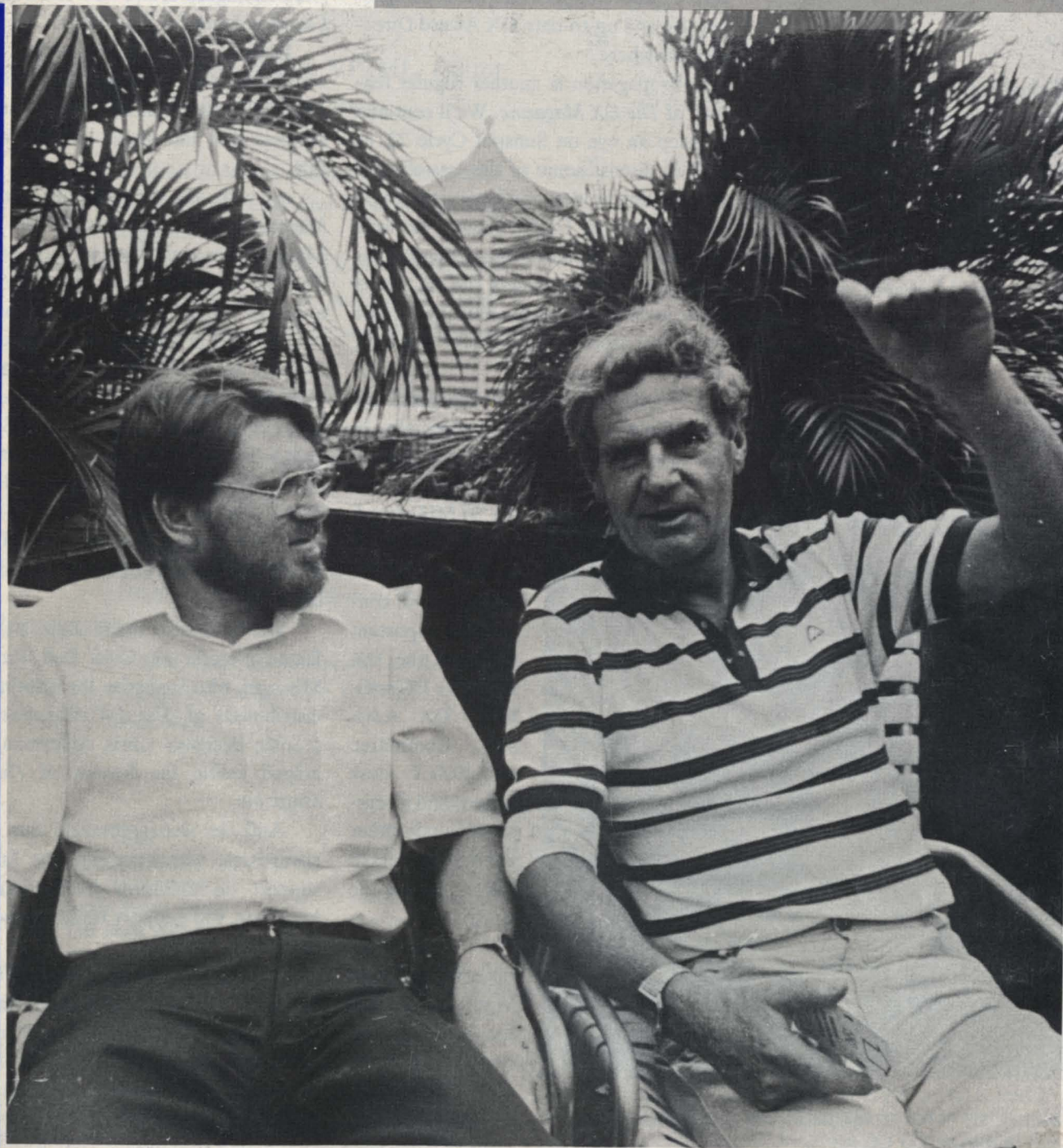


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**The  
DX  
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**Disaster at Spratly**  
QSL Information  
Propagation  
Awards, 6 Meters  
10-Meter Long Path



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# Disaster at Spratly

The 1983 German DXpedition

by Baldur Drobnica DJ6SI

In February 1983 several OM's of the Cologne-DX-Club met to discuss the realization of a DXpedition to Peter and Paul (PY0P).

DJ3NG and myself decided that PY0P was sufficiently activated in November 1982. Therefore Gero and I decided to spend our time and money in a different DXpedition. As Spratly was No 1 in the list of the most requested countries, we chose 1S. Another advantage of going to the Spratly was that there were no tedious procedures obtaining an Amateur Radio Licence.

Considering the geographical point we decided it would be best to realize the DXpedition from Brunei. So we took up contact with OM's in Brunei. During the weekly skeds all chances and possibilities were discussed. At that time we learned that in VS5 an DXpedition to 1S was discussed for Christmas 1982. We were told that there were no suitable boats in VS5 which could go to Barque Canada.

In the German magazine "YACHT" I found an advertisement of a German captain, who chartered his catamaran from Singapore. We got in touch with Captain Marx. Additionally we had constant skeds with 9V1WC. We introduced Peter Marx and Henner 9V1WC. The preparations in Singapore were very satisfactory. All heavy equipment was cared for there, such as batteries, generators, canvas, gas, etc.

Our journey was originally planned for March 21st. Captain Marx advised us against this date as the monsoon lasted very long this year and the wind would blow against us all the time. He rather preferred April 3rd. On March 31st DJ3NG, DJ4EI, DF6FK, and I took the plane to Amsterdam and from there to Singapore. There we were met by 9V1WC. Together with him we made the last pur-

chases, such as masts etc. OM Henner and his XYL Brigitte took us to a typical Chinese restaurant in the evening.

On Easter Sunday we took our equipment on board and left the mooring by 1500h local time. During the next few days we sailed through the Singapore Strait passing the Anambas and North Natunas.

With our equipment and a 15M and



Figure 1 Gero DJ3NG (sitting) with DK9KX (right) and DF3KX, wife of DK9KX, before leaving for Glorioso in 1980.

20M dipole (inverted V) we kept in touch with Sea Net, 9V1WC, and Cologne as DJ3NG/MM and C53DZ/MM (net control DK9KN). Weather and excellent cooking were responsible for a good atmosphere on board.

To our disappointment, the monsoon was blowing still very strongly from NE, so that our timetable got all mixed up. After passing the Natunas, ship traffic grew less. Soon we were completely alone. On April 10th we had a very strong wind so we could finally go under sail for the first time of our trip. But we had to tack and could not keep exactly to our marked course.

Our destination was Barque Canada at  $8^{\circ} 04' N$ ,  $113^{\circ} 12' E$ . On the way lies Amboyna Cay  $7^{\circ} 53' N$ ,  $112^{\circ} 55' E$ . For better control of our course we took Amboyna Cay as a fixing point. A landing was not intended. We were not sure if there were a garrison or similar establishments. The captain had heard in Singapore that there might be Philippines. From the Singapore newspaper clippings we had collected, we knew that Amboyna Cay was claimed by Malaysia and that this country had erected an obelisk on the island to show the claim.

We reefed the sail and made a very slow and careful approach to Amboyna Cay under engine. As we could not see any buildings from this far distance, we had the impression that this sandbar was not occupied. Then came the idea, "Why go all the way to Barque Canada, we just as well could save 30 miles, as we were already 2 days behind schedule?"

As we approached further to Amboyna Cay a hut-like building came in to sight, then 3 antenna masts but without recognizable antennas. No human in sight. At a distance of about 2 km we saw a watch-tower and changed course immediately. We had hoisted the German flag but we could see no flag on the island.

As we had changed our course we saw the first man. He stood on a tower and gave signs with two handsignals



*Figure 2 Diethelm DJ4EI, one of the amateurs killed at Amboyna Cay.*

(similar to the equipment used on airports for leading planes to their place). As the shelling started, we knew he had aimed the gun.

The first shot came too short. The second round of 3 shots each hit the captain in the right side of the chest. I saw him bleeding from nose and mouth. He threw himself on to the floor and tried to keep the ship going and on course. The third round hit our complete gas supply of 120 L (appr. 32 gal.) which we had stored on quarterdeck. In this part of the ship were also the dinghy

and the life-belt with the flashlight.

At that time Gero was in contact with Pat, N0ZO/DU2, on 20M and gave at that moment the following message, which would go round the world afterwards: "We are being shelled - fire on board!" We all flew from the quarterdeck to the saloon. From here we climbed through the garret outside. I had to pull Gero from the equipment and pushed him through the garret outside.

On fore-deck we found that Diethelm DJ4EI was missing. Who had seen him last, and when? It was quite

certain that he had not been in the saloon. He had been standing beside the gas-tanks before the explosion. Had he been shot, was he burned, or had he fallen into the sea? Perhaps all of it. I will never forget his last words to me: "My god, I can't swim."

The ship was ablaze, poisonous smoke took our breath. The shelling went on without interruption. While connecting empty gas-barrels with ropes, I was hit on the elbow. Blood gushed out of the wound. Norbert DF6FK tore

clear that we were not given a chance. Everything should be destroyed - no boat, no witnesses. We would be missing forever.

Peter Marx saw our dinghy. A fortunate coincidence had burned the rope with which the dinghy was fastened to the ship and the dinghy had fallen into the water. Peter asked his wife Jenny if she thought she could get it. In the shelter of two empty barrels, which she held before her, she reached the boat and rowed it in our direction. All went

last message. Had the contact been confirmed? Yes - Pat had everything o.k. Peter believed that the US Air Force should be there within the next 2 hours with a search party. That meant hope.

Then we saw to our clothing. Gero, Norbert and I were in swimming pants. Jenny wore a wrap-around skirt, Peter was in shorts. Gero had no shirt, he was topless. I wore a yellow snowshirt and a tiny hat. All others had T-shirts on. Norbert has a hat too. No-one had shoes.

In the boat we found a screw driver, a preserving jar, a little basket, a cloth, and a plastic bottle with cut-off top, for scooping. That was all. The boat had no water! Nothing to eat. No signal apparatus. Midship underneath the water-line we had a leak, caused by a gunbullet. We stopped the leakage as good as we could with rags. Every half hour we had to scoop out the water.

The sun went down. At that moment it was clear to us that help would not come before the next day. It was a long night. So near the equator, it lasts for 12 hours. A lot of time to ask many questions. How had Diethelm died? Strangely enough, there was no debate. For all of us it was for sure, the Vietcong have shelled us. Caliber: 50 to 60 mm shrapnels.

The next day we lived with the hope that a nice big plane would start from Manila, which would drop us life-saving-equipment until they got to us to pick us up. The day went by and nothing happened.

The next day dawned with calm weather. Flying tuna - no plane. We could not count on ships in this part of the world. Because of its reefs, sandbars, and shallow waters, it was marked as "Dangerous Grounds" in the sea-charts. Ships pass this area at a far distance. Too many have stranded on the sandbars before.

On the fourth and fifth day, it was sure that no-one was searching for us! The thirst tortured us. Gero tried to distillate water - without success. Small



**Figure 3** From left: Baldur DJ6SI/EL2SI, EL2BY, and the Minister of the PTT in Liberia, EL2AY, during Baldur's February, 1983, DXpedition to Liberia.

one sleeve off his shirt and applied a tourniquet to my arm. He was hit later by shell-fragments.

I tied an 70 liter watertank to 5 empty barrels and pushed them into the sea. But the wind drove them directly near the blazing stern of the ship. We could not reach them anymore.

The heat was now unbearable. Our hair was already singed. We slipped into the water, fetched the ropes with which we tied the tanks together and thought we could swim like that to Amboyna Cay, handing ourselves over and be safe.

A new round of shots made it very

aboard.

As we were searching for Diethelm, we saw that the hulls of the catamaran were peppered with shots. We called for Diethelm a few more times, but there was no sign, no sound from him.

Still under shelling, we drifted off the coast. At the time of the malicious attack, we were south-west of Amboyna Cay. As the wind blew from north-east we drifted away from the sandbar. After about 1 hour the firing ceased because of non-effect. Now the time of summary has come.

Gero had to explain and repeat his

fish, really tiny ones, swam into our basket. Still wriggling they were swallowed greedily. To our despair we lost the basket.

At the bottom of the boat I felt tiny colonies of mussels. I scraped them off with my fingernails and sucked them. Gero weakened considerably. His skin was too sensitive. Sunburn and shivers tormented him. Clothes were exchanged. Norbert gave his T-shirt to Jenny, she gave her wrap-around skirt to Norbert and Gero. So both had sunshelter during the day and a cover at night.

I unscrewed the refined steel plate which was meant to hold the outboard engine. Later on we used it as signal-plate which reflected the sun to draw ships' attention to us. The back I used as a diary, engraving the most important events, as the date DJ4EI had died - why has no-one searched for us - where was the US Air Force?

On the ninth day, by about 1300h local time I had to engrave Gero's death as well. I intended to put the plate back in its place later on, so when the boat would be found, it would give hints to what had happened to us.

During the sixth or seventh night, a ship passed us, fully illuminated, only about 400 meters from us. No chance to give signals. Nevertheless, great joy and rising hope. Now we knew that the constant northeasterly wind has carried us into the shipping route.

But it was too early to rejoice. During the following day, no ship in sight. Another long cold and wet night. We had filled the two Diesel-barrels with seawater and used them as a drag-anchor. So the boat went quite steadily. But nevertheless some waves hit us by surprise in our sleep. So for some time we could not find sleep again.

Shortly after sunrise, a big ship came along. But it passed and had not seen us, as it would happen more than once later on. One or two ships passed that day and another that night, and our hope for rescue fell. Gero's condition grew worse. Again ships during the night and the

## Spratly Today

The Spratly Islands are loose collection of rocks, sandbars, and reefs in the South China Sea, midway between Vietnam and the southern part of the Phillipines.

The islands are claimed by Vietnam, China, and the Phillipines, among others. The 200-mile economic zone surrounding islands is the motivating factor behind the conflicting claims. The region may have significant oil, gas, and mineral resources.

In the Spring of 1988, Vietnamese and Chinese ships exchanged fire in the northern part of the Spratlies. Many individual islands are garisoned by troops from the surrounding countries.

Chinese and Vietnamese naval vessels continue to patrol the region, and Malaysian authorities recently arrested Filipino fishing boats in the area.

following day. Nothing.

Then I told all of them that I had heard a voice during the second night - loud and clear - that we would be rescued on our tenth day. We prayed often.

On the ninth day Gero died. It was terrible not to help. Norbert told us, Gero had drunk sea-water during the night. At 1400h, I said a prayer and

buried Gero in the sea at about 7° 52' N, 109° 44' E.

Shortly afterwards, I saw a big plane without country-index. It flew in circles and we hoped it was looking for us. But its interest was a Russian trawler which passed us on the horizon. And then the night again.

The following day ships came only in the afternoon, some of them quite near. The letters "DATSUN" were very clear. A little later an LPG tanker passed us only 300 meters away. No reaction. Norbert was in a very bad state. He had hallucinations. He would not survive the following night. The captain got worse considerably too.

Suddenly a ship very near by, only 200 meters. We waved frantically, even tried to shout. Perhaps someone on deck might hear us. It passes very quickly. Very tired, already resigning we waved behind her. We had given up, it was too far away already. Again - nothing. We prepared for another night.

Then Jenny saw it first. The ship that had passed us had changed its course, it had turned by 90° and stayed in place. Later we were told that the First Officer Yamada had seen us and had reported it to Captain Inose. After he had stopped the engine, he had lost us. The ship drew a circle around us, found us again and went to the lee. We went on board the gangway they had lowered for us.



Figure 4 The survivors of the *Amboyna Cay* shelling re-enact their ordeal.

During all those dreadful days we were not hungry, only thirst had tortured us. During the first 14 hours on board of the Linden I drank about 20 liters of water. The Japanese crew of the Linden cared for us marvelously. The wounds were looked after, cabins were cleared for us, clean beds and clothes were provided immediately.

Slowly we picked up condition again. I had lost 15 kg and weighed only 60 kg. Our bodies had scratches and ulcers. On arrival in Hong Kong, we were examined by a physician on board of the Linden.

In a Police patrol boat we went to the harbour and from there in an ambulance to the Queen Mary Hospital. After short treatment, we left the hospital and went to the Hilton Hotel where we got treatment for our wounds by a doctor of our choice.

On our arrival in Singapore we were welcomed heartily by Henner 9V1WC and his XYL Brigitte. Besides the grievous loss of our friends, we had many material losses, including three transceivers, an antenna matchbox, a ELBUG key, microphones, earphones, a 2-element Fritzel-beam, a P 50 beam from DJ2UT, two aluminum masts, dipole, two 220 V / 12 V generators (Honda and Bosch), tools etc. A loss of appr. 20,000 DM (10,000 US\$).

Additionally, we lost all our clothes and money, in my case it was 2000 US\$ in cash. Also, there were flight and charter summing up to 5,500 DM each. But this all can be replaced, except our dead friends.

I have written to our government and proposed the captain and first officer of the Linden for decoration as representatives of the whole crew which reacted and cared for us so marvelously. We will never forget that, and will always be thankful.

(Translated by the wife of DJ6AP.)  
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### DXpeditions by DJ6SI

Callsign	Year	QSOs
LX3BD	1964	15,000
LX9SI	1973	5,000
DL0FOC/HB0	1978	2,500
DJ6SI/OH0	1986	18,000
SV1DB/A	1975	3,000
FH0FLP	1980	2,000
FR0ACB/G	1980	5,000
FR0DZ/G	1980	4,000
FR0DZ/J	1980	5,000
FH0DZ	1980	1,500
C53ADZ	1981	1,500
6W8/DJ6SI	1981	3,500
DJ6SI/TZ	1981	2,500
5V7HL	1981	2,000
TJ1GH	1981	7,000
C53DZ	1982	2,000
DJ6SI/3X	1982	6,000
DJ6SI/5U	1982	5,000
DJ6SI/T5	1982	5,000
DJ6SI/9L	1983	7,000
5X5BD	1985	6,000
DJ6SI/5V	1985	6,000
TK/DJ6SI	1985	1,500
DL0MAR/9G	1985	6,000
DL0MAR/9G	1986	5,000
5Z5EXP	1986	5,000
5L2SI	1987	5,000
A15AA	1988	6,000
J28SI	1988	1,000
TY9SI	1988	7,000
5UV386	1988	11,000

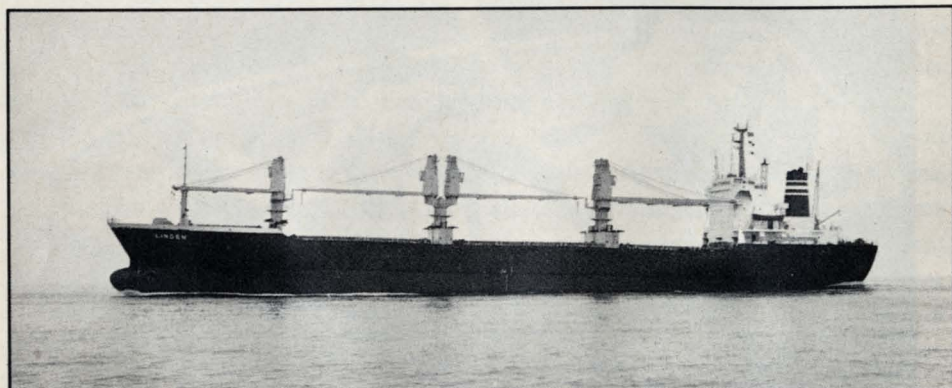


Figure 5 The MS Linden rescued the DXpeditioners on April 19th.