

## T33C: DXpedition to Banaba 2004

By Alan Eshleman, K6SRZ, and David Collingham, K3LP

It's 5:40 AM local time here 50 miles south of the equator in the Central Pacific. We're all excitedly crowding against the starboard rail of *Te Taobe* to get our first view of Banaba Island. In the predawn light, the island looks exactly like the old photos we've been studying—a low, gray, gloomy shape. We're not sure what to expect when we land. Our communication with the island up to this point has been confined to postal mail moving slowly between Banaba, Fiji, Australia, and our homes in Europe and the USA.

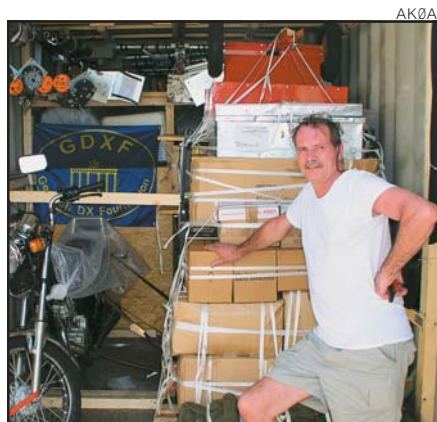
We do know that there will be no electricity other than our generators, no telephones and no Internet. We don't know where we'll be sleeping or how we'll be moving our nine tons of gear around the island. We're not even sure how many people live here.

Some of us are seasick, some of us are battling diarrhea and all of us are very tired. It's hard to sleep on a hatchcover, under a tarpaulin, on a rocking, rolling boat. A few hours earlier, a squall had ripped off the tarpaulin and drenched us with rain. The aluminum door to the ship's toilet refuses to latch and swings open whenever we roll toward port. On the first day we tried to wedge the door shut with scraps of cardboard to protect our modesty, but today nobody cares.

Now the sun is up. We move closer to the island, anchor and launch two 16 foot aluminum boats. Now we can see people moving down to the harbor, and behind them rows of abandoned industrial buildings.

It takes us 11 hours to get nine tons of equipment and supplies ashore. We have twenty-seven 200-liter barrels of gasoline, a motorcycle with trailer, 10 generators, dozens of antennas and masts, 7 radios, 7 amplifiers, tools, spools of coax, 45 pieces of personal luggage, a dozen laptop computers, food for 22 people for two weeks, 63 cases of beer, 280 cases of bottled water, and a microwave oven. Day one ends with sore muscles and a better idea of where we are.

By now we've established three operating sites. The Banaba Council helps by supplying a truck and driver. The island's guest house, Banaba House, is the site of the CW camp. The SSB camp and 6 meter



**Wil, K6ND, getting ready to unload some of the nine tons of food and equipment needed by the 22 members of the team who would stay on Banaba for 12 days. The container was shipped from Germany in December 2003, arriving in Tarawa in February 2004 and placed aboard *Te Taobe* at the end of March. Fortunately, nothing was damaged in transit.**



**Frank, DL4KQ, and his wife Snjezana at the celebration prepared by the Banaba community to thank the T33C team for their contributions to the island's school and clinic.**

station are about a kilometer up the hill from Banaba House, along the sidelines of a soccer field. Two digital stations for RTTY, PSK and SSTV are located 3 km from the harbor in the home of the island's solitary policeman.

Day two is humid and hot. Coming up the road from the harbor the flatbed truck that doubles as the island's school bus is carrying our generators, many cases of bottled water and a dozen local children. Also on the truck are Dave, K3LP, and Wil, K6ND, who are leading the children in a rousing rendition of "Old MacDonald

Had a Farm." *E-I-E-I-O* they sing with gusto. The T33C team has arrived and the islanders seem genuinely happy to see us.

T33C is the result of almost two years of planning. The DXpedition represents cooperation among three different groups of amateurs, all with the goal of activating Banaba, which stands high on the list of most wanted DXCC entities. One group, headed by Rob, PA2R, included several members of the recent successful TI9M expedition. Another group was headed by Frank, DL4KQ, who proved to be a meticulous planner. The third group was represented by veteran expeditioner Hrane Milosevic, YT1AD. Our final group includes 19 hams, including K2LEO and three other adventurous women who made the trip.

Most of our equipment was collected 10 months in advance. Frank, DL4KQ; Ron, PA3EWP; Rob, PA2R; Bernd, DL5OAB, and Greg, DF2IC, packed a large steel shipping container with more than 9 tons of supplies. On December 11, 2003 the container left Germany. By February, it was waiting for us on the dock in Tarawa. The packing job was excellent: nothing was damaged in transit.

Considerable advance planning was necessary because Banaba is not an easy place to get to. The nearest airport is on Tarawa (T30) some 420 km NE of Banaba. To reach Banaba, we needed to fly first to Fiji and then on to Tarawa. To get from Tarawa to Banaba, we chartered the rusty, 104 foot interisland freighter *Te Taobe*. Though she is small, *Te Taobe* is still too large to enter Banaba harbor, so all equipment needed to be brought ashore by many trips in small outboards.

Now all our stations are in place. After a "CQ T33C UP" call, the pileups begin. There follows eleven days of continuous operation with 19 operators doing four-hour shifts around the clock. Most of our stations are using K2/100 transceivers, ACOM1000 amplifiers, and SteppIR yagis for 20 through 10 meters. For 30 meters CW we have a two-element ZX-Yagi. For the lower bands we use a variety of wires and loops. Our best performer on 160 meters is an inverted-L with elevated radials. We are helped greatly by a fearless young Banaba man who climbs 70 feet up a tree in his bare feet to place a halyard that we use to raise our low band wires.

## History and Culture

Banaba's first contact with Europeans came in 1801 when the ship *Ocean* "discovered" Banaba. Older maps still show Banaba as "Ocean Island." Banaba was a community of fishermen and farmers, organized by clans and governed by elders. By all accounts, the island community was peaceful and self-sufficient. The outside world did not show much interest in Banaba until 1900 when New Zealander Albert Ellis discovered that the island was a rich source of phosphate of lime, a valuable fertilizer.

By the following year, Ellis and his backers had signed a 999 year mining lease with the islanders. Thousands of miners and their families moved to the island. Paved roads were laid down, workshops and power houses were erected, and homes and apartment houses studded the hillsides of Banaba.

The mining operation was a disaster for the Banabans' traditional way of life. Phosphate mining stripped the soil bare, exposing enormous rocky pinnacles of fossilized coral. By 1979, when mining operations finally ceased, more than 80 percent of the land area of Banaba had been mined down to rock.

In 1941 the Japanese army occupied the island, forcing many of the Banaba men into agricultural labor on other islands and executing more than a hundred others. Following WW II, most Banabans were relocated to Rabi Island in Fiji, 1500 miles to the south of their home island.

In 1965 the Banabans took Great Britain to court over the environmental damage. The case was settled in 1979, with 10 million Australian dollars put in a trust fund for the island. Today, Banaba is governed by the nation of Kiribati and by a Council of Elders that resides on Rabi, Fiji. To operate from Banaba, our group needed to obtain the approval of the Council of Elders in Rabi and from the resident Banaba Island Council.

Today, the 300 or so Banabans who live on the island support themselves by fishing, subsistence agriculture, and shipments of rice and other staples that arrive from Tarawa.

A small clinic attached to the abandoned hospital and staffed by a medical assistant dispenses medical care. There are no resources to treat serious illness on the island.

The remains of the mining operation are all over the island. Everywhere you look are abandoned trucks, bulldozers, and forklifts, rusted and overgrown with lush, tropical vegetation. A crumbling country club has trees growing out of the bottom of its swimming pool and a sag-



**The flags of Kiribati (topmost) and of the nine nations represented by the T33C crew fly over the SSB camp. The SSB camp was on the edge of the island's soccer field.**



**From left to right: Stevan, YZ7AA, Alan, K6SRZ, Frank, DL4KQ. On the last night on Banaba, team members autographed the flags of each other's nations. Alan was team physician for T33C and also treated some of the Banabans. Frank was a master at logistics.**

ging, termite-riddled dance floor. An abandoned power house with banks of enormous diesel engines and turbines is rusted and silent. Deserted workshops are filled with once excellent power tools, now rusted beyond repair. The hospital is littered with broken equipment. A single large surgical lamp floats over the abandoned operating room. This decaying, industrial landscape made us feel as if we'd stepped onto the set of a post-apocalyptic science fiction drama.

But the people of Banaba are wonderful. Singing is a big part of the Banaba culture. In the evenings, islanders would come to our various camps and sing, and then invite us self-conscious visitors to sing *our* songs. We were invited to the island primary school's Easter program and to a marvelous program of song and dance on a rainy afternoon at the island's Catholic church, a high point for some

of us. A lucky few of us were guided through the network of limestone caverns that lie beneath the summit of the island. Others went fishing with island men in their outrigger canoes.

Two days before the antennas came down and all our gear was packed away, the people of Banaba threw a party for the T33C team to thank us for our gifts of school and medical supplies to the community. We returned our thanks to the community, and following that, each member of our team was crowned with a floral halo and led to a festive table of local foods.

After eating, we were serenaded by choirs of local schoolchildren and entertained by troupes of boys and girls performing traditional dances. Videotapes of these performances would make a cultural anthropologist green with envy! Representatives of the school, the Banaba Council and the Rabi Council of Elders all gave welcoming speeches. Katu Jacob, a schoolteacher and a fantastic resource to the entire team, acted as translator.

## T33C Team Results

The T33C team made more than 77,000 QSOs from Banaba. Seventy-five thousand were with the T33C call sign and another 2000 with team members using personal T33 calls. Propagation was, unfortunately, poor for several days.

Our primary goal was to give as many hams as possible a new one. At times, QRM from our 80 and 160 meter operations interfered with the high band operations, making it difficult to copy weak European signals on 30 meters and higher bands. Dave, K3LP; Joe, AA4NN, and Alan, K6SRZ, handled most of the limited 160 meter operation. Flo, F5CWU, captained the SSB camp, while Doug, N6TQS, and Bill, AK0A, ran the digital operation. All operators were assigned three four-hour shifts per day on CW and SSB.

Safely back home, we've had a chance to read the comments in our expedition's Web site guest book ([www.dx-pedition.de/banaba2004/](http://www.dx-pedition.de/banaba2004/)). The comments warmed our hearts. Among the nicest were those from the little pistols of the DXing world—the operators with modest stations running 100 W or less into a dipole or ground plane—who seemed genuinely amazed that we pulled them out of the pile-ups. W5QM was surely the littlest pistol of all, working us with 250 mW!

Back in the workaday world, it's hard to keep from daydreaming about the Blue Pacific and the warm hospitality of the Banaba people. And, inevitably, the day-dream turns toward thoughts of *where shall we go next?* 