

3D2C DXpedition to Conway Reef

Story & Photos by David Flack, AH6HY

From September 26 – October 3, 2012, a group of 19 operators from seven different DXCC entities put Conway Reef on the air with the callsign 3D2C, making 71,693 total QSOs in just over a week on the island. Hrane YT1AD and Paul N6PSE were the chief organizers of this gargantuan effort; I was lucky enough to be one of the operators.

One of the strengths I have always associated with Paul & Hrane's DXpeditions is the mix of experienced and new hams that they fuse together as one coherent team. When so many editorials in amateur radio magazines says the hobby is doomed if we don't get more people involved, these two men are not just talking, they're doing.

My first contact with Paul was in 2010 when he was calling for volunteers to head to Iraq to be part of the YI9PSE team. I had no idea who he was and had little previous group DXpedition experience at the time, but his outreach seemed genuine enough and before long I was warmly invited to join his effort. Bonds were made and new friendships formed, and a year later we were passing out contacts from the newly-independent Republic of South Sudan.

The year 2012 offered the tantalizing prospect of spending some time on a remote South Pacific reef. In all of Hrane's travels – and as the world's ham radio population knows, he has traveled *a lot* – he insists that Conway Reef is “the most beautiful island in the world.” It had been almost 11 years since his last visit, and he was clearly excited about going again. With a recommendation like that, I just had to see this purported magical place for myself.

3D2C would be my third DXpedition with Hrane and Paul, and by now I already felt like a veteran. Once again they had cobbled together a group of diverse backgrounds, from very experienced operators including Craig K9CT, who still had his sea legs after having just returned from Swains Island, to three new individuals who had never been on a DXpedition before. Alan K6SRZ filled the important team doctor slot.

In late September our group converged from all over the world at the Novotel Lami Bay in Suva, Fiji's vibrant but rain-soaked capital. The Russian contingent arrived a few days early to check on the condition of the gear before the bulk of the team landed. In hindsight it was a brilliant idea to send an advance team because it turned out that when the shipping container was opened, two of our generators had so much corrosion that they were no longer operable. The scramble to find replacements before we set sail was on.

Our transportation between Suva and Conway Reef was the Island Dancer II (aka Sere Ni Wai, the “Song of the Sea”), a converted 100-foot long scuba diving live-aboard vessel docked next to our hotel. For many of us it was our first island/tent/generator DXpedition, and we were all excited at the prospect of setting out to sea.



Our chartered ship for the journey from Suva to Conway Reef, the Island Dancer II.

Not taking any chances with seasickness, nearly all of us stuck scopolamine patches behind our ears as our pre-departure team meeting got underway in the lobby of the Novotel. I also took the extra precaution of doping up on the anti-nausea promethazine medication, which had the intended effect of making me drowsy and letting me sleep during most of the following two days as we skipped across ocean swells on our journey to the southwest.



En route to Conway, all of the gear is checked and rechecked to make sure it is in perfect operating condition. Here, N6NKT, K9JM, and YT3W get things ready.

After nearly two days on the open ocean, land was finally sighted. Our ship anchored in 50 feet of water just outside Conway's fringing reef, and we relied on the ship's zodiac to ferry material and operators to and from the island. Even at high tide the zodiac would just barely miss skimming across the top of the massive coral heads, and great care had to be taken to avoid damage to the natural environment as well as to the boat itself. Watching the crew successfully plot a safe zigzagging course to land through a gauntlet of boulders and coral was truly a sight to behold and gave me new respect for the talents of these guys. It took ten trips in all to get all of the gear and operators to the island so that camp construction could begin.



The first shipment of operators (the Unload Team, YT1AD, K9CT, PP5XX, PY5KD, and PY5MM) heads from the Island Dancer II to shore on Conway Reef.



RZ3FW and UA4HOX assemble a yagi under the watchful eye of a nesting masked booby.



Three diesel generators are set up on the beach (left), while the first of four yagis is raised by UA4HOX, RZ3FW, 3D2TR, and WD5COV. The 3D2C operating tent is to the right.



The 3D2C sleeping tent, with eight cots stacked side by side barracks style inside. Alan AD6E was the only operator smart enough to bring his own accommodations to the island, a small pup tent set up next door.



Part of the 3D2C team's conscientious efforts to avoid disrupting the lives of the local birds as much as possible. We set branches around this particular nesting site because it was out in the open and we wanted to make sure nobody would inadvertently step on this bird's eggs when she was out fishing.

True to form with my past experiences with them, Paul and Hrane had assembled a team of people from nearly every continent. All too often we see rude comments on packet clusters and online forums about DXpedition teams being essentially from one geographic area, seemingly more interested in working their friends back home while ignoring the rest of the world. That certainly was not the case here. We had team members from North America, South America, Europe, and Oceania. No JA ops this time, but the path between Japan and Conway is essentially an easy northwest/southeast line, so it wasn't a grievous oversight. Nearly every area of the world had an advocate on site, and we made sure our operating efforts were split evenly and fairly to maximize chances for faraway regions with limited odds. We were especially proud of our efforts to focus on the difficult paths to Europe and, much to our happy surprise, ended up logging more contacts with that continent than any other.

Ironically, my fondest pileup memories concerned none of the above continents. I was pleased to have an unexpected strong but short opening directly over Antarctica to southern Africa -- certainly a challenging path if there ever was one -- and made the rest of the world stand by as I put a string of ZS stations in the log. I was determined to work

the Africa pile down until I could hear no more and kept at it until propagation faded out. When I made one last call for South Africa, a shockingly loud signal responded by saying, “How about someone who is originally from South Africa?” Anything to get in the log, I smiled. I recognized the accent immediately even though he was thousands of miles from home, worked him for the sheer humor of it all, then let the rest of the world get back in on the fray.

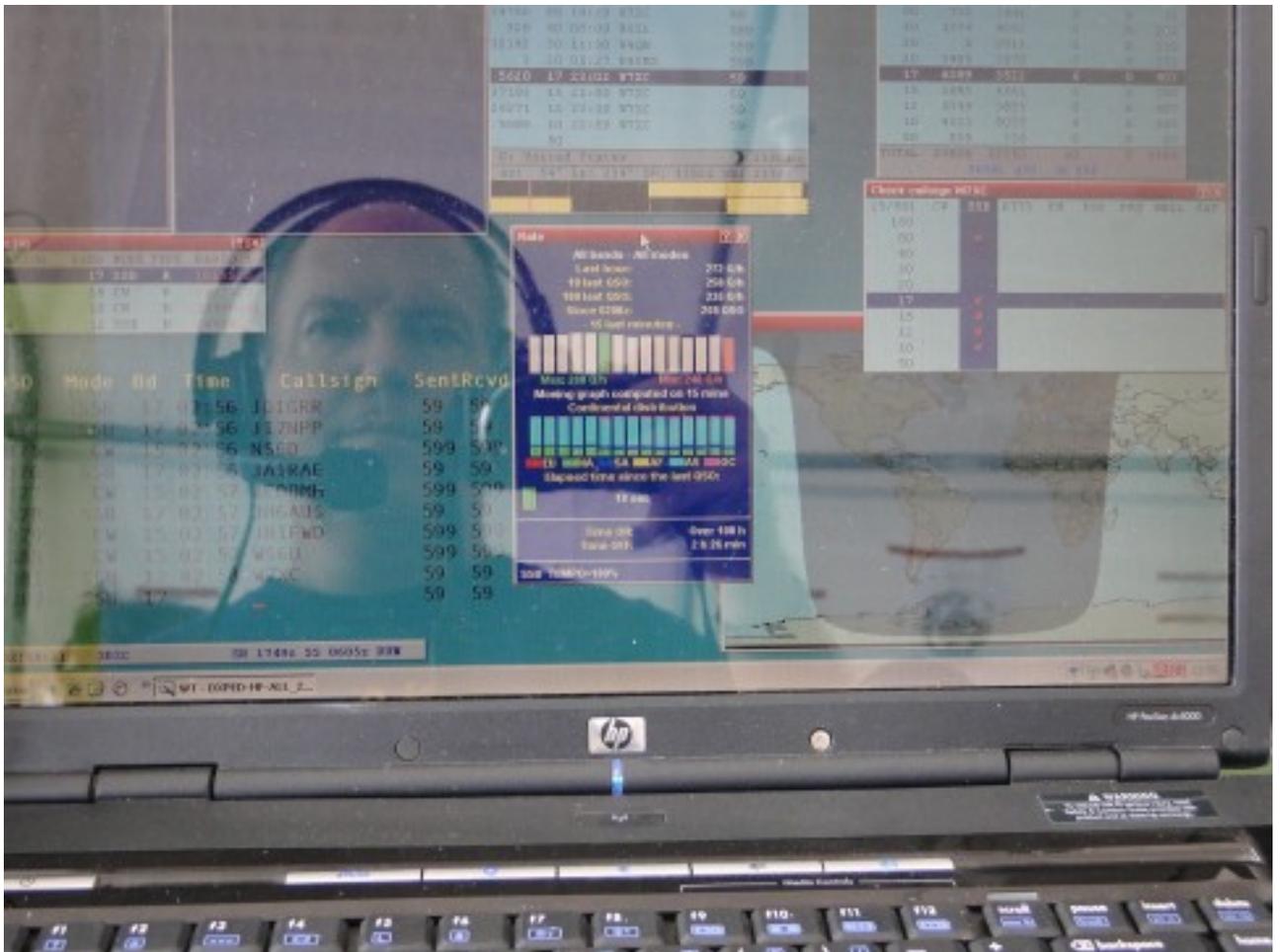
We had six station positions set up for simultaneous operation and more than enough operators on hand to keep them manned day and night as long as propagation allowed. The sleeping quarters could fit up to eight at a time; others who needed sleep were ferried back to the Island Dancer II each night to crash aboard the ship before being transported back to the island the next morning with breakfast to let the night shift guys get some well-earned rest.



WD5COV, N6PSE, AD6E, and K9CT get the ball rolling.



A view to die for. K6SRZ, 3D2TR, and K6MKF working the pileups, seemingly oblivious to the gorgeous seascape just a few feet away.



AH6HY spent most shifts working the pileup on 17m SSB, helping to cement it as the most dominant band & mode combo of the DXpedition.



A peek inside the sleeping quarters finds PY3MM, UA4HOX, and RW4NW getting some badly-needed rest after pulling another all-nighter in the shack.

During our stay on the island we subsisted on just two meals a day, which is not to say we suffered. We had no choice but to work around the tide schedule because food and other supplies could only be brought to us during the two brief high-tide windows each day. The ship's crew created succulent culinary delights with the freshest seafood imaginable, and there was always plenty to go around. No one went hungry. Coolers were restocked with a variety of beverages each morning to make sure the scourge of dehydration would be kept at bay.



A Conway Reef treat: sashimi made from freshly-caught tuna and ceviche made from giant clams harvested at our doorstep.

I am always fascinated by how adaptable people are, how they adjust to their living conditions no matter how small or unusual. We spent days on an island that is essentially the size of a couple football fields, yet we never ran out of things to do in our free time. The entire island could be circled in just a few minutes but always seemed to offer lots of diversions, and short walks could end up taking hours. By the end of our stay, most team members had amassed vast collections of amazing seashells. And when anyone needed a real change, the sea was always right there, just a few feet away, beckoning. In addition to the colorful coral, fish, and giant clams in abundance, the northern half of the reef is littered with wreckage from the illegal Chinese fishing boat *San Sheng No.168*, whose massive fiberglass hull sits sideways in dramatic fashion atop the reef just a couple hundred feet offshore, practically begging for exploration.



Accidentally run aground in 2008, the Chinese fishing vessel *San Sheng No. 168*, has become one of the reef's most recognizable features.



Massive corals sit just below the water level at high tide, making navigation to and from Conway Reef a dangerous prospect for all but the most experienced sailors.



Anchor from a bygone era in the shallows to the south of the reef.

For birders, Conway Reef is a little slice of heaven as it sits in splendid isolation several hundred miles away from human impact, hosting colonies of three separate species of booby birds on its relatively tiny land area. They showed remarkably little fear of us. In fact, the name “booby” is thought to be derived from the Spanish word *bobo*, meaning “stupid,” a testament to seafaring history when these tame, clumsy birds were often the only thing that shipwrecked sailors could capture and eat.

Even in such a small biosphere, the division of resources among the islands only natural inhabitants was fun to observe. Red-footed boobies built sturdy nests across the tops of the scrub brush; brown boobies laid eggs on the ground underneath where they were well hidden by the shade, while white masked boobies plopped down at the edges of the vegetation and even made nests out in the open on the beaches, completely exposed to the elements. Most of the birds showed no fear of humans, and indeed most seemed not to be bothered at all by the presence of our camp, in some cases literally just a couple feet away. We were the objects of great curiosity to the island’s bird population, no doubt a treat in their otherwise routine days of diving for fish and sitting on their eggs.



Red-footed booby takes a perch atop one of the 3D2C antennas to better watch over the camp.



Red-footed booby and chick on Conway Reef.



Masked booby keeps an eye on her egg on Conway Reef.



Brown booby watches over her two eggs. Boobies usually lay two eggs at a time. The first chick to hatch invariably kills the second weaker one shortly after it emerges from the egg. Survival is harsh in this very isolated locale.

The only other life on land were the legions of hermit crabs and the resident tick population, which seemed to explode overnight with glee after our arrival. The longer we stayed, the more ticks found ways to penetrate our shelters; by the end of the trip we were constantly swatting them away from our legs and feet in the shack. It was always humorous to work people on the air who said they were jealous that we were in such a spectacular place; all the while we were looking down while we logged the Qs, always keeping alert in case something started crawling up our legs. If only the people working us could have seen us...



Humongous Conway Reef hermit crabs.



The bane of our existence on the island, ticks of various species and sizes. This unlucky bugger was caught crawling across the operating table just seconds before I sent it from this world to the next.

Before we knew it, it was time to pack up and head home. The weather had gotten noticeably worse the longer we stayed. Our first few days of relentless sun and blue skies were gradually traded for periods of gray clouds, dark skies, and drizzle as the week progressed. Knowing that the weather was worsening and that we would be sailing against the wind and current on the way back, the captain ordered us to start dismantling camp earlier than we had planned. Still, with close to 72,000 QSOs in the log at that point, we had already exceeded our wildest hopes and felt no guilt as we began the process of tearing down. The pileup was worked literally to the end, as Paul & Hrane kept passing out QSOs even in the open air – squinting at display screens now covered with glare – as the operating tent was literally being dismantled around them.



Making QSOs until the end, N6PSE and YT1AD pass out contacts as the operating tent is disassembled around them!

As soon as we were all safely back on board Island Dancer II, the ship's engines roared to life and we began the 2-day trek back to Fiji proper. As Conway Reef receded on the horizon behind us, we vowed to reconvene at this exact same spot in 10 years time. It will be interesting to see if that really happens, and if so, how many of the original team members will be up for the task. My bet is that just about all of us would love to go back.



Gorgeous Conway Reef sunset.

The boat ride back to Suva was much rougher than the ride down, with more pronounced pitching and heaving and some scarily-loud sounds that on occasion that made it seem like our ship was going to split in half on the high seas. But our experienced crew brought us back safely as we knew they would, and once again we were thankful that the boat's home was a dock literally just steps away from the Novotel's inviting lobby. We staggered off the ship and directly into our rooms for a warm shower and well-deserved rest in nice, comfortable (and stationary!) beds.



The 3D2C team wishes to thank the German DX Foundation and all of our corporate, club, and individual sponsors for helping make this DXpedition a success. Without all of you this DXpedition would not have been possible, and we are eternally grateful for the support.

3D2C



3D2C Conway Reef QSL

Our Statistics:

QSO chart:

	SSB	CW	RTTY	SSTV	PSK31	band
160m	0	812	0	0	0	812
80m	729	1785	0	0	0	2514
40m	1361	4937	0	0	0	6298
30m	0	3287	0	0	0	3287
20m	5208	5064	122	0	0	10394
17m	7437	4344	322	0	0	12103
15m	4497	8433	145	10	192	13277
12m	6269	4512	63	0	0	10844
10m	4431	6055	402	0	0	10888
6m	676	600	0	0	0	1276
mode	30608	39829	1054	10	192	71693

Continent distribution:

AF - 0,33%
AS - 25,21%
EU - 37,25%
NA - 33,33%
OC - 2,73%
SA - 1,15%