

Nightshift at BS7H 2007

By Joe Blackwell, AA4NN

It is 10:00pm local time as I sit here eating a Jiffy peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I have another sandwich of peanut butter and strawberry preserves that I will enjoy sometime around 4:00am. I'm on the night shift from Rock #1 at Scarborough Reef. I just finished a four hour run with Europe on 17 meter CW, and I thought it was time I took a break for some peanut butter. I feel guilty about taking short breaks, but my back and legs ache to the point where a few knee bends and back twists would surely ease the tension as I chew away on my sandwich.



Scarborough Reef, Rock #1 at high tide

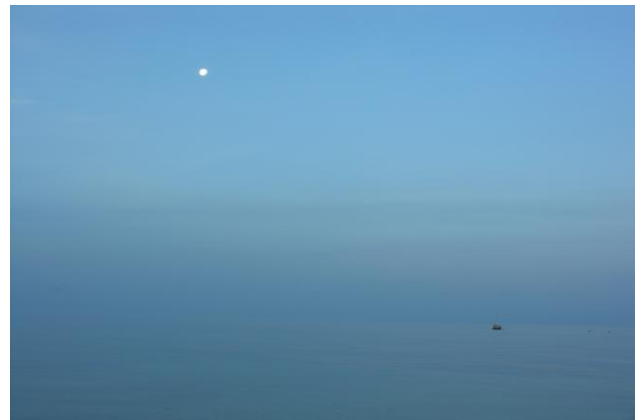
Night shifts from Scarborough begin around 5:00pm local and last until the relief dinghy arrives sometime around 7:00am the next day. That's quite a long haul, believe me. The early evening hour is necessary in order to complete the shift change while the tide is high enough to allow the dinghy to float up to the rocks. It never happens that easily, though, because the crewmen invariably must get into the coral laden sea to pull the boat those final few meters to the rock. At this time of day the sea is less than a half meter in depth, yet the coral is maybe 20 centimeters below the surface just enough to cause a drag on the dinghy. It is exhausting work for the crewmen.

The sun is still quite high at the beginning of the night shift. The bright sun makes it difficult to see the laptop screen and the display on the IC7000 radio. Later on our talented carpenter, Mr. Ko, BV6HJ, would build some plywood covers to shield the equipment from the elements. However, the shield will not be effective at Rock #1 because the evening sun is at such a low angle behind the right shoulder of the operator. I won't be looking at the radio dial very often anyway during the first hour or so since the JAs will dominate and you can tune just

about anywhere in the band to work them. Sunset comes quickly and the JAs fade away just as fast, signaling the beginning of the long European opening. The full moon will rise to eventually light up the entire reef area as it travels across the sky to disappear with the onset of sunrise.

In different areas around the reef there are always fishermen, two or three in small canoe-like crafts with outriggers. There is a larger boat moored at the reef which is home for these fishermen. Right now, though, two fishermen have drifted up to my rock and I am startled as I happened to see them over my left shoulder. I'm sure they mean no harm, but you never know. I give a quick wave of my hand and continue busily at the radio while exercising my peripheral vision toward the left. They soon become bored and drift away toward rock #2.

Our mother ship, Deep Blue, is quite visible in the moonlight although its mooring light certainly gives away her position. I can easily see Rock #4 and a speck of light from the desk lamp at Rock #3 further in the distance. In the opposite direction I can see the outline of Rock #2 and the pin point of light from the operator's desk lamp. It is an awesome sight in this lonely sea, and when the moon rises a bit more I will capture this scene with my digital camera.



Rock #4 under the moon.

The 17 meter pileup begins to die around 4:00am. Regularly throughout this European run I take short breaks to refuel the generator or take a snack or have a sandwich or just do some leg bends and body stretching. I wish I could walk a mile to loosen my legs and body muscles. My breaks are short and not so sweet since I am conscientious enough and feel the need to get back to the pileup. It is time to change to 30 meters according to my shift directive. Normally I am happy to work 30m because there is a different sound to the signals and the pileup covers over half the 30 meter band. Very often I must go to the top of the pile to get a good copy on a callsign. Let this be a hint to you DXers out there having trouble breaking through a pileup.

If wasn't long after I began operating on 30 meters that the wind began to pick up speed. It seems to do this every night with an estimated velocity of 25 to 30 miles per hour. The first time I experienced this wind I thought the operating surface would be lifted clear away from the platform. The oversized patio umbrella was lashed to a support post, and I could just imagine the lift created by the umbrella shape would literally pick up the operating surface and toss it and the equipment into the sea. It didn't, of course, but there was tremendous vibration of the operating surface with the laptop dancing around and the amplifier shaking until I became a bit concerned, not for myself so much as seeing our equipment going into the sea. The vibrations and noise from the flapping umbrella added to my anxiety, but maybe an hour later the wind died down and all was fine once again.



This is what shift change looked like with the crewman out in the sea pulling the dinghy over the coral. Deep Blue in background.

It is an eerie dawn appearing as the sun begins to replace the moon. I can clearly see the mother ship with the dinghy tied alongside, and there is no indication that it will leave anytime soon with operator replacements for the first shift of the day. The dinghy generally goes to Rock #3 first since it is the rock most distant from the mother ship. I must not pay attention to the actions of the dinghy because as they say "a watch pot never boils." It is best that I just concentrate on working the pileup and let the dinghy arrive whenever it will.

Once back on the mother ship I will have some fried eggs and toast, fresh coffee and a comfortable chair to rest my body. I know the shift schedule will show that I am again scheduled for the night shift coming up, but that's okay. I like working contests as single operator. This is my stint as single rock operator.

I can't say enough about Mr. Ko, BV6HJ, who was the man responsible for building the platforms and operating surfaces on each rock. He did not operate the radio on this DXpedition. I speak of Mr. Ko because it was in 2001 when I was on the team for

Pratas Island, BQ9P, that we made a side trip to Liu Chiu Island for a new IOTA, AS155. It was Mr. Ko at that time who was responsible for assembling all the antennas. Meeting him again six years later was a real pleasure. Mr. Ko speaks little English, but we still renewed our old acquaintance assisted by Mr. Fan, BA1RB who is very fluent in English. I found a 6 inch length of wood one inch square left over from the platform materials and carved two interlocking chain links from it. On one link I inscribed BV6HJ, and on the other link, AA4NN. Friends forever!



AA4NN and BV6HJ sharing a linked chain of Friendship.

I learned later that Martti, OH2BH, had an encounter with three Filipino fishermen who actually boarded his rock! Such incidents do not make one feel comfortable while riding the dinghy to a rock for another night shift.

Max, I8NHJ, and I were picked to run the first shift of the DXpedition. A coin toss gave me the dubious honor to transmit the first signals from BS7H. The pileup was waiting as evidenced by those callsigns being thrown out there between short tuning cycles of me loading up the amplifier. Then finally the moment arrived. I simply sent "DE BS7H UP" and there began the mayhem. Incredibly awesome. The pile stretched over 60 KHz wide with those strong signals you love to hear. Finally I turn it over to Max who worked SSB where the pile was equally tremendous. Not being a SSB person, I was overwhelmed at the way Max worked that pileup. By shift's end we had logged something like 1500 Qs.

It was that selfish streak in me that wanted to work the last Saturday night shift to finally send the QRT message to the world on our Sunday morning. James, our scheduler, had other ideas, though. He thought he was doing me an earned favor by sparing me another grueling night shift. I didn't protest. I didn't beg for the shift. Reluctantly, I headed toward the refrigerator for a cool one.