True Tales From Half Moon Island

By Mike Crownover AB5EB

Activating NA-89 has been a goal of mine for the past several years. The island group was much needed and it was close to home, all the things that make a IOTA activator drool. However, the only islands that I had known to be activated for IOTA where in the Brenton National Wildlife Refuge. This group of islands took a direct hit by hurricane Katrina. The problem with them being in the park is that you can not stay over night. At least you can not without some very hard to obtain permission. For that reason the islands in the park, where prior operations had taken place, did not appeal to me. So that is when my research began on other possible islands and Grand (aka Half-Moon) Island became my target.

Located about four miles off the Mississippi coast, just across the state line of Louisiana, and outside the national park, Half-Moon appeared to be a easy destination for the activation of NA-89. A look at Google Earth maps, however revealed an island that seemed to be more marsh than anything. Having my own boat for about 5 years, and fishing along the Texas coast, I was very familiar with what may appear to be dry land could actually have several inches of water over it at high tide. A call to some local fishing camps only lead to more concern on the possibility of actually operating from the island. One person told me there was “no dry land on Half-Moon”. Very little info could be found on the internet regarding the island and the only picture I found was from a fishing trip which showed only marsh. However, after comparing maps to islands on the Texas Coast, I felt confident that there where at least some dry land, but only a few spots. It was either sand or oyster reefs. Oyster reefs are dry land but they are made entirely of Oyster shells. So you can imagine how difficult it would be to walk, setup tent, etc on such a spot. So in the end I had to really go on my own knowledge of the gulf coast and its islands and hope that we would find dry land. Dragan K0AP later revealed his concerns after we did find land, but in the end it even made it more of a adventure.

There have been 4 known activations on NA-89, the first being by Mike W5ZPA, Larry, K5MK, Chuck N5GPP, Wondy K5KR, and Tony WB5SSB in Jan of 1989. Another group operated from the same location in 1994 and included Buzz N5UR, Don W5FKX, Bruce, K5HAA, Max K5PP and Randy WX5L. Both of these activations took place from a facility owned by Kerr McGee. It sounds like a 5 star hotel compared to Half-Moon! The operation took place with prepared meals, A/C and even Ice Cream! This is the way to do the island. However the facility had long since been removed. In 2003 Silvano KB5GL (SK) operated also and was able to make about 800 contacts with poor conditions and operating only during the day. There were also contacts from a operation by NE4G that have been credited to the island. Despite the operations above, the demand for NA89 outside of NA was very high, with the JA’s in desperate need of a contact with NA89.

So now I needed a team to go with me. After a false start earlier in the year due to logistical issues with team members a planned trip in the spring was cancelled. Looking at the weather that weekend it would have been tough with the wind. My boat is a 24ft bay boat and although it can take 4 to 5 foot seas, I unfortunately know this from experience, it would likely have been too dangerous with a loaded boat full of people and eq uipment to make a landing in the spring. So the trip was moved back to October with the hope of calmer seas and cooler weather. With the new dates Dragan K0AP (Z32XX) was now available to make the trip as was Hector AD6D (XE2K). Dragan lives in Kansas City, and Hector lives in El Centro, CA. I had met Dragan at the previous years IOTA Bash held in San Antonio and I have known Hector for years. I operated with him from XF2K. Both of these guys are great contesters. Hector is exceptional in antenna building and I knew having him on the team with give us a great chance of being successful. Having been on expeditions when factory bought antennas have failed having someone like XE2K on the trip to me was a big plus. This was my first activation with Dragan, but his operating ability was just as I expected. His ability to handle the huge pile ups was obvious on the trip.

The trip to NA89 was about a 10 hour drive from my home in Texas. We left at 5am with the boat, “Extra Shift”, in tow, loaded down with equipment. The trip was fairly uneventful until we had a tire blow out on the boat trailer. After changing the spare we had to locate a replacement spare and then we where back on our way to the island. This put us several hours behind schedule, but allowing time for “Murphy” in our planning ensured that we would get to the coast still with time to make it to the island before sundown. It was not until about 5pm that we got to the boat ramp in Ansley, MS and put the boat in the water. We where very close now, and with only a few hours of day light left we headed towards the island. The Extra Shift has GPS and sonar, this was very helpful, but these were unknown waters to me, so I was cautious in leaving the coast. We squeezed through some shallow areas only a few feet deep and finally got into deeper water in bay. This allowed me to turn my attention to finding a piece of land. This was the moment of truth, and I hoped the island would not let us down.

As we approached the island, we could see a small piece of land. It was a relief for the whole team to see a site we could land on. However the site was very exposed and was located on the south west corner of the island. It was a area I had noticed on the map but was not where I wanted to find anchorage for the boat. Traveling around the south tip of the island a little more the cove I was hoping to find was there. It had a narrow opening and at low tide was about two and a half feet deep. The boat needs about 17 inches of water so this was plenty for us to get into the cove. The cove itself was about 75 feet across and about 150 feet deep into the island. The piece of land was smaller but I felt much more comfortable with the boat in this location.

We quickly where on the island and a quick survey showed that a area about 50ft by 100ft would be above water at high tide. The surrounding area was dry at low tide but at high tide would hold several inches of water. It was near low tide when we arrived, so and Hector began cutting to length a 30m and a 40m ¼ wave vertical while Dragan and I worked on putting up the shelter and setting up the radio. By sundown we were on the air making contacts. The first evening was a little slow, but all of us got some time on the air. Hector and Dragan went to bed sometime after midnight and I stayed up until about 4:30 am local time on 40m working JA’s. The signals where not strong but I was able to make about 300 contacts overnight.

Dragan and Hector where both out of bed and on the air before sunrise and Dragan work some JA’s at sun-up on Saturday. They both had good runs on 10m and 12m. We set up a tribander for 10/15/20 and we also had a amp we ran 500w watts with. We used a 2kw Honda generator loaned by Buzz (N5UR) to run the amp. The pile-ups on 10m and 12m were huge, and the signals were very loud.

I was out of bed a little before 9am on Saturday. Overnight the winds had changed from the north to the south and at high tide had pushed the Extra Shift onto the mud flat. As the water receded the boat was left half way out of the water. At just under 5000 pounds the boat was stuck and we would not be able to leave the island if we needed to until the tide returned. It created a logistical issue since the steady breeze would keep it on the mud when the tide rose again and possibly push it further ashore. So I had to put the anchor into the wind and drive PVC pipes along her starboard side which was against the mud, this would keep her from blowing further ashore, at least I hoped it would. The morning at least started off right with a fresh cup of coffee, my wife packed us a coffee maker. We had to shut down one of the stations to have enough power to run the coffee machine, but it was well worth it.

The pile-ups on Saturday where fast and furious, 10m and 12m where open to the whole world. We ran two stations with little to no interference. Having the beam and vertical with filters worked great. Having the different polarization of the antennas was important with less then 200 feet separation. We ran 500w on the tribander. At one point Dragan turned off the amp since the EU pile was so big. He turned it back on as the pile died down.

As the tide moved in, I was able to wiggle the Extra Shift back into deeper water and repositioned her in about 2 feet of water. Before anchoring I took a short boat ride off the island and got some good pictures of the station and watched the sun set. We had several boats fish the cut in the island through out the day. I am sure the site of our antennas created a lot of interest. I did try to fish some that afternoon, but only got one bite. I had caught some shrimp in my casting net, so it was not a issue with bait.

As night fell, Hector and Dragan kept running stations. I was very tired after staying up until after 4am the night before so I went to bed early. Dragan stayed up, putting many more JA’s in the log. The operation had already exceeded my expectations and we still had one more morning. I slept well that night, that is what exhaustion will do for you. It made that piece of sand I was laying on fell a lot better.

I woke early Sunday morning about an hour before sunrise. I had rested enough that I could no longer sleep on the ground. By the way we had packed 2 cots but they never made it out of the boat. Funny how once you get on the island, it doesn’t seem like such a big deal. This has happened to me on prior expeditions too. You just go until you can go no more, and wake up and do it again. I noticed the generators were off and Dragan and Hector both were asleep. I was thinking I should get up and look for JA’s on 40m but I had my doubts. I then remembered we had another high tide around midnight, and I wanted to see how the Extra Shift faired. I am glad I did! The wind had changed direction slightly over night and I had left too much line on the anchor, this allowed the boat to pivot too much on the rope and was half way out of the water! The anchor kept the motor in the water and I quickly went from half awake to thinking we will not be leaving today if she is stuck. I scrambled over Dragan and Hector half asleep to get out of the tent and headed to the boat. I started up the motor and went in reverse but she would not budge. With the out going tide, I knew I had to free the boat now or we would not be able to leave until the Sunday evening. I was having no success pulling the boat straight off so I began turning the motor to the right and to the left. This made the bow “wiggle” on the mud and she slowly inched back into the water. Another lesson learned: don’t leave out too much line on your anchor. I had stayed on islands overnight before on the Texas coast, but have never faced these challenges.

The roar for 225HP motor woke the other two in the tent from their peaceful dreams. Hector was ready for coffee but Dragan was still too tired from just a few hours of sleep and he stayed in the tent. I quickly got to the radio and started calling CQ on 40m CW and the JA’s where waiting. I was able to work about 40 or so before the band went dead. Hector and I ran nice pile ups all morning and around 10am, Dragan made his way out of the tent. Our goal was to leave the island around noon, so Hector and I began taking down the vertical and Dragan continued working the pile on the tri-bander. We had most of the camp taken down in about an hour, and just as we thought we might have to drag Dragan off the radio to take down the rest of the station, the generator ran out of gas. So, that was the end of radio activity and we began taking down the rest of the station.

The picture on front of the qsl card did not come easily. The only camera that we had with a timer we knew how to work was Dragans cell phone. It took him no less then 30 minutes of trying to figure a way to prop it up where it would stay up. It only had a 5 second delay and the first couple of takes where from about 25 yards away. It was quite comical to watch Dragan sprint to get in the picture. After a few failed attempts it was agreed that we would move about 15 feet away. So after letting Dragan catch his breath, we finally got the picture that is on the qsl card. With the boat loaded we all climbed aboard and began our short ride back to the dock. The trip was uneventful, and we were able to load the boat with no issues. We were back on dry land, but still had at least a 10 hour drive home.

On the way home we did have another flat on the boat trailer. Lucky for us it was about 4 miles from where we bought our first replacement tire so we knew exactly where to go. The guys at the tire shop found it a little comical since they had remembered us from just a few days before.

After all was said and done we had 3700 contacts in the log and many happy hams around the world with another island checked off the list. It was a pleasure doing this with Dragan and Hector, truly a international team. What a great hobby!