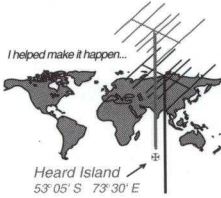


LOG OF THE EXPEDITION

Part 3 - Returning



January 30 - At Sea

Our flight from the Center of the World lasted but two minutes. It had all the feeling of a planetary landing craft returning to its mother ship. To those onboard the Marion Dufresne, we were a flyspeck leaping off a rock. To us, Heard Island was an asteroid zooming away below us and into the void.

As we flew across the coastline, I glanced to my side to capture that peculiar interval when I would be part of two worlds, Heard Island and the vessel (and all it represented). For a few moments I could see both the island and the ship, and I was part of both worlds, firmly planted in neither, extending partially into both. In the frozen feeling of that instant, I captured an image of the larger universe in which these two worlds are immersed. The universe is populated by isolated worlds such as these two, each with its boundaries and peculiar nature. They drift and turn and generally know nothing of each other. But once in a lifetime, two of them may touch, their edges overlapping just enough to mix. A tiny part of each world becomes a tiny part of the other, and both are better for the exchange. The touching and mixing provides at once for diversity and evolution, enabling a universe that flourishes and persists, without destroying the separate worlds into total fusion. Thus I came to understand why it was better for Elleo and his world to remain remote and separated from my own, and why we are better off without Elleo in ours. It was all quite natural and logical, once you understood it.

In a trice, I was completely out of that world and back into mine. Finally, I got to open the champagne. Ralph and Peter and I stood together and passed it around it with great gusto and unrestrained pride, and considerable messiness! Truly, these were sweet moments. Everyone was there, and we tarried long on the deck, hugging and laughing and taking pictures.

Slowly Heard Island began to shrink, and I knew that we were underway. I walked to the edge of the deck and stood alone, shrugged against the chill, and watched as our island floated away, its colors turning to brown and white, then black and white. Silently, I said goodbye to Elleo, who had taught me that to him this was not the edge of his world, but the center. I wished him well, and wondered if he would keep his promise to remember me. Surely, I would keep my promise to him. I would remember him, and all that had happened here. And I would write about it. And it would live forever in the hearts of those of us who experienced it and all who shared that with us..

January 31 - Kerguelen

I remember little of yesterday. We ran at 10 knots against 20-ft. seas. At times the spray from the bow reached the windows of the bridge, perhaps 100 ft. above the surface. In the distance I could see roller waves that looked like armies on the move. The violence was awesome, but the vessel quite secure. Many of the passengers, and some of our team, were sick, from the motion or just from fatigue. I spent time sleeping, standing on the bridge watching the sea, updating my log, and hanging out in the bar.

Mike K9AJ gave me the medical report from Heard Island:

- 1 shoulder dislocation
- 1 otitis (ear infection)
- 1 back pain
- 1 insomnia
- 1 skin rash
- 2 tendonitis
- 1 penguin bite
- 1 corneal abrasion
- 6 upper respiratory infections
- 2 bronchitis
- 3 laryngitis
- 3 minor skin wounds
- 2 second degree sun/wind burn to face

Hmmm. Just 1 insomnia? I suspect that everyone had suffered from that!

Before we realized it, we were at Kerguelen. It was far larger, and more complex, than we had imagined. Our first task was to run up a narrow inlet to pick up some hikers who had been out for the past week. Later, several of us had a short flight to Jean d'Arc, an abandoned whaling station, now a monster pile of rusting pipe and warping lumber. Hal and Myriam climbed on the rocks and the surf line collecting tardigrades and isopods. I climbed the hill and found the survey markers, which, oddly enough, were put there by ANARE.

Then we moved to Porte Francaise, the main base, where we all disembarked, and tramped out into the small town of military-style buildings looking for the CO. Sightseeing was fine, but what we really needed was a stamp in our passports! At the post office, we found a pile of rubber stamps, but they were apparently for decoration of outgoing letters; they were not official. No matter; we gleefully stamped our own passports anyway, just in case we couldn't do better. Eventually we did better: found the CO, who was all smiles. We got our passports stamped and got going.

Many on the team were keen to pull out our OP-2 crate and operate radio. But soon it became clear that there simply wouldn't be time. There was the threat of an oncoming storm, and we had to keep a return schedule, so Claude simply ruled it out. The team did the next best thing: they found the radio station on the island and Peter talked the duty officers into tuning up on 14.195. Our authorized callsign TOØK apparently had been issued in error, and was withdrawn. It was



The VKØIR team, homeward bound. (kneeling, from left): Wes Lamboley W3WL, Al Hernandez K3VN, Harry Booklan RA3AUU, David Muller VK2JDM, Glenn Johnson WØGJ, Ghis Penny ON5NT, Willy Rusch HB9AHL. (standing, from left): Bob Schmieder KK6EK, Arno Metzger OE9AMJ, James Brooks 9V1YC, Bob Allphin K4UEE, Kurt Wetter HB9AFI, Han Burki HB9BHW, Michel Sabatino EA8AFJ, Peter Casier ON6TT, Mike McGirr K9AJ, Mike Mraz N6MZ, Arie Nugteren PA3DUU, Bob Fabry N6EK.

replaced with FR5XM. The guys called CQ, but were only able to raise one station, a ZS6. So everyone took turns working that one station! I also made a QSO using FR5XM: I worked Harry on 2 m. At the time Harry was standing about 10 ft. away.

We decided to give all our lumber, the plywood and 2x4s from the shelters, to the ship, as a token of appreciation. Now we watched silently as it was taken off and landed on Kerguelen. A bit sad, I thought. To a museum, perhaps, but this?

The ship would take a large number of personnel off Kerguelen, most of whom had been there a year or 18 months. As we waited for the launch, they brought a flat wagon and put out punch and potato chips, the first we had seen in more than a month! We did our best to be cool as we wolfed down the chips.

Back onboard, we had a flag-signing ceremony. All the flags were signed by everyone. I gave the American flag to Ralph, the Belgian flag to Peter who passed it to ON4UN, and Willy took the Swiss flag. There were more passports to stamp, envelopes to sign. I believe every member of the team had every other member sign the cover of his Participant's Handbook.

The sun set the evening ablaze. We stood on the helo pad for an hour while the Western sky changed color and texture, gradually turning to a leaden gray. The ship moved out from the island and into the open ocean. Reunion was to our north, 1800 miles away.

February 1-5 - Return Voyage

In retrospect, these five days are hard to resolve. It is difficult to remember exactly what happened on which day. It didn't really matter, of course. Mostly we were sleeping and decompressing. Ralph later recalled:

"The thing I remember most about the return voyage was the boredom. I would walk the abandoned halls of the ship and wonder, 'How can my teammates sleep so much?' On the way to Heard Island we enjoyed lively discussions and planning sessions. Everyone who wasn't sick was up and about and enthusiastic. Now, the most exciting thing I could find to do was my laundry."

Of course, laundry wasn't all that bad, after you had been on Heard Island for two weeks.

Faced with little to do, we turned to trivia. One day we had steak and fries (were they *French* fries?) for lunch. From somewhere, K4UEE found a bottle of catsup, the first we had seen in a month, but he wasn't about to share.

"Please pass the catsup," I said politely.

"What catsup?" I received back. He was really very cruel. The bottle seemed to always be on the far side of the table, and no one over there could seem to find it. Bob even went to the extreme of sitting at another table, which I am sure was not related to my socks, since I had changed them religiously. But would he share the catsup? Noooo...

Later we got even with Bob. James and co-conspirators Peter and Michel doctored the phone bills to include one extra phone call of 59 min 57 sec. The charge was about \$350. The number called matched the home phone number of K4UEE.

"What ...happened...?" Bob asked incredulously. "I never ..."

"Well, apparently when you hung the handset on the hook you didn't seat it properly, and it charged you for the full hour. It times out automatically at one hour." The guys were lying like rugs.

"Oh, no!!!" Bob wailed. "I couldn't have! Oh, no!"

Bob was tortured for most of the day, but eventually the real bills were given out. The rest of the team burst into hysterics.

One day Mike inadvertently misled the entire world. Telephoning his wife in Illinois, he made a facetious remark:

"Everyone onboard is sick. Except me, of course and I'm fine!"

Unfortunately, his wife took the remark literally, posted it on the web, and soon the entire DXing community was issuing sympathy notices for the poor VKØIR crew, all of whom, except K9AJ, were sick!

By the second day, we were out on deck sorting our gear. The shelters had to be opened, cleaned, and repacked in their proper bags. The tools and generators were separated according to whether they belonged to Ralph or to me. With flat seas and clear weather, it was hard to stay inside, and we reveled in the work.

Willy hooked up his FT890, and TOØR/MM was on the air. The pileups seemed as great as on Heard Island! Every station we contacted wanted to offer congratulations. There was an excess of encomiums, and we began to think the world was always this way.

The days were filled with small groups hashing Heard, a few team members working as TOØR/mm, tours of the engine room, sleeping, and sorting our gear.

The balmy nights were passed either in the smoky bar or on the helo deck under a brilliant canopy of stars. One evening James and I stood for hours looking at the stars and agreeing that something incredible had happened. James was particularly insightful.

"We sailed on borrowed water, didn't we?"

"Yes," I agreed. We both knew that we had been lucky with calm seas, both going to Heard and returning. But perhaps our luck was even broader. James reused the metaphor:

"Perhaps we transmitted on borrowed airwaves, too."

Perhaps, I agreed. But then, I countered, luck favors the prepared. My real opinion was that we were so well prepared, even bad luck and poor planning may not have been able to overtake us.

Poor planning did overtake me one day at lunch. That morning I had taken a tour of the engine room, together with several others. Returning late to lunch, I wolfed down a great steak and a big baked potato. Just then Willy reminded me that today was our day to lunch with the Captain! Delaying as long as possible, and massaging my stomach to accelerate peristalsis, I moved to the other dining room and stuffed my poor body with a second steak and potato, smiling all the time, not knowing whether they knew or not.

Another day we gathered around the helo for group pictures. We continued to find souvenir items to autograph. I read a copy of "The Lost World," Michael Crichton's sequel to "Jurassic Park." It was all about regenerating extinct life from DNA, people being eaten by dinosaurs, that sort of stuff. About two-thirds through I lost interest; compared with our recent adventure, it was just too tame.

February 6 - Reunion Reunion

Only two of us, James and myself, were up to see a glorious dawn over Reunion. Orange fire rimmed the steel gray clouds. The spectacle linked us directly to Kerguelen, five days previous, and our thoughts were mixed. Every moment we knew would never be repeated. But life's like that, isn't it?

At 6:00 sharp Tonton lifted off in the helo. Captain Regnier brought the huge vessel into the inner port, making two 90-degree standing rotations. At 6:40 AM the lines were thrown over the bollards, and we were secure.

On the dock were a few cheering Reunioners, including our irrepressible Conchita, who had brought a gift and four kisses for every team member. We had brought Reunion fame, she said. But I suspected that it was Conchita who was putting Reunion on the map. We returned to her the unused special tea she had given us, and a jar of Heard Island volcanic sand.

Within minutes our team disintegrated. Mike N6MZ and James 9V1YC left immediately to get a plane to Mauritius. A half-dozen others went to change their air reservations, to leave earlier than originally planned. Part of the team repaired to Conchita's for lunch. Peter disappeared for most of the day with the TV interviewers, generating material that would be fed all over France the next day. The ship's crew started unloading our big containers, and at 11:24 AM I watched them roll away on trucks. OP-4, our venerable outhouse, was left sitting on the deck of the Marion Dufresne.

There were the last-minute details. I gave our cabin attendant all my socks and most of my tee-shirts. We signed a bottle of wine for Claude. Tonton and his daughter returned to the vessel for a last lunch. Ralph and I took a walk into town to get a Pepsi and mail some letters. FR5DX showed up and bought one of our computers. A few other FR5 friends came and we had an impromptu party on deck, drinking champagne and shaking hands. The French smoked like chimneys.

Then, in the mid-afternoon, scarcely a few hours after returning, most of the remaining team, including myself, left for the airport. Peter, Ghis, and Arie, who had volunteered to stay and complete the arrangements, were left onboard the Marion Dufresne. Again, Peter recorded his thoughts:

"Feb 6. 19:00. Ghis, Arie, and I are having a last supper onboard. We talk and laugh a lot and bring up memories of the past 5 weeks. Nevertheless, our hearts are a bit heavy. There are 17 empty chairs around us, those of our 17 friends with whom we have lived day by day since Christmas. With whom we have shared challenges, danger, tension, wind and rain, and pileups, and laughter, and... Seventeen people we might not see again for a long time.

"It is only now that I start to relax a bit. Now, I know that our expedition is over and I can think back with a fulfilled smile. We have done what we set out to do. What amazes me even more now: A very complex expedition was executed *exactly* as was planned, while still the participants and our audience enjoyed it. Without any internal conflicts, professionally, we executed The Plan. There were no accidents. We got all and everything safely back. I think we were good. But we were also lucky. Thank you for sharing this with us."

Peter captured what all of us felt.

February - Home

Martha was all the welcoming party I wanted, and she was there when I walked out of San Francisco Customs into her arms. We immediately disappeared for three days.

Eventually I came to grips with the thousands of e-mail messages and hundreds of pieces of mail that had accumulated over the past six weeks. My highest priority was to communicate with the team. On Feb. 11 I wrote:

"After a few days at home, I am now reliving our Heard Island experience. There is no way I can adequately capture the respect I have for what the VKØIR team did. You were more than a team—you were an inspiration. As I have said numerous times, never, never have I had the pleasure to work with such a proficient, productive, and cooperative team. No problems, no complications, active participation, technical expertise, ... It almost defies ones ability to describe the positive energy we shared. For me, as one of the leaders, the best compliment I can think to give you is to tell you I had a fun time. Quite different for me, since I am usually very uptight about safety and performance. This one was easy for me, and I loved every minute of it. Thank you all for giving me one of the greatest experiences of my life."