massive expedition. There is even a helicopter base that can safely house two helicopters inside a hanger, as well as all the crew and maintenance personal. This helicopter base also doubles up as the emergency base if the new base is compromised in any way. It is also equipped with a commercial HF radio, medical and accommodation facilities.

The main activities that take place on Marion Island are none other than weather observation, mammal and bird sciences. Other activities include upper atmosphere monitoring by HMO, geophysical sciences, as well as other disciplines funded by various universities from time to time.



Due to my extensive military and commercial HF training and experience, one of my main tasks was to replace and upgrade the existing HF radio system on the island. There are eight over night huts dotted around the coast which provide accommodation and shelter to the team members while on their work assignment. The ninth hut is located inland and is situated near the top of one the highest peaks. This is connected via a VHF radio back to the base. The coastal huts are linked to the base via HF. Sadly the DEA has appointed technicians who have little or no HF experience at all. In their defence, I must also add that radio technicians of today are either not trained in HF or are have virtually no experience in HF. So, the HF dilemma continued on the island with the blind leading the blind throughout the years. The existing HF system was literally on its last legs. The radios that were in use were Racal TR-48 man-pack HF radio. These have been withdrawn and replaced with modern commercial radios. Most of the problem lay with decent antennas, leadership and management from DEA side. When I was appointed it seems as if management was able to secure the correct funds and there was a new willingness to rectify the problems.

I settled for the Icom F7000 commercial radio and the Radiant Broadgun HF antenna. The lowest frequency on the standard Broadgun is 2.5MHz, but I was able to have the antenna modified by the manufacture and have the frequency extended all the way down to 1.8MHz. DEA use a selection of frequencies from 2 to 24MHz. The Broadgun was also upgraded to with stand higher wind speeds.

The radios were installed in plastic tote bins, complete with two 50Ahr batteries and a solar regulator. The batteries are charged via two 80 Watt solar panels and there is a Honda generator that can charge the batteries, as well as provide lighting to the hut when required.

Radio scheds are held twice a day to ensure that the external team members are safe, as well as to supply them with weather info.

I also maintained regular radio sheds with Cape Town Radio and the SA Air Force Radio Room at Silvermine. All telephone and data is carried via a satellite link to the offices of DEA, however it is also prone to interference from the weather. The Cape Town Radio HF link proved vital in re-establishing and resetting the satellite link.

We actually lost the services of the satellite link between Xmas and New Year, which gave me extra pleasure in passing messages via Cape Town Radio. Numerous radio amateurs also stood by and passed the odd message to the authorities when Cape Town Radio was unable or too busy to carry my traffic.

Apart from maintaining all the electronic communications on the island, which included the HF network, satellite link, computer network and audio visual system, I also had the opportunity to play radio. As you might be aware, Marion Island was rated as the 3rd most wanted country on the DXCC list in 2010.

The daunting task fell on my lap to be more popular than Osama Bin Laden! I was hunted on the bands day and night.

The call sign requested from ICASA was ZS8M and I also registered my Dxpedition with the DXCC desk in the USA. Approval was giving around about July 2010, so Marion Island was now legal and could be added to your DXCC approval.

Operating DX as a hunted call sign can be extremely daunting and frighting. Listening to some 100 hams all calling and trying to work ZS8 can be very intimidating, especially when you have no control over the frequency, but I learnt very quickly to master the art of DX. I have to give thanks to **JE1LET Masa** and **KH6CG Stan**, to name just two DXers who were able to help me via Skype and guide me. OM Masa would arrange the JA DXers for me in the afternoon and then hand over the frequency while I worked about 100 JA call signs in an afternoon. The JA operators are notorious for being the most professional and polity operators in the world, so believe me when I tell you this; they were a pleasure to operate.

Other operators I would like to credit for their help and support are **ZS1FH, ZS1LS, ZS1A, ZS1LF / ZD9GI, V51B, ZS1DDK, ZS3Y, SQ8X, ZS2CC, ZS2CX, RA3CQ, ZS6A, ZS6BUU, ZS4BS, NE8Z, ZS6P, N3DG, ZS6HA, N0UN, ZS1SR, ZS1L, ZS1SAM, ZS6WB, G3SVD, EB5BBM, EB7DX, MM0NDX, W3UR, JH1AJT, ZS4S, CT1EEB, C91IW, JF2MBF, 7K4DHB, K8UT, K3FGO, N4AA, N4BAA, NC1L, PE1NCP, DJ9ZB, DL9USA, EA5BZ, EA8AK, F8ATM, F8DHE, GI4FUM, IZ8MAX, N1DG, VE7BZ, VE3LYC, VE7WEB, VK3MO, VK7XX, VK7ZE, W4SO, WA2HMM, WA3SKQ, W3DF, WK3N, WX5L, ZL4PW**. The above list, and I am sure I might have missed someone, helped in some or other way to make the Dxpedition a memorable experience. Thanks!

My **QSL Manager** is **ZS1X Dirk**, who in my opinion did and still does a fantastic job. Thanks to **SteppIR**, **Icom (Multisource in South Africa)** and **Tigertronics** for their kind assistance and support.

I was only allowed to use the local broadband HF antenna at the base: no Yagi or additional dipoles were allowed to be installed. I was also not allowed to the IC-736 or the FL-7000 amp as I had to supply and use my own equipment. In fact, I sold the Dept this equipment in 1996. My equipment included an Icom IC-7000 and IC-7200. The IC-7000 was used mostly for digital modes.



One of my friends and former SA Air Force colleagues, **John ZS1LF**, applied and was accepted for Gough Island. Johan arrived on Gough Island about 4 months after I arrived on Marion Island. He operated as ZD9GI. John was the radio technician and team leader. Johan and I also made contact via AO-51, a first between these two islands.

Operating from Marion Island was an awesome experience. The DX bug has bitten me hard. Sadly quite a few EU operators black listed themselves after I expressly requested that they stop QRMing the frequency. I also identified a few QSL scams as well.

It seems that those hams who couldn't speak English would ask a friendly ham to 'pirate' their call sign on their behalf and secure the QSO so that they can claim the QSL card. Some of the scamsters admitted this scam to me via email after I confronted them. Sadly they blacklisted themselves.

Some of these blacklisted operators then put up a massive fight via email demanding that I remove them from the list. I even had an Italian threaten to have me arrested by Interpol. I am still waiting! I follow and practice the DX Code. Those who behave badly have no respect for their fellow DXers and should be blacklisted.

To my advantage I was able to collude with various non-QRMing operators via Skype and quickly QSY to a quiet frequency and conclude the required QSO's before the unruly QRMers arrived. Once they arrived I would Skype the group I was busy with to QSY to another frequency.

The Italian operators were the most aggressive, causing an intense QRM barrier that was so intense that many DXers from EU countries were blocked out. For the record, there are many Italian operators who were and remain professional operators, but the majority remain a problem. I do not rule out some operators from Russia and some from the former USSR countries. However, I was able to successfully dodge these bad operators and still log those you deserved to end up in my log. I received many emails from numerous DXers complaining and condemning the QRMers. All I can say is that they need to look at themselves and rectify their operating style as they are placing a serve strain on the entire DX community. In my mind bad operating practises have nothing to do with culture, just bad manners and disrespect for others. It is high time the international community do something about this, or our hobby will struggle to recover from being tarnished as a bunch of bad mannered old men. I even witnessed verbal abuse between different cultural groups like you could only expect from sailors when frustrations boiled over due to bad behaviour from certain EU operators.

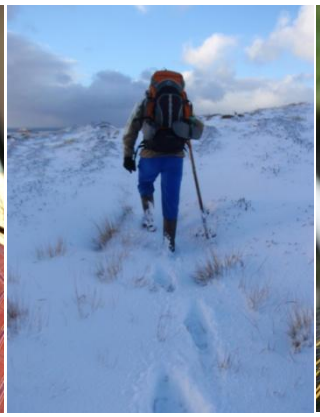
Over and above this, operating DX for the island was exciting. I made many friends, also receiving many emails with request for a contact. The greatest contact was from a 75 year old OM requesting a contact as ZS8 was his last required contact for his DXCC certificate. He had been waiting for 25 years for ZS8. Well, I can tell you that we arranged a 20m contact for the next day and successfully made the contact. I received a very emotional thank you via email.

I really enjoyed 40m DXing in the early mornings working into North and South America. My thanks go to **ZS3D Danie** for setting the standard and coaching me in the beginning.

There were times when I wasn't able to operate, like when the construction team was on the island. I also tried to keep a healthy balance between work and operating during quite periods and after work hours.

Considering the type of antenna I was allowed to use (a commercial broadband 6ALJ6), as well as the state of propagation, I was extremely lucky to be able to have worked all the stations I did, logging some 8500. Propagation made operating extremely difficult most of the time. No new antennas or any form of a Yagi was permitted as the island is bird friendly and any form of killing or damaging birds is prohibited.

I also marvelled at the digital modes, being able to work to the other side of the world on 10 watts PSK-31 was a real eye opener. There is an entire SSB, digital and CW community amongst our amateur radio community, let alone DX hunting and competition fanatics.


With South Africa being situated at the bottom of Africa, coupled to the largest amateur radio community in Africa, we certainly have a role to play in the international community.

We had two bad emergency situations when two separate team members did not report in at the required radio sched times. When this happens, certain reactions kick in and the members in base become aware of a pending emergency. The first incident was when a team member misjudged his timing and distance while walking from one hut to the other, only arriving at the hut way past midnight. He only reported in the following morning. By then the remaining team members at the base and members close the emergency area were ready to deploy and search for our friend. Luckily he was safe and unhurt. The second incident was when a member could not get the old TR-48 to switch on and then missed a radio sched. Luckily we were able to get a search team into the area quickly enough. The problem was thought to be flat batteries as we had experience many days of severe cloud cover.

I do come from a very strong **HAMNET** background. When these incidences happened, my training and experience kicked in and I was able to take the lead and help with planning and the execution of the search plan. This is no ordinary search and rescue as we only have radio contact with the huts when someone is actually at the huts. There is neither a repeater network nor cell phone network, only HF at the huts. Planning and clear communications between everyone is vital. If someone is injured and has to be evacuated, it's the hard way. The patient needs to be carried back to the base. The terrain is wet, uneven, rocky, etc. Safety is vital and radio communications is your only life line, hence the dedicated radio sched times.

There is no fashion on Marion Island. As you may notice, big beards are the norm. There are two reasons for not shaving; beards serve to keep the cold winds off your face and lastly, it is rumoured that before the days of emails returning islanders took great joy in seeing their loved walk right past them as they were unrecognisable.

Sadly, time came for me to stop operating as the new team arrived in April 2011. The base became over full once again and we had other tasks like help restock the base with food, diesel, etc.

The new team took over once we departed. Sadly two radio amateurs were on the island after me, but none were interested in the hobby.

We returned to Cape Town on 15 May 2011.