

## Rockall Island, IOTA EU-189 The 2009 Expedition “*Why it did not happen*”

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One of our mottos in life is “*try before you die*”. That is why Patrick ON4HIL and I joined forces to organize an expedition to Rockall Island. The idea crossed our mind at the end of the IOTA contest last year in July. As usual we had enjoyed the fun and camaraderie of our contest group and besides that we felt kind of euphoric about our accomplishment (we ended 5<sup>th</sup> worldwide in our category) so we were ready for a bigger challenge.

Our first challenge however was to get a suitable team together. What we did first was having a look at the club members listing and started to mark callsigns from people who we thought to be suited for this expedition. The criteria we maintained were quite simple,

- They have to be in good physical health.
- They must be willing to invest a lot of their free time.
- They must be prepared to pay a large amount of money.
- Their wives/partners have to let them go on a risky adventure.

We had a list of over one hundred people and we ended up with just two extra members to join our team, namely Marc ON6CC and Luc ON4IA.

Because we had to share all costs from this expedition and just having four people was far too few so we started to look around for additional suitable guys. One evening I phoned Karel ON5TN with the question if he would be interested in joining us and his response was, “*how on earth are we going to get prepared for such an adventure?*”. I answered; “If you have time Wednesday night around eight o'clock for a team meeting, you'll get all details of what we have in mind.” That meeting at Patrick's place was the first of many! Soon it became obvious that we needed a much larger team in order to get well prepared and divide the many tasks. So we started to look for additional team members to assist us. Fortunately we have people of all walks of life and with different skills in our club. Luckily our team started to grow fast until we had about a dozen people together. Besides us five who would eventually go to the Rock we had seven people who joined us every meeting and with most trainings.

Usually we had a meeting every other week discussing what sort of training we were going to have that weekend or what chores had to be done, like developing a shelter, making special tools, or design special antenna supports to be used on the Rock. Rudi ON7YT took care of all these mechanical challenges as he is good in making things from scratch. From Marleen ON6ZU we learned how to get around with our diving suits and she also taught us how to climb rocks. Jan ON6ZG was going to be our cameraman; he filmed and shot photos of all preparations. Eugene ON8UK lent us an extensive first aid kit and Dr. Luc Van Keer ON4LU gave us a short explanation how to use some of the funny looking things inside that box. Anton ON6NL took the responsibility to act as our PR man. Dirk ON5GS and Henk ON4AHF were going to be our masters of transport to and from Stornoway. I must also mention our webmasters Eddy ON7KEI and Erwin ON8AR who did a terrific job (and Marc ON6CC too) building or hosting the Rockall website. And last but not least Carlo ON4BR who took the QSL chores at his account.

Organizing a Dxpedition to a remote Island like Rockall is a logistical nightmare. You have to be prepared for everything. Anything can go wrong! During each team meeting, usually Wednesday evenings at Patrick's factory, we had twenty to thirty points on the agenda to discuss! Often these meetings kept on going until way past midnight making it hard to get up in the morning for our normal work duties. In case we did not discuss all agenda points during the midweek meeting we had a closed e-mail reflector where we continued our discussion later that week (usually the next day). With the weeks and months passing by at a fast pace we were getting close to our departure date and still so many things to do. The last weeks before departure to Stornoway were hectic both at work and for the Rockall adventure. It was really exhausting for all of us and we were looking forward for a fast departure. We had just about enough of all trainings/preparations/meetings/nightmares/what-could-go-wrong scenarios and so on.

Dirk and Henk were the first to get underway with 1,5 tons of equipment on board of their van. They drove from Genk in Belgium to Holland where they embarked

on a ferry that would take them to Scotland. A second ferry took them to the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Monday, April 27<sup>th</sup> early morning the rest of the team met at Patrick's place to join Karel at the airport in Brussels. After the usual touching goodbyes and kisses we went through customs and on to the first plane of three that day. Late afternoon we arrived at Stornoway airport where we got welcomed by Henk and Dirk whom arrived earlier that day. This is also when we first met the captain of the Elinca, Angus Smith.

We went straight for the harbour to see if all the equipment got safely on board and to put up the vertical that was going to be used when being maritime mobile.

We used an 8 meter tall fibreglass mast to support a wire and at the bottom we attached the AH-4 Icom auto tuner. From this tuner we only had one radial of a random length running along side the reeling of the boat. Our temporary shack on board the Elinca was situated in the galley where we put the FT897D and the Pactor modem in a closet just behind the dining table. When not eating (what some of us did not do much anyway) we used the table to put our laptops on.

Here I have a little explanation to do why we did not work split when on board the Elinca. Let me try and describe the situation we were in. The radio was behind our back in the closet to prevent it from getting smashed around when the boat was in rough seas. The laptop was in front of us on the table to log stations online. So turning the VFO knob was pretty much out of the question because of this extraordinary setup. If we were going to make it onto the Rock we definitely would have worked split, starting from the first QSO!

When arriving at the harbour earlier that afternoon I noticed several people that I thought to be harbour staff but soon we found out that they were from the press. We were asked to give interviews about our so called "daring" expedition to the Rock. Our Rockall story not only became local news but also national news as it was broadcasted on the BBC that night. In fact most media kept updating our story during the entire week we were in Scotland. Anton ON6NL our PR man and pilot at home got several e-mails from various reporters asking for news about "the Belgians" on the way to Rockall. Yes we were a hot news item all week long. Then finally after so many months of planning and preparations on Monday evening April 27<sup>th</sup> around 1930 local time we were ready to leave port and head for Rockall.

Soon after we left the harbour we became QRV as ON4ATW/MM and within minutes we had a huge pile up! It was almost like people had been waiting so long and all emotions came alive this very moment. I guess this must have been the first ever pile up for a dead normal maritime mobile station. Of course we were

delighted with so much attention and this way we figured people are trying to say thanks for all the efforts we put into this adventure this far. How would it be like on the Rock? Little did we know that it was not going to happen this journey.

Our original plan, to have two stations for 48 hours on the air, did get its first dent a few hours after we left port. The skipper told us he just got news that a storm was developing somewhere out on the Ocean and it probably was going to move towards Rockall by the end of the week so he could not guarantee a 48 hour stay on the Rock. Ever since we started planning for this expedition we had a bad feeling about this unpredictable weather and more than once we said to each other: "Let's hope the sea will be calm enough with gentle waves hitting the Rock softly so we can swim and get a good grab before the next wave pulls us out". The skipper now tried to get to the Rock as fast as possible. At an average speed of 10 knots that would be by Wednesday April 29<sup>th</sup> around 0700 UTC.

I did not sleep much that night (as most nights). I was in the galley having a cup of coffee and some scrambled bread. (have you ever tried to cut slices of bread on a rolling sail boat?) If you ever do than you know the meaning of "scrambled" bread". When finishing my coffee I went to the upper deck and I immediately got called by Innes, the skipper's son, who pointed to a distant point in the ocean on starboard side. For a moment I stared into the foggy morning mist and than all of a sudden this tiny little stone became visible; this was Rockall Island. I started calling my friends who were still below decks and I actually started yelling like a child in a candy shop; "Rockall, Rockall, come and see this!". The closer we got to the Rock the more silent I became. I was filming with a small camera trying to focus on the Rock that was getting bigger and bigger. That small stone from an hour ago had started to grow into what we had only seen on pictures and on film. There it was, Rockall, and we could almost touch it. Yes we could smell it! It is hard to describe what went through my mind but I can tell you it is so unreal, so fascinating, so.....

Then we got slammed in the face "*I'm sorry guys I can not let you of the boat because it is too dangerous!*" Angus tried to explain to us how dangerously the waves were crushing onto the Rocks base and besides that the weather was going to deteriorate even more the next few hours making it even more dangerous. "*Can't we even try to go onto the Rock without our radio equipment?*" "**NO!**", was the answer and at that point it became clear to us that the expedition was over! What a pity. After circling around the Rock several times the skipper decided to turn the bow and set sail towards civilization. Waves were already crushing violently into Rockall's base and splashing almost to the very top. I went below decks into the

galley and I sat there staring for minutes and try to figure out how I was going to deal with this. It's hard to describe how I felt but I realized it was not only a disappointment for me and my colleagues on this boat but also for the team members who stayed on shore. A feeling of guilt crossed my mind thinking of all the people out there who wanted a QSO with EU-189. A desire we failed to fulfil.

Trying to figure out what went wrong brought one answer only; we got defeated by Mother nature. Could we not have foreseen this? Why did we not get an accurate weather forecast? Why on earth did we schedule our expedition this time of the year? I kept on asking myself these questions until I realized that I had to inform Anton about the outcome and starting to send some e-mails via winlink to the server. Half an hour later I spoke to Rudi on the radio who tried to cheer me up a little but somehow I knew it was going to be a long boring trip back to the mainland. After the evening meal the skipper asked me if I was feeling good enough to assist him on deck for a few hours that night. During hours of darkness it was mandatory that there were two people on the upper deck; one to steer the boat and the other one to do little chores like pulling a rope ones in a while or getting a cup of coffee for the helmsman. Just after midnight we sailed into a bad weather system, or was it the storm that caught up with us?. I don't know but the relative calm sea all of a sudden turned into a wild swirling ocean. The waves were so high that the Elinca sort of disappeared in between these walls of water. The waves in front of the bow made it feel like the boat was sliding backwards and each time when the boat took a dive into this wave you could hear the water slamming into the steel hull like some one was using a sledgehammer and tried to knock you off the boat. For a brief moment I had a bad feeling about this but when I looked at the skipper I knew he was going to get us through.

I got released from my task a few hours before daybreak and went to bed for a short sleep. Instead of sailing to a major port in the Outer Hebrides the skipper decided to seek shelter in one of the many Lochs. We all could use some rest and relief from this tiring week. We anchored safely in an almost completely enclosed Loch with only a narrow entrance to the open sea still the storm managed to hit us hard ! Our fibreglass mast which we attached at the stern of the boat was the first victim of these gale force winds, followed by the rubber dinghy that had to be cut loose by the skipper in order to prevent anyone on deck to get hurt. Our antenna could be repaired but the dinghy is lost forever to the sea.

Then at last on Saturday morning of May 2nd the sea was just about calm enough to sail back to Stornoway, Elinca's homeport. Getting solid soil under our feet after spending nearly six days at sea made us smile

again. Flying back home to our families made us realize that this adventure was over.

I have to admit we failed to do what we had planned to do this time. That week out on the Ocean has taught us so many new things. Many things we did not count on, so many things we did not know of, so many things we did not use, we even learned a bit about ourselves! Not using all these lessons learned would be a big waste. We can assure you we are planning a next attempt. This time we will not go to fight the forces of nature but make them work for us. We will invest again a lot of time and creativity in this. However almost fully finance such an effort as we did now is not within our possibilities for a second time. We will have to seek financial support inside and outside the amateur radio community. Your advice on this is most welcome!

Stay tuned at [www.rockall.be](http://www.rockall.be) and follow our next steps on the road to hit the airwaves from Rockall Island EU-189.

[Pictures from the DXpedition are given on the website [www.rockall.be](http://www.rockall.be)]