

Coral Sea Adventure VK9MAV

Andrey Mikhaylov VK5MAV

"It was smooth on paper - but forgot about ravines"

The Marion Reef attracted my attention as the goal of a possible next expedition around May 2016, between the return from Breaksea Island OC-243 and the difficult expedition to Viney Island OC-266. By the way, I constantly have 2-3 islands in my plans. And now I... but I would better keep silence, for a while.

A slow gathering of information began, which, due to the remoteness of the reef and its location away from the main shipping routes, was surprisingly small.

First, of course, there were two questions - how to get there and how, after arrival camp there for several days legally?

The first results provided by Google, pleased - at least 10 different tours to Marion - for anglers, divers. But a more detailed study and numerous phone calls showed that everything is not easy at all. The vast majority of sites contained outdated information - in fact, the companies advertised were carried out last tour to Marion 5-7-10 years ago and new ones were not planned.

Realizing that there are no options, I began to work out options for delivery by helicopter or seaplane. However, I realized from the very beginning the cost will be very high - and was wrong. Real cost were 5-6 times more than expected, so this option has disappeared after 3-4 phone calls. There were no options at all (in my price category, because if I could pay \$ 30-40K, It's not a problem to charter a ship).

At the same time, I walked a bit in the bureaucratic loops, trying to understand which government department is responsible for managing Marion. After several repeatable loops, around October 2016, the situation cleared up, I've got application papers. As usual with one "but" - the application must include the name and data of the vessel.

After that, the search for the vessel began with a tripled energy (all this during the preparation/operation of OC-266 and after it). Unfortunately, everything was in vain. There were no tours ... Until then, from hopelessness, I did start to pay attention to unloved Internet resources. It was right decision.

Facebook and registration in all sorts of local groups around Queensland Coast, from where even theoretically ships may go the area, brought the result. Bingo! The local people told me that there is a ship called "Norval", which specializes in trips to Marion mainly. They provided me with the site's URL (then it was somewhere on the 7-8 page of Google search results, but thanks to me, I believe, moved much higher now). Inspired, I

contacted Ron Murphy, the owner of the ship, and he confirmed everything. My happiness was great. It was possible to begin filing an application for access and stay at Marion Reef.

And so, on December 19, 2016, just before Christmas, the long-awaited permission arrived to my mailbox electronically and week later as paperwork. And in it, although I asked for Marion only, Diamond Islands were too (thank you, personally unknown to me, officer of the department)! The permit was containing another Island as well, but it was not in plans. The permit was issued by the end of June (important).

We agreed with Ron Murphy that the best time for my trip is the end of May - June 2017.

When Christmas and New Year Holidays passed by, I started technical preparation for the expedition. The transceiver was sent to the ICOM (Melbourne) office to repair everything that theoretically could break and for tuning/adjustments. Antennas have been installed in the backyard, tested and packed - 3 el VDA for 20 m, and GP for 40 m. Pelican boxes for transportation have been purchased. The Honda EU-20i generator has been purchased and severely tested. The N1MM + software, all sorts of equipment manuals, propagation forecasts and so on are copied to a laptop. All software is separately recorded on a flash drive. Annual leave had been requested and approved. From now - just wait...

But it was extremely difficult to wait. On March 26th, all news channels were filled up with forecasts that Debby cyclone (the strongest in the last 2 years, officially the category 4 out of 5, the wind speed reached 300 km / h) was born just in the Marion Reef area and instead of vanish peacefully over the ocean, it intensifies and goes to the coast of Queensland.

The cyclone was slowly approaching and, according to all forecasts, prepared to reach the coast near the town of Airlie Beach, where Norval stood at local marina. Finally, on March 28th, the cyclone reached the continent. Forecasts of meteorologists, alas, were real. The cyclone came in with a front about 200 km from the center situated exactly at Airlie Beach. Huge part of Airlie Beach was swiped out and ruined. No info came from Norval owner and I wasn't able to contact him - in the vicinity there were no electricity, communication, water, no access - roads were destroyed and flooded.

Finally in the first days of April, Ron wrote on Facebook that just the day before the cyclone hit, he managed to take the ship to Gladstone. Although the cyclone also hit it well, a dinghy was torn off and carried

away, the electric and communication equipment flooded with water and other, smaller problems. And again - waiting.



That's what the harbor looked like before and after the cyclone.

In late May, skipper Pete on the phone confirmed that we leave on June 9th. Suddenly, quite by accident, it turns out in the conversation that I do not need to fly to Gladstone, but to Mackay, where the ship was again overtaken to. I book tickets for Mackay on 8/06 and back for 19/06, overnight stay at the hotel on the way there and back, insurance for the trip, sent a generator and Pelican ca with antennas to Mackay to the hotel address via courier, got approval of annual leave at work. In the first days of June, Norval made a test trip to Marion. Again a failure did happen, one more dinghy was lost, a remote beam was torn off, and an anchor was lost - a storm. And the most unpleasant issue was that the problems with the gearbox started - it's warming up, chasing the oil, not all gears can be switched to. The gearbox needs a replacement.

Ron called me and notified that the trip is postponed to June 16. Immediately, with fines I re-booked flights and the hotel - the administrator kindly agreed to keep my boxes. I did hardly explain the situation to my boss at work with annual leave dates moved again.

I perfectly understand that my calls wouldn't help at all, but I wasn't able to stop myself - I did call Ron every 3 days.

OK, now it seems to be all right, I'm flying out on the 15th early morning. But the night before the flight Ron wrote short message on his page - not addressed directly to me, but it didn't let me sleep well before flight - the ship is not ready and fix will take a few more days.

In mixed feelings and anxiety at 6 am I was flying out of Adelaide on 15th of June. 2.5 hours flight to Brisbane, where another flight to Mackay was waiting. At Brisbane stopover (1.5 hours), I've decided to go out for a smoke. I turn on the phone - a voice message from the Norval skipper was sent to me 40 mins ago. The ship is not ready, how many days it will take - it's not known. I call Pete, the skipper, he said he doesn't have a clue - call Ron. Ron's phone is off. In complete confusion I get back to the airport to pass security - and suddenly get stuck. The young security girl started to ask questions about purpose of the iambic paddle. Ham radio and Morse code didn't tell her anything and she took it away somewhere. However, the transceiver and numerous cables in the same backpack did not attract any interest. After 15 minutes I was let to go - but, as I understand, somewhere in the security system the "bell" rang. But I understood it only afterwards. In the meantime, another 1.5 hours of flight to Mackay, full of thoughts about revenge ...

Mackay Airport, taxi, hotel, Ron's phone is still unavailable. I'm in the fuse, throwing things in the room and starting to call and run around for any boat companies and the marina administration in search of at least some kind of replacement or passing boat. Everything

is in vain ... Closer to the evening, Ron's phone finally responded and he confirms that everything has been fixed and we still leave on the 16th at about lunch time. Exhausted, I finally took a shower and fall asleep.

On the next morning Ron explained where Norval is moored at the marina.



I find the boat easily, get acquainted, agreed when they take my boxes from the hotel. Pete, the skipper, who didn't want to answer my questions, it turns out, was already fired at that moment. Instead of him - Chris. For me - it was a huge luck. Thanks to his tips, huge help and participation it everything – he did make the expedition real.



During this time, Norval moved to another pier to fill fuel tanks. At the same time, I bought jerry cans and filled them with 120 litres of petrol for the generator. Then, on the way, they throw me into a shopping center, where I buy water, food, cigarettes and folding chair/table. At the same time work on Norval is still going on - in particular, attaching a new anchor. On the left is Ron Murphy, the owner of Norval.

We leave closer to the evening. After about 4 hours (the cruising speed of Norval is 20 knots) we are at the first of many Whitsundays Islands OC-160. Guys quickly throw me ashore, did help to install the dipole and I tried to start working. Only light source I used to have was a headlamp flashlight.

Very cold, very humid, windy weather. 5 minutes - and all boxes are covered with a layer of water - I had to cover myself and the equipment with a big piece of plastic. I was very much afraid that there would be a short circuit and the expedition would end there. No propagation on 40 or 20 m band. Nowhere. Nothing. Nada. After roughly 40 minutes of CQ with no response, I hardly manage to make the first (and the only one in this attempt) QSO with A65CA. His CW signal was below noise level but we both confirmed the QSO. Again, long CQ with no response for another hour. The air was crackling, hissing, and I even can't hear usual Chinese broadcasters or fishermen. Suddenly a dinghy from Norval came out of darkness - we forgot two more fishermen in Mackay, belatedly with arrival, and we return. The night sleep at the boat passed with no dreams.

The early morning begins unexpectedly - a call to Ron, after which he beckons me with the words "here someone is interested in your hobby." I took the phone and ... remember the "bell" at the airport security? "Good morning, this is the police sergeant at Mackay ... we have information that you brought the communication equipment to Mackay and are going to Marion ... Please confirm your name and date of birth ... and why ... why ... VK9MAV – is it your callsign? Here I am on your page ... no. It's all right. I'll probably come up. Where is the boat at the marina?" But he did not come - and I do not regret.

As Ron later told me, similar things did happen to Norval a couple of years ago, but everything was more serious. It was under surveillance. As it turned out, Marion was (and, probably, still is) one of the famous drug trafficking points to Australia. And that's why everyone who shows interest in Marion Reef attracts attention himself.

In the morning I also meet the crew. The skipper is Chris. Cook and deck sailor - Frostie. Surprisingly bright personality, very friendly, helping and just a nice hippie. Immediately, a conversation is fastened (or rather his monologue about the Nibiru planet, secrets of Egyptian civilization, Armageddon and the survival of mankind ...)

An additional turmoil begins. Additional food delivered. It turned out that they didn't take enough beer. Fixed.

Well, it seems like all done finally – and we left the marina closer to 6 pm, June 17, Saturday. 12 anglers of all ages and physical conditions, I, Ron - owner, Chris - skipper, Frostie - cook/deck sailor and another sailor - alas, the name has faded from memory. Anglers began to celebrate the beginning of the tour with free beer immediately.



From the moment of sailing I was sitting at the Norval's bow, imagining how I will work, planning and dreaming. So almost 2 hours passed, the night was completely dark, Mackay's lights disappeared, only a light spot over the horizon could still be seen.

Suddenly I noticed that people began to somehow randomly move around the ship, and it itself slowed down very much and began to somehow uncertainly scour the course.

As it turned out, the already repaired gearbox began to heat up again, spitting with oil. And besides, we started taking water a little by little. A slight panic - but, unfortunately, the consequences for me personally were not so easy. In the chaotic movement of passengers on the ship, my backpack, in which the headset was located, was dropped and repeatedly passed through it. As a result, ALL QSOs from both islands, all 4.5 thousand, were made to the internal speaker-pincher of the transceiver. It was not easy in the pileups, especially with constant wind noise. I would never have believed that this is possible - I tried to work like that a couple of times before. It's a perversion.

However, everything ended more or less well. Particularly nervous passengers were offered the evacuation to Mackay on 2 dinghy attached to the stern, but all refused. Slowly and hesitantly, at a speed of 5 knots, we reached Mackay well over midnight.

This entire time situation on the ship was uneasy. A large amount of already consumed beer, collapsed plans and incurred costs almost provoked the riots, but more reasoned cold minds helped to cope with this. All that time I was sitting again at the bow and repeating one phrase "That's all ...". I didn't have any other thoughts on my mind. There was no anger, just a cold calm.

In Mackay Norval moored back at the same place where he left a few hours ago, anglers fell asleep in the cabins. Only me, Ron and Chris with Frostie wandered about the ship in anguish. However, Chris and Frostie on the motorboat gone to a bar, they persistently invited

me to go with them. But I try not to drink at all in expeditions and refused. Tried to go to bed - it was useless, sleep did not come.

After 2 hours, Chris and Frostie returned, reasoning sensibly that everything is expensive at a bar, and Norval has beer reserves almost untouched. And since the trip is canceled - no one needs them. They invited me again - there was nothing else to do, and we came upstairs to a small upper deck, sat down there.

This was a good remedy for melancholy - drinking beer, Frostie played acoustic guitar (he writes lyrics and music himself, quite professionally), we shouted songs to the whole harbor, spoke for life. I didn't have a jam-session with a live guitar for last 30 years.

The guys asked me again and again about ham radio, there were some relatives and friends who also have the same hobby. They tried to understand how important it is for me to have plans of the expedition totally crashed. And so, when time came closer to dawn, Chris asked me a simple and obvious question that changed everything ...

"We'll go, we'll rush on deer in the morning early"
(One of popular Soviet songs in 1970s)

And so, when it was already beginning to dawn, Chris asked me a simple and obvious question that changed everything ...

"The Norval trip did not take place. He is now being amended for 2 weeks or more. All your plans and dreams have collapsed. And you don't have too much time - the permits ends on 30th of June. But think out-of-the-box. All the tourist marine business in this area is held not only by Norval. Many ships go to the area not only for fishing. Divers, researchers. Ron is not you, he's been in this business for more than 20 years, and he has friends and colleagues. Did you ask Ron to find out if anyone was coming to the area soon? "

The question was acknowledged by all those present to be reasonable, but postponed until the morning - Ron's day and night were too hard to wake him up. Moreover, I myself saw that he is going through not only because of financial losses, but also because of me.

The end of our talks had a beneficial effect on me, and even a sleep came at once. Not for long, only for 2 hours, but when I crawled upstairs (sleeping places - under the deck), Ron was already there, preparing the boat for repair.

Immediately after my question asked, he reached for the phone. I, trying to not frighten off my luck, went to the deck, where Chris and Frostie, absolutely fresh, were engaged in bringing unlucky anglers from the harbor to the shore by a motor boat.

In less than 15 minutes, Ron came to me and, smiling, said: "There's my friend's mother-ship is moored near Diamond Islets at present time. There is a large group of divers. He needs to get some goods delivered and Norval had to bring them. You understand that Norval for a long time will not go anywhere, but he needs the cargo. So I decided to send a speed boat. If you want, you can go with them. Go out now. But there is no comfort there at all. The trip will take 7-8 hours. The weather forecast is excellent. Not Marion reef, but you will be happy with Diamonds as well, won't you? "

To say that I was dumbfounded is not to say anything. This does not happen. But - it is necessary to jump now and here. It's good that all the things were not unpacked (I did not know about the headset yet). Chris and Frostie immediately threw them into the boat. A small boat, a cruising speed of 40 knots, but can do up to 50. The official name is "South Wind", but above was the unofficial "Wet Hooker".



Quickly poured a breakfast prepared by Frostie, I, accompanied by the same guys Frostie and Chris, jumped aboard. As it turned out, they are going go with me. Anyway they had nothing to do on the Norval, until the mechanics came in to repair the box. It was about 8 am. And we rushed away ...



Chris is at handwheel, to the right of me is Frostie's turban. Chris (and Frostie, who succeeded him) stood at the handwheel all the way, I was sitting on the locker in front of the windshield (later, much later, good memories of a comfortable locker will bounce into me, and very much).

We were rushing almost non-stop, only a couple of times the engine was stopped to refill the fuel tank. The weather was really excellent; visibility was "one million" and virtually no waves. I still have the impression that I even had a nap a couple of times (though, without unclenching hands on the handrails for a second). To talk, alas, there was no possibility - a powerful engine roared so loud that the noise was continuing for a couple of hours when arrived.

The first thing I was thrown to the nearest island and helped to transfer the whole cargo (especially when they saw how amusing I am limping - alas, the consequences of doing sports 30 years ago), and then they left to pass the goods.



Worried, first of all I rushed to unpack, connect and switch on the electronics - I was very afraid that boxes could not stand the trip. Hurray - the generator was wound up at once; everything else was also lit up. Only task remained was to put up antennas. Alas - at this point I learned that I no longer have the headset and will have to work with the internal speaker of the transceiver and CW only.

By the way - I got the royal conditions there. On the island was a canopy with a huge and a rainwater tank. As it turned out later, the Queensland government, through a special program, installed similar amenities on many islands where camping is allowed. But in this case - perhaps it was not built by the government, but by companies whose ships use Diamonds as a shelter in case of bad weather.

Frostie and Chris returned soon, got rid of the cargo and bringing me more food, which, in their opinion, was absolutely necessary for me, since I did not take it enough. In my terms - it was enough. For 6 days - 8 cans of canned sausages, 4 cans of tuna, several packets of

crackers, 2 large chocolate bars, tea, coffee and 20 litres of water.



But they brought two more 2-liter canisters of milk, a kilo of smoked chopped bacon, a couple of loaves of bread and a box of Coke cans. Unfortunately, I did not have a refrigerator and the milk stood peacefully, sour, until some time. I conscientiously ate bacon for two days, and then, in order to avoid poisoning, I threw it into a large plastic bag, where I collected all the garbage.

They also brought a few cans of beer and salads (but this is more for themselves, before going back to Mackay). We celebrate the arrival and I was left alone. Chris on the left - sits, Frostie lies.

Ok, now is a time to put antennas up. The beach, as seen in the previous photo, is great and has a lot of space. But the antennas could not be erected too far away, and they stood on the edge of the beach, a meter from the shore. Cables were not too long - I took 30 metres ones. But as it turned out - this was for the best.



40 m GP got up easily within an hour, with 8 counterweights in a circle. Unfortunately, the installation of 20

m VDA took longer time, may be 3 times more, because of the inconvenience of installing alone and a strong permanent wind, besides constantly changing direction. During installation, the antenna fell several times, but eventually got up and fixed with plastic (important) anchors. It was already an evening, the tide started already and water level began to come up slowly and imperceptibly.



Compare with the photo above – it was taken from the same point.

The bands were empty, alas. Both 40 m and 20 m. And it was not the antennas that were to blame for this. VSWR for VDA was 1.4, for GP - 1.1. Only thing to do was to wait.

Approximately at 6.30 UT the 40 m band began to open. First Chinese broadcasters and all other sound garbage became to be heard. Long CQs did not bring back any response, but at 7.17 UT - the first QSO with VK3GA happen !. Then another couple of Australian stations - and RA0FF, then K6VVA after. The band was alive! Approximately up to 8 UT the work went so-so - one QSO in 3-4 minutes. But then, apparently, Japan opened and rushed! All in the heap - the US, Japan, Russia, Europe ... The rate reached 4-5 QSOs per minute. The pile-up was lasting until 13 UT, when I broke down and went to sleep right on the table (on the first day I did not put the tent).

I tried not to stretch the pile-up too wide, the main operation was 1 UP. Although there were operators who called DOWN almost at my frequency. First of all, alas, I had to answer Big-Guns calling in the chaos, since they blocked everyone. Then pass through the pile-up answering to those whom I can distinguish and the selection of quieter stations along the edges. I repent, sometimes I answered those who was DOWN, but to

people familiar, so as not to teach the rest to the bad ☺. Almost all noted that I was passing through 40 m loudly - believe me, you all passed as well as local stations practically.

However, it wasn't possible to sleep for a long time - very cold weather (around 14C) and mosquitoes (this is a separate story). So at 17 UT, I again sat down behind the transceiver and all continued - but now 99% of all QSOs - Europe. The same pace was maintained until 20.30 UT, when I realized again that callsigns were no longer perceived by me. I rang Larisa by satellite phone to calm her down and say that I'm all right. Alas, I could only call from 2 to 4 am local time on all days on the island. The rest of the time, the satellite, hanging over Singapore, dropped calls, or was busy, or 90% of the packets were lost and a gibbering gruel appeared. In addition, I constantly exchanged SMS with Andrew EU7A, who voluntarily took over the duties of the pilot, for which I am very grateful. But even SMS sent through were short, not more than a couple of lines - everything else were lost.

I slept again on the table - I did not want to put up the tent at night. But besides that it's cold, it was also very humid. Many thanks to Larisa, who insisted that I take an electric blanket with me. Otherwise, it would be quite uncomfortable.

I slept for a couple of hours. Slowly opened my eyes, the portable electric boiler did make hot water for a cup of coffee (again thanks to Larissa), and only then, accidentally glancing towards the sea, I understood - I have problems. And they are huge.

And routine days by days ...

I slept for a couple of hours and opened my eyes with difficulty. The electric boiler boiled water (again thanks to Larisa), drank coffee and only then, accidentally glancing towards the sea, I understood - I have problems. And big problems.

Perhaps not so big - but so far completely incomprehensible. When was going to bed, I instinctively checked the condition of the antennas - suddenly VDA, still not used because of the lack of propagation on 20 m band, suddenly indicated VSWR about 1:3, and it was constantly changing smoothly. But, deciding that any movements in total darkness are useless (the only source of light I had was a headlamp, discharging every 2 hours, and then there was only a glowing laptop screen), I postponed the clarification for the morning. And in the morning after short glance towards the sea - and much became clear, and something - even more incomprehensible.

VDA wasn't visible, but the GP was leaning. Coming closer to the water edge, I saw that the VDA, strangely changing its shape, peacefully floats slightly to the side, kept from going to seas by the cable. GP stood "on an honest word." It's radials were formed a cobweb with supporting ropes and partially wound around the base.



Plastic anchors lay loosely on the sand, rolling by waves - not all. One of them was on the branches of a tree ☺. How I worked last night - it was completely unclear.

As it turned out, the high tide almost reached the roots of the trees on the shore and my chair, stopping in centimetres from the feedpoint.

The water had already started to go away, and when VDA was pulled closer to the shore, I realized that I would have to do something different. Falling, the antenna stuck into the sand and the central cross collapsed into pieces. Of course, I could try to find some branches and use the magic "blue isolation tape" ☺ to attach the remains. But remembering how I put the VDA up yesterday, and having not a clue how I will install a now loosely wobbling design - I refrained from thinking about the restoration. Reinstalling the GP, I tried to drive anchors as deep as possible into the sand (as demonstrated the next morning, this did not help) and moved the radials so that they did not go off to the sea. As a result, I got a narrow "eight" formed by radials, 4 to each side, stretched almost parallel to the shore and the ground. The next night the water rose and stood, completely covering the radials, all the time while the propagation lasted for 40 m. Perhaps this is the cause of the mystically loud signals.

All those tasks took several hours, and since I have no 20 m band antenna temporarily I decided to continue on 40 m. Later I just took the central element of the VDA and pulled it onto the mast as Inverted V. As the following days demonstrated - on 20 m band I was heard at least 2 S points weaker, but alas.

While there was no propagation, I set up a tent. Initially, I was supposed to work from it. But the canopy was much more convenient. The tent doesn't save from mozzies, the air inside isn't warmer because of the large ventilation slots at the top. And most importantly - the spiders are looking for quiet places, where a lot of flying food is available. And that flying food is attracted by a larger pile of food - by me.

Below one of the visitors, seen by me, when I fell asleep - I just said "hello" to him automatically and turned off without experiencing anything. Apparently, he took it as a manifestation of cordiality and stayed for longer. The size is slightly less than the palm of my hand.



And besides, because of a constant wind of 20-30 km / hour with every minute gusts up to 50-60 km / hour the tent constantly "breathed". The difference between the photos is 1 minute.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to install the tent properly - because of very little space; I had to tie the ropes to the canopy, bushes and the tank, leaving a 30 cm passage. Although it seems that the space is enough, in fact it is a very tiny oasis with trees, bounded by small mounds, where there is a canopy and a rainwater tank. Further around - only bushes.



On June 19, at 06.46 UT, the pile-up of the previous night continued, again at 40 m and lasted until 13.00 UT without interruptions. Japan, USA, Canada, Mexico ... Of course, there were small breaks - to make coffee, to re-fill the generator, to smoke and yell insulting words to some visitors of the air zoo ☺. Then, after a 2-hour break, at 15 UT the propagation was opened to the Asian part of Russia, and then to the European part and Ukraine. All those calling stations were diluted by signals from Japanese stations, but at 21 UT the band closed. I could still hear individual signals, but very ghostly. I remember several operators, regularly, every hour making repeated QSOs - usually so loud that I took them from 1-2 kHz aside - but answered, otherwise no one else was heard. And also others, who had been calling loudly for hours without hearing my answer at all. After 5-10-15 responses, I usually stopped paying attention to this callsign. So if someone could not make the contact - sorry, check the receiving part of your setup.

It's how looked like at night - and at daytime. Do not be surprised by the waistcoat - it was really cold there. By the way, on the last night on the OC-267 I tried the recipe Larysa told me about - I just got into the sleeping bag, buttoned up to my throat and worked - if I would try it before ... But back to the radio.

On June 20, at 03:30 UT, the first QSO took place at 20 m band- of course, it was a station from Japan JF6XQJ. Previously, my long CQs did not bring any response back, but now the band was opened, but in very weird way - everyone was calling at the same time - Japan, USA, Europe. And almost all the time the propagation was unstable - as if someone was playing around with a switch. All stations were loud, and all disappeared suddenly, in the middle of transmission. And again. Because of this effect, many had to call me again and again - and I had to answer again and again. At 10 UT, the propagation did not just calm down, but turned off in a second, like in the Arctic.

Same behavior was exactly repeated in all following days - early in the morning (mine) – propagation on 20 m, weakly exciting Sweden, Finland, England, a bit of Spain, Romania, Portugal and suddenly transferring to Japan and the USA. After 3-4 hours, a fairly slow pileup died down for 7-9 hours. A sign that the propagation will close in few seconds was the QSO with South America. Just one - Chile, Brazil. My evening started with the same mixed propagation, but not for long, 1-2 hours. Then, when it was already completely dark and the high tide came into its own, covering the radials and the base of 40 m GP - insanity on 40 m band began.

All the rest of the time between propagations I either slept, or wandered through the sand and coral reef, as in the afternoon, at low tide, a lot of places for walks were opened. Or sitting just looking at the sky



And looked in amazement at the strange, very even holes in the sand, appearing right after the low tide. Who did make them - I wasn't able to understand. Maybe - some fish. Perhaps - crabs or sea snakes, to wait until the next tide.



In addition - a couple of times I was engaged in the repair of the generator. I took, just in case, a small repair kit with me - a spare spark plug, a wrench, a bottle of oil and filters.



As it turned out, mozzies were strongly attracted by the light of my headlamp, especially when I refueled the generator at night and got into the tank. Well, the fuel purchased at Mackay wasn't very good as well.

Mozzies - it was a separate problem. Till now (10 days have passed already) not all bites on arms and legs disappeared. My night shift on the air usually looked like this - with one hand I moved through pile-up on the transceiver, with other I entered the callsign into the laptop, with third I drove off mozzies, with fourth I work on the key, my head and legs also drove off mozzies and scratched one other. Legs also took an active part in scratching ☺.

Several times the weather was rainy, and then I had to take an action.

Life on the island went into the usual rut, the days were rather monotonous. Unexpected minor accidents only added colors. So, one day I suddenly climbed my shoulder into a spider web, unexpectedly strong, I did not even break it. In this case, the owner of a size bigger than my palm did not even pay attention - all kinds of things are running around here. The other day, making my way to the bench to continue operating at deep night, I was met by a 3-4 meter jet of liquid. It vividly reminded me of my childhood, when we made similar squirts from empty plastic bottles and ran in the summer with them along the street. It turns out that one of the plastic milk containers, completely forgotten, chose this particular moment, to a second, to finally break through and pellet me, at last.

One day, closer to the end of my stay on the island, I slept in a tent and was suddenly awakened by a rhythmic metallic knock. Something knocked on the water tank. With a smile, stretched, thinking about the birds - and sat up abruptly, having heard the interrogative "Hello?"

Dispersing the rest of my sleep, jumped out on all fours out of the tent and saw quite unexpected picture - few plastic buckets with soaked linen and a man pouring

water on the woman's soapy head. It was simple - Michael and Cathy live on a yacht, wandering around the world. Once near, they decided to use rainwater collected in a tank on the island. So they went in ... When they finished, hung the wet clothes on the bushes to dry, we talked for a couple of hours about yachts, radio, travel and everything else ...

"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--
Of cabbages--and kings--
And why the sea is boiling hot--
And whether pigs have wings."

After taking away the washed stuff and filling jerry cans with clear water, they left on the inflatable boat to their yacht, continuing the way.

Behind all these worries and IOTA, in the background, I constantly had the thought - and how will I get out of here? And the prospects were not easy. I could contact via satellite phone to a diver ship somewhere nearby - maybe the current tour was ending soon and they could bring me back to the continent - no matter to Mackay or another town on the coast. Or I could contact Ron and ask, in extreme case, to send the same high-speed boat. However, both options implied very high additional costs and uncertain dates.

What to do?

«Comin' in on a wing and a prayer...»

Behind all these worries and IOTA, in the background, I constantly had the thought - and how will I get out of here? And the perspectives were not easy. I could contact via satellite phone to a diver ship somewhere nearby - maybe the current tour was ending soon and they could bring me back to the continent - no matter to Mackay or another town on the coast. Or I could contact Ron and ask, in extreme case, to send the same high-speed boat. However, both options implied very high additional costs and uncertain dates.

What to do?

But this thought was not the main thing, it was just constantly present. All consciousness was consumed by the fear of missing short periods of propagation, the fear that magic could end with the sudden activity of the Sun, and a constant scratching □.

Work on air has already begun to get some kind of order and go into the framework. The callers have got idea how I manage the pile-up and after PSE PSE PSE NA/VK /DL /UA transmitted almost everyone stopped calling. Unfortunately, at the very beginning it did not bring almost any effect. But realizing that I would just do QRX for a while, almost everyone accepted the rules

of the game. I did not limit dupes, understanding perfectly how hard everyone would want to be in the log. However, in last days of activation I started to send Dupe or QSO b4 to particularly zealous fans. Some did make up to 5 dupes on the same band. What for? For me this is a big mystery.

Also, it was bit inconvenient that many Japanese stations (apparently because of the standard setup?) loose first dot in the transmission. Along with the beautiful manner of not responding if the call sign is wrong at least in one character (I really appreciate it), it caused delays - at first I automatically reacted to OA, being afraid that propagation is open to South America, and I missed it. Then realizing that this is most likely JA, the time was lost for a response / repeated reply, and a character had been sent by me incorrectly. I've noticed Japanese stations here, because about 50% of all QSOs have been conducted with them.

Of course, my "merits" are counted as well. The key moves around the desk, mozzie bite at the most inappropriate moment, the roar of gusts of wind. And just fatigue.

On June 22, I again woke up from a rhythmic tap on the water tank. No longer frightened, got out of the tent and was greeted with welcoming smiles of the same Michael and Cathy. They, as it turned out, decided to stay around bit longer, fishing, and decided to replenish clear water supplies. And then Michael said to me "You've been here for a few days on the island. When are you returning to civilization?" I began to explain the difficult situation with the return. Interrupting me in mid-sentence, Cathy smiled. "Well, we thought so. Especially I - you, males, think that the main thing is to get involved into a fight. How to get out of it, you do not always imagine". There was nothing to discuss, the true is true, and I, smiling in return, did not say anything.

And then a proposal came out and it was impossible to refuse.

"We talked to friends yesterday. They are waiting for us in Bowen, it's about 200 km from Mackay. If you want, we can take you with us. On the continent, you'll figure it out without any problems". I tried to recall the map, "And how are you going to go - on the high seas parallel to the Great Barrier Reef or in more calm waters, between the GBR and Australia?"

The answer was the one I hoped for - of course, in a more peaceful area. Then I asked the second question - you will still go through Whitsundays island group - maybe throw me there? The reaction to the question was unexpected - the couple looked at each other and laughed - as it turned out, they planned to stop for a day at the island of Scawfell. After asking for a minute, I

digged into the IOTA Directory, downloaded to the laptop, and made sure that Scawfell Island is in the OC-160. Bingo!

Seeing that I'm just happy, Michael and Cathy decided their today visit is finished and went to the yacht, warning that they prefer to sail at daytime and tomorrow at 8 am I have to have everything packed already.

I started packing right away, leaving only a GP for 40 m, a transceiver, a generator and a laptop. Everything else by the beginning of my last propagation on OC-267 was dismantled and packed - a tent, a dipole for 20 m, food, water, garbage bag, etc. I left myself only a sleeping bag, into which I climbed completely. It was warm and comfortable to work on the air, but too tight. At 20.30 UT (6.30 am local time) I did make the last QSO with PY1VOY and packed the remaining equipment.

Good wizards did not keep me waiting - Michael on the inflatable boat appeared around 7 am. 6 round trips (the boat is small), and all my luggage is on board of the yacht Lady D, not new, but neat, 12-14 meters long. To my delight, all the loading took place at a high tide, and I did not have to carry anything too far, since the boat approached almost to the canopy☺.

Frankly, to my shame, I immediately went to the cot and turned off almost until the arrival to the OC-160, having slept for about 10 hours in a row. And even more upsetting is that I did not make a single photo of my rescuers. At first I put it off for later, and when I woke up, I realized that we were almost at OC-160. Besides, it was raining outside.

Scawfell Island is much closer to Mackay (about 60 km or 2-3 hours by boat depending on the boat and weather). It is a fairly popular holiday destination and equipped better. In particular, in addition to the canopy and rainwater tank, there is also a toilet and additional tables for picnics.



Unfortunately, since it was Friday evening, a family with children had occupied the canopy, and I had to settle on a separate table. It served me both as a shack and as a bed. I looked there, sleeping wrapped in a sleeping bag, weird but I didn't care.

The island itself is slightly mountainous, with tall trees and an equally high tide. Remembering the previous experience, GP was installed similarly, with an attempt to repeat conditions in which it worked perfectly. The dipole – as well. However, it turned out in the morning that I fixed the center of the dipole badly and it blew off in the wind. But there was no any power left to fix it, and I left it as it is.



I cannot say anything very interesting or unusual about operation from OC-160. Most likely, the volume of impressions exceeded the volume of my short-term memory, so I remember it in pieces.

It was necessary to explain repeatedly to each new arriving company, what I'm doing here and why I do not do fishing☺. In addition, there were complaints about the generator's noise, interfering with sleeping children.

The weather was cloudy all the time, with intermittent showers.

In periods of lack of propagation I was able to ring Chris at Mackay. He was pleased me that on Sunday 25th of June he has a client for fishing for the whole day, on Wet Hooker, and will be able to pick me up around 10 am to return to Mackay before fishing.

Having worked till 2 am on Sunday and having last connection with SP3NNH, I fell asleep, going to wake up at 8 o'clock and slowly pack everything.

Opening my eyes, the first thing I saw was Chris, who had already jumped off the boat. As it turned out, the weather forecast changed for the worse and he decided to pick me up as quickly as possible.

Hastily gathering everything, we loaded and set off on the return journey. Chris warned that there will be a whining, since the excitement of the sea is 3-4 points, plus a wind of 3-4 points. In addition, the return trip will take longer, since most of the way he plans to pass not by the shortest distance, but hiding behind the islands.

I, as before, sat on the locker in front of the windshield, now firmly clinging to the handrails and not letting go off them for a second. The boat was running at its 40 knots, constantly bouncing off the waves. Water rinsed all with regularity in a few seconds, and it was cold.

Passing between picturesque, even in such a gray and unfriendly weather, numerous Whitsundays islands about an hour, Chris threw off his speed and hid in the shade of a private (with the airfield) island. Completely filled the tank with fuel, checked everything, he warned

me that it would be worse after that, because we go out into the open part of the way to Mackay.

Indeed, it was much worse. The boat periodically took off on the waves, and flying 4-5 meters in the air, fell to hard water from a height of about a meter, all at the same speed of 40 knots. Actually I had an impression that the boat has a secret dream – to be an airplane☺.

All this did not last very long, as, once again jumping high; the boat began to fall back. I almost self-deprecated the movement of my body down with my hands, and at that moment the boat hit harder from below.

At that moment I realized that maybe that's it. Finito. I lost the vision, replaced by a burning, unbearably white light, flooded the world around. Attempts to breathe ended with nothing. Plus the spine has turned into one pillar of pain. All this lasted no more than 3-4 seconds, but it felt like an eternity.

Chris noticed immediately that something was going on with me, and slowed down a bit. It gave me time to catch my breath and recover. I understood very well that there is no other option than to continue moving. Therefore, I comfortably waving my hand and shouting through the roar of the engine and the wind something unreadable and stood up, fixing hands on the side of the boat.

At that moment, the wave hit again and everything happened again, since I just did not have time to fix myself yet. But this time it was a little easier, and we continued the way to Mackay.

The remaining 2 hours I remember vaguely, sagging all this time on tightly bound with the handrails hands. When we finally came to Mackay, I could barely get on board of Norval and, with all my strength showing that everything was OK, slide inside, where I fell into the bunk. The next few hours I tried to get warm and fall asleep, but everything was in vain. I did have no strength to go to the hotel, which was about 500 m away. Relaxed a bit in the evening, I was pulled myself by hands, crawled out onto the deck.

By this time Chris returned from fishing with the client. He looked carefully at me and forced to go to his house to take a hot shower (the shower was available at Norval, but you can imagine yourself how piss-like it is ☺). Chris's mum, a retired nurse, was happy to remember her previous work and drove me into a hot bath with salts, where I was laying for about half an hour, after that I was fed by dinner and interrogated.

We quickly found a common language with her, because in addition to the cordiality and comfort, which simply stood as a warm cloud around her, both turned out to be cat-owners. And her 3-year-old red handsome cat Basil accepted my presence too, with a restrained sniff and rubbing against the palm of my hand.

To beg for the night would be fair at all, I felt better after the bath, and I asked Chris to take me to the hotel. There, the first thing I did was to re-book flight for a day later, because it would be crazy to fly tomorrow, and there were still things to do - to send the generator, antennas and everything I could to Adelaide.

The next day Chris drove to Norval in the morning, where by that time I came in already, spent good half an hour walking slowly from the hotel. He loaded all my boxes into the boat, and then, passing through the harbor, into the ute.

Although my condition wasn't too good, I still had some interesting things to see in the marina while waiting for Chris. And make the final selfie for memory.

Mackay CBD with the transport company office is far enough from the marina. After spending half an hour, we got there and I made out the delivery (it's all already arrived, within 6 days).

Then I was taken back to the hotel, where I stayed for another day waiting for the plane home.

I will not say that the flights were easy; it was a bit uncomfortable to sit. By the way, the plans for Marion and the police interest came up again on the way back. In addition to the security check, I was carefully, to the smallest corner and soles, "sniffed" by a special device, apparently in search of traces of drugs.



But at home – Larysa and cat met me with great joy. This event everyone can imagine himself. For 2 weeks now I am at home, on pills and painkillers, but now I almost try to bend my back ☺. I hope tomorrow the doctor will say something good, as the preliminary diagnosis sounded unpleasant. And I would not want to be absent from work for too long, summing up colleagues.

Here, finally, the end of the story.

Pro - I could never make myself a birthday present better than this. I felt great with multinational support. 4,500 QSO. Over 100 DXCC countries from each of the islands. Lost more than 5 kg of live weight. Survived simply perfect pileups.

Contra - I have no headset any longer. I have no transceiver any longer (three hours submerged into salty sea water on the way from OC-160 to Mackay, and 3 days with water inside, until I finally gathered up and opened it, washed and dried - alas, everything was corroded. However, an easy explosion when turned on, a broken display and a pair of broken knobs made it clear that the repair would cost more than the new one). Uncertain physical state.

Future plans:

This year I fulfilled my promise to myself to activate at least 2 islands. In 2018 - one island awaits its hour, it remains only to arrive there. Another one - in the process of finding an official who will take the trouble to issue a permit. And the third one - in process of understanding how to get there, everything else is ready. All three - below 20%, that is "rare" in the IOTA classification. Alas, it depends not only on time and money, but also on the ability of my work to pay me enough to buy a new transceiver ☺. For now all perspectives are vague.



Departure from Adelaide, OC-267, return to Mackay. The slight stamina of madness in the eyes, like the beard, increases noticeably with each next photo ☺.

I want to express my deepest appreciation to all who did help to make the expedition happen.

Sponsors – clubs and companies:

German DX Foundation and Most Wanted DX site – their donations have been granted when they need much – before the expedition

CDXC and RSGB Expedition Fund – their donations have been granted as soon as the expedition started on air.

IREF and Clipperton DX Club – their donations will be granted after article provision to cover costs

And even more important – support of hams from over the world, 31 countries in total, especially American, Japanese and Russian hams. I really appreciate your support – and donations are still coming.