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Financing VP8ORK

Behind the scenes of that rare DXpedition contact are many significant costs.

Don Greenbaum, N1DG

Many articles (see the Microlite Penguins DXpedition Team, VP8ORK, story, "South of Sixty South," elsewhere in this issue) cover the many facets involved in going on or working a DXpedition. Yet few go into financing one. The most popular questions I get when making DXpedition presentations concern the financial aspects of running a major expedition like VP8ORK.

Financial Transparency

Expeditions have a responsibility to release their financial records. Some do, some don't. Perhaps if more groups did more disclosure, the DX audience would know the difficulty in financing a major operation and why trips to remote places need more support than those that visit places with hotels and regularly scheduled airline service.

Planning and the Budget

In early 2010, we learned that an experienced Antarctic vessel, *Braveheart* (see Figure 1), would be in the South Atlantic in January 2011. James Brooks, 9V1YC, took the reins and immediately notified members of past Antarctic and environmentally sensitive location DXpeditions. A team was quickly found and we started formulating a budget. By May, 2010 our quotes for most items were in and the budget was approximately \$300,000. Four factors drove the costs:

- Travel to the Antarctic is dangerous and

the vessel and crew must be experienced.

- The local environment is hostile (weather) so shelters must be wind and water resistant.
- The team required reliable power, reliable radios and sturdy antennas (see Figure 2).
- Chile and Argentina are a monopoly as gateways to the South Atlantic.

The most experienced DX vessel in the world is the *Braveheart* out of New Zealand having served 10 award-winning DXpeditions including ZL9CI, VP6DX, VP8THU, VP8GEO and ZL8X. This is a crew who knows the difference between a balun and a balloon. A price was agreed (in New Zealand dollars), which at the time translated to US \$227,000 and was contingent on the price of oil remaining below \$70 per barrel. The dollar fell for all of the ensuing year after we signed the boat charter and oil steadily rose to well over the \$70 per barrel target. The final cost for *Braveheart* came to \$244,800.

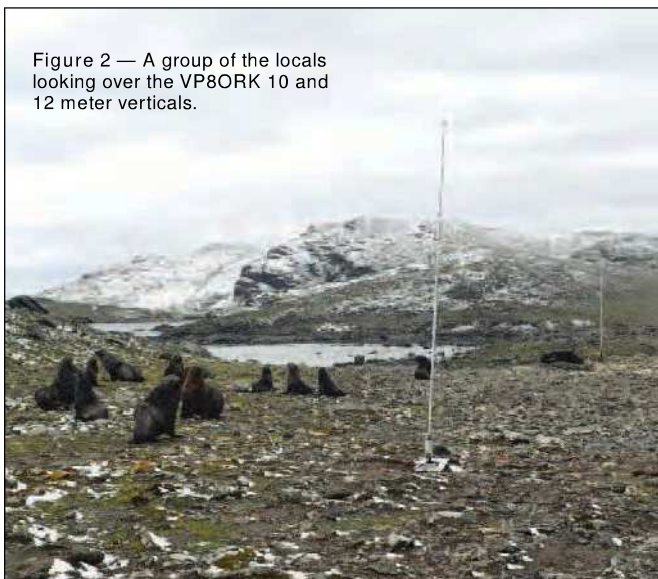


Figure 2 — A group of the locals looking over the VP8ORK 10 and 12 meter verticals.

The hostile environment meant securing proper tents and a way to supply heat to them. We decided on two Weatherport brand shelters and lumber to construct wooden floors and bases. The tents (see Figure 3), lumber, heaters and insulation were budgeted at \$12,500. The budget for heating the tents was \$700.

Our equipment budget was small. We owned our computers and borrowed all our radios, amplifiers, interfaces and our low band antennas. DX Engineering donated HF verticals and Primus donated coax.

Generators were purchased in New Zealand and the budget, including gasoline for them, came to \$8300. Shipping to Argentina and back was budgeted at \$12,000. The port fee estimates from Argentina were \$18,000.

In advance of our trip, we hired a local shipping agent (referred by our US shipper) to handle the Argentine port affairs. To our surprise, after arriv-



Figure 1 – The MV *Braveheart* amid the rugged seascape off Signy Island.

ing in Ushuaia and loading our ship we were astonished to find bills from the port considerably in excess of our prepayments. For starters, instead of a pilot requirement from just outside the port, now they forced us to use a pilot all the way from the bottom of the Beagle Channel, Puerto Montt, Chile. The bill each way was \$4400 and each trip required a pilot twice (up and down the Channel). They also nickel and dimed us on all sorts of charges. The final Ushuaia port fees exceeded \$35,000!

Lastly, an item we had in the budget might surprise you. PayPal is an easy but expensive way to collect money. VP8ORK paid over \$3500 in PayPal fees.

In total, almost \$350,000 was spent to bring the South Orkney Islands on the air. We made close to 64,000 contacts. The cost of providing each contact with VP8ORK was \$5.50.

Fundraising

Most large scale DXpeditions rely on raising the bulk of their money from the teams. Each of the 13 VP8ORK team members ultimately contributed \$13,000 to the effort to bring a new one to the DX community. This constituted almost 60% of the budget. This excludes the airfare and hotels to and in Argentina and cold weather gear each member purchased. To fund the rest of the trip we approached foundations, clubs and individuals. Shortly after we announced our plans to activate VP8ORK, our fundraising began in earnest. By the time we left for Argentina we had raised approximately \$80,000 from foundations and clubs, and another \$20,000 from individuals. Significant QSL income was needed to fill the gap.

QSL Income

The final courtesy of a contact is the QSL. It is primarily through the request of QSLs that we had hoped the final gap in our budget would be covered. We set up two QSL routes, an Online QSL Request System

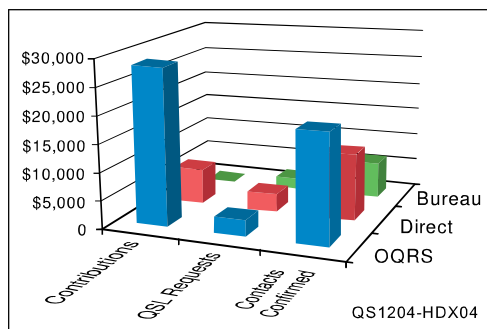


Figure 4 – This diagram shows the amount of contributions, number of QSL requests and confirmed contacts for the various QSLing methods used.

(OQRS) for direct and bureau requests, and a direct route via Garry Hammond, VE3XN, the longtime Microlite Penguins QSL manager. Alfio Bonanno, IT9EJW, printed our cards for free but the card shipping, envelopes, labels and postage came to over \$5000.

Gross income for those requests via OQRS amounted to \$28,500 (\$9.25 average per call sign request, not contact) and via VE3XN \$6500 (\$2 average per request). Clearly, OQRS is a winner for teams in financing DXpeditions. The North Americans have embraced this method while more participation is needed from the rest of the world. As of September 30, 2011 we have answered direct requests from 3095 OQRS and 3290 direct stations representing 32,034 contacts or an average of 5 contacts per request.

Lastly, to fulfill a bureau QSL request there is a cost of approximately 8 cents per card in shipping and postage to and from the bureau. LoTW should be used if you don't want a direct QSL. It costs the team nothing additional to confirm your contact that way. There are 2000 bureau requests pending in the OQRS system (80% non NA) so far.

Support by Continent

Where did our support come from (see Figure 4)? Of the \$86,000 in foundation and club support, 86% came from North America, 13% from Europe and 1% from Asia. Of the \$54,000 from individual donations before and after the DXpedition (includes all QSL monies), 61% came from North America, 32% from Europe and 6% from Asia. So, in total, North America contributed 76%, Europe 20% and Asia 3%.

The totals in terms of stations worked: North America 36%, Europe 50% and

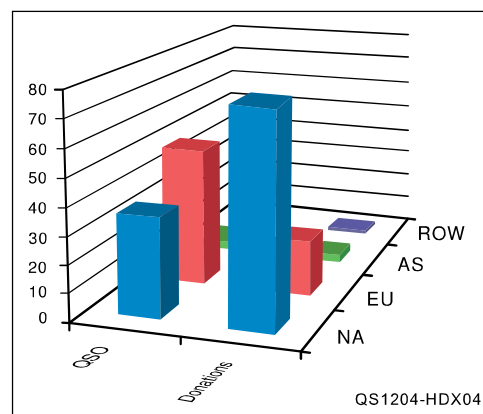


Figure 5 – This diagram shows the number of contacts and donations as a percentage of the total by continent.

Asia 5%. Oceania, Africa and South America accounted for 9% of the stations worked and 1% of the donations (see Figure 5).

Where Do We Go Next?

Financing a major DXpedition to a remote location takes a major effort and requires the support of the DX Community. There will always be some hams who can take a month away from home, endure a 2 week voyage in the most dangerous oceans of the world and operate the pileup for an additional 10 days. But with the price of this climbing to \$13,000 per person plus airfare and foul weather gear there is a limit to the funding a team can contribute. We are going to have to be more creative on these trips. Can we bring in corporate sponsors? Can we do more partnering with scientific expeditions to remote locations?

Photos by Don Greenbaum, N1DG.

Don Greenbaum, N1DG, an ARRL member, first became licensed as WN2DND at age 11 in 1962. In 1996 he changed his call from WB2DND to N1DG. An active DXer and contester, his Challenge total is just a few short of 3000. Don has been on several major DXpeditions including VP8ORK, K4M and A52A. In 2005 Don was inducted into the CQ DX Hall of Fame. He is treasurer and a director of the Northern California DX Foundation. Don can be reached at 27 Pill Hill Ln, Duxbury, MA 02332-5007, don@aurumtel.com.



Figure 3 – The two VP8ORK tents at the uninviting South Orkney Island camp.