

Field Day first timers – Australian style

Just pick a mountain and drive up it...



Caption

GREAT OUTDOORS. For the several years that I lived and worked in Britain, there was not a great deal that I missed about Australia once the initial pangs of homesickness had faded. My family and I were far too busy having a great time as we explored our new home and we thoroughly enjoyed all that living here could offer. Apart from family back home, the one thing that I did perhaps long for was the opportunity to get far away into truly remote wilderness and experience the satisfaction of being entirely self-reliant in a place of untouched natural beauty. While this is obviously still possible in the UK, it is arguably a bit harder to achieve than in Australia, where the possibilities are almost endless.

I have always enjoyed field days. The opportunity to get out of the city, set up portable gear and work out in the open is a lot of fun. For many years, I had gone out with my local radio club, Melbourne's North-East Radio Group (NERG) who run a large station for the national field day (known as the John Moyle Field Day after a legendary pioneer in Australian amateur radio) on a prominent mountain about 40 miles from Melbourne. NERG always did well and

I learned a lot about the challenges of field day work. Over the last few years though, I had noticed that there were progressively fewer portable stations participating in the field day. This trend had also been noted by others and was beginning to have a significant impact on the event as a whole. Slowly, the idea of getting out on my own or with a small team began to form. I had a little bit of radio gear that would be suitable and certainly had enough camping equipment to manage, so it was more a matter of obtaining a few additional pieces of kit and getting organised enough to have a go.

Selecting a peak to work from was not as easy as I had initially anticipated. The John Moyle Field Day is held in March each year and has a scoring process that rewards careful strategising by giving distance multipliers for bands above 30MHz. Finding the 'sweet-spot' of being close enough to major centres to achieve sufficient contacts, but far enough away that the multipliers really kicked in was the key. I had done a lot of hiking in the Victorian Alps of south-eastern Australia and was sure that there would be mountains in that region

that would suit, but a few other considerations also needed to be factored in. These included being reachable by vehicle, but not so accessible that the site would be overrun by onlookers who would trip over guy lines and coax. Also, it needed to be very high with an uninterrupted 360° outlook for effective VHF/UHF work. After much poring over topographic maps, I decided that a return visit to the high country was the best way to choose. Accordingly, my family and I went hiking over the summer and during this reconnoitre I was able to identify a small number of peaks that might be appropriate.

EQUIPMENT. I had a TS2000x that would work well for VHF/UHF and an old FT-100D for HF, but antennas would be tricky. I have set up a 'go-pack' for portable HF work that includes a very robust stainless steel multi-band dipole that could cover 80-10m, so bands below 30MHz were essentially sorted. No problem for VHF/UHF FM either, as I had a few multiband verticals that would be fine. The main problem was beams for 6m, 2m, 70cm and 23cm. I didn't have anything that would work and time was rapidly running out for building necessary antennas. Complicating matters further, I only had three very basic telescoping portable masts, so it would be necessary to co-locate some beams



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together. Just as the likelihood of running all bands on SSB looked bleak, I spotted Sandpiper aerals during an online search. They had a 6m, 2m and 70cm Yagi mounted on a single boom and a neat 19 element 23cm beam that would conserve mast space and (just as important) were within my price range. A few e-mails later, I had placed an order via the Australian agent and was assured that the antennas would make it out to Australia in time for the big day.

Ten days later, the box arrived and I managed to get some time to assemble and tune them just before packing for the trip.

The final challenge was power. I don't really like generators – they are noisy, dirty and heavy. Besides these obvious drawbacks, they are generally banned in most Australian national parks. I had a 140W solar panel kit with an 88Ah deep cycle battery and this had worked very well during previous camping trips. However, trying to run two radios flat out for 24 hours of contesting as well as keeping lights and computers running would be a real stretch. Fortunately, I had a number of ultra-light folding panels designed for extended hiking expeditions that could be daisy-chained to a little regulator I had made. These could harness a further 110W for charging a second 88Ah battery that I ordered online.

PHONE A FRIEND. All of the equipment was coming together (and just in time), but it was clear that a solo effort was going to be far too difficult. I sounded out my brother, Gerard, VG3GT, to see if he was interested. Both of us have hectic work schedules and young families, so taking off to the wilds for a weekend of radio is not so easy to organise, particularly at short notice. Amazingly, the stars were perfectly aligned, so that we were both free and able to get the necessary 'leave-



Caption

pass' from our long suffering families. Even the weather forecast for the weekend looked okay. So far, so good...

The Friday morning before the field day, I packed my vehicle and loaded the masts onto the roof rack. Patiently, I waited for the call from my brother advising he was leaving work and was ready to be collected for the trip. Unfortunately, he rang instead to explain that he was caught up at work and would be significantly delayed.

Six hours later we scrambled away from Melbourne as dusk set in. While we were both excited at the prospect of running our first field day team effort, there was also the anxiety of whether we could make it to our chosen site and whether the gear would work. We drove for five hours straight, pausing briefly 10 miles from the ski village of Mt Hotham and nearly 4300 feet altitude. This was the point at which the bitumen ran out and we would be driving on rough rocky 4WD tracks. Before starting the up the last and steepest stretch we walked out ahead and found a large dead tree fallen across the track. Fortunately, we had packed the chain-saw and, by silvery moonlight, we cut through the obstacle and shifted the massive trunk from the path. From here the track was the steepest gradient I had ever driven. The low range of my diesel 4WD was just enough to crawl steadily upwards. At midnight, we reached the top (5600 feet ASL), feeling completely elated.

As forecast, Saturday morning was bright, sunny and windless. The field day started midday local time, leaving us about five hours to get six antennas up on three masts as well as solar panels, radios and computers set up. It was going to be tight.

Working together, we set up a shelter alongside the vehicle and placed the table,

chairs, radios, batteries and computers underneath. Next was the HF dipole that we sloped as an inverted 'V' from the guyed nine metre mast, followed by the vertical and beams for 6/2/70 on a 6m mast. Finally, we erected the 23cm beam and vertical (which itself was 5m long and not easily pulled up) on another 6m mast. By now we had a pretty impressive antenna farm and multiple lengths of coax snaked their way back to our operating position. We then spent nearly 30 minutes organising a complex array of coax switches and diplexers to route RF from rig to antennas and labelled everything for later reference. To finish off the station, we carted out the solar panels, positioned them to catch maximum sunlight and connected the regulators to the batteries. There were only two problems with all this. First, the power supply for one of the laptops was missing, meaning that HF would need to be logged with paper and pen. Secondly, we had taken longer to set up than expected, meaning we were already an hour into the competition. With some trepidation, we checked the SWR on all the antennas – amazingly everything seemed to be working properly! We sat down, took a deep breath and started to call 'CQ John Moyle Field Day'.

Dividing our workload as best we could, Gerard worked all HF bands and I took on 6m to 23cm. HF was cracking, with 40m particularly alive and well. The log pages started to fill rapidly. I started to swing the beams around and stations were bounding in loud and clear. Within a short time I had worked several portable stations on all the VHF & UHF bands. Given that I had initially decided I would be pleased to have worked even just a few stations, particularly on the higher bands, this was much better than



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I had expected. At night, the wind picked up and whipped our shelter back and forth as waves of mist condensed onto every surface. Gradually, field day activity settled and we figured we could catch a bit of sleep before morning came and calling picked up around sunrise.

Sunday morning was stunning. The wind had gone completely and all the surrounding valleys were full of mist, creating a myriad of mystical lakes three thousand feet down below us. As the sun rose, we turned our solar panels to best advantage. Radio activity became pretty busy once more. Other stations were intrigued by our location and the solar power set up. All were surprised



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to hear a station portable in the alpine region and it was clear that nobody had worked field day from this area for many years. Most memorably, we managed to work our families back in Melbourne and advised them that we were safe and well. The last minutes of the 24 hour period rolled around and the pace briefly picked up again prior to the conclusion of the contest. Finally, the clock ticked over and we were done – our first field day team effort was over.

In essence, everything from the solar panels to the radios and the antennas had all worked wonderfully. Even better, we had made a decent number of contacts and had probably acquitted ourselves well on total scoring. A little over three hours later, we were ready to head down the mountain.

WORTH IT. We had enjoyed a wonderful weekend of field day. Remarkably, we had not encountered a single person or other vehicle during our entire time off road.

It had been great fun and adding to the number of portable stations felt like we were doing something really positive to help ensure the future of the field day. Furthermore, our gear had worked well and we had learned so much to improve on our effort next year. All the way home we discussed different aspects of our station and what we would do on our return in 2012 – there is no doubt we would be heading back to have another go!

A few weeks after the contest log had been submitted by e-mail, I thought I'd see how we had ranked. Surprise turned to delight when I realised that our station (VK3JNH) had been awarded first place in the 24 hour, portable multi-operator, phone only, all bands section, with 277 contacts and 2542 points. Now we definitely need to return to our remote alpine summit to participate again. Message to others considering a first-time field day effort: 'GO FOR IT!'