

Quest for Goat

It was on the one four six seven hundred machine, during the Spring of 2013, that I first heard of the Summits on the Air (SOTA) program. A discussion was being lead by Craig Wallen (AC4M), who was informing all those who were listening about a new program for ham radio operators to communicate from mountain tops. This program, which had originated in England, was now beginning to have activity all over the world, to include the United States. Craig was sharing how much fun he had had while hiking to a mountain top and making QSO contacts via his portable handie-talkie. Matter of fact, he was recruiting for someone to participate with him. I fell for his pitch.

For my first adventure I met Craig at the parking lot of the Buffalo Mountain Johnson City Park. We both were outfitted with our portable VHF radios, but also had packs stuffed with dry socks, knives, compass, trail map, candy bar, sunscreen, first aid kit, notebook and pen, and two soft drinks. I did not have anything particularly special to communicate with, not even a spare battery or extra antenna. For that first encounter with a SOTA expedition we travelled two miles, or a bit more, and secretly secured one of our drinks in a mountain stream about halfway to the summit of White Rock Ridge. A couple of hours later we retrieved those drinks, cold from the stream, and enjoyed some refreshment after a hard hike. However, between the hikes up and back, we enjoyed a warm Spring day atop the mountain overlooking Johnson City and made a number of contacts via our portable VHF radios. I think I got over twenty QSOs via my Yaesu VX-8 handie-talkie that 15th day of April, which accounted for my first eight points as an activator. Not bad for my first SOTA adventure!

A couple of weeks later I found myself on the height of Cherokee Mountain, about two or three miles west of my previous encounter. But this time I had encouraged my good friend Tom Price (KI4CVU) to go along with Craig and me to experience this SOTA business first hand. And an experience it was too, having to endure a very tough and steep climb to the mountain's pinnacle via a gas pipeline right-of-way. Tom showed his physical toughness by making the trip without a pack, having used a plastic file box instead, which contained two full size (and weight) radios! It has also been rumored that Tom additionally had a QST magazine in that box. What a great day for the three of us, with twelve QSOs I had scored eight more points and now had 16 points total.

My next encounter, not even a week later, was High Knob. I had become so enthusiastic about the program and addictive to SOTA that I had passionately talked another friend, Earl Oaks (N4ZFA), into coming along. So it was with Craig, Tom, Earl, and me putting up antennas atop High Knob in Norton, Virginia. This summit was a bit easier since we were able to drive up to within 150 yards of the actual top. By this time I had purchased a new antenna for my VX-8 handie-talkie -- a light-weight, portable, roll-up SlimJim. Using it as it hung from a tree branch, and fifteen QSOs later, my point total had climbed to 26 total. I was hooked!

Next it was just Craig and me again trying to tackle Delaney Mountain. Oh, but how this one was so different from the previous! Not far from US Route 421, which goes across Holston Mountain, this one proved to be unique - there was no trail! It was a steep and brutal bushwhack trek all the way to the top. Oh how this one just about did me in, but here I discovered the need for a good pair of boots and a pair of gloves for holding onto thick brush. Tough and trying, I nevertheless discovered that I was now totally addicted to this SOTA program. Seven QSOs from this summit earned eight points which now would give me a total of 34.

So why the interest in the points? The points are a reward, a measurement, an encouragement, to communicate from mountain tops with ham radio equipment. Depending upon the configuration of the summits and their elevation, points are awarded for “activating” these summits. And to activate a peak one only needs to achieve four QSOs. Additionally, one can also be awarded with certificates and trophies. One of the most sought after awards is the designation of Mountain Goat, which requires 1,000 points. At this point I believe there are only about 66 Mountain Goats in the United States. Maintenance of records for this program is kept in a data base in England, and the records are so detailed that I can go back to any of my summits and retrieve information as to who I contacted, what time of day the QSO occurred, and on what band.

I have shared with you how I got involved in this program and how it became addictive to me. I have been doing it since April 2013, and am now on the threshold of achieving Mountain Goat status. I only need 16 more activator points to achieve my goal. During the period 2015 and 2016 I hardly made a trek to a mountaintop. During that time I suffered two serious heart issues. Yet, I wanted to continue on, and I did with some help from my doctor and fellow SOTA participates. So now I am on the verge of my quest for goat, which has been a record of what I’ve learned about operating ham radio in the field.

I have been through three different HF portable radios. I have settled into an antenna arrangement which works for me. Now I have standardized my pack contents. Also I’ve figured out how to best power my system, as well as to how to carry it while maintaining its waterproofing. I have made friends all over the United States, and better yet, have developed enduring relations locally. There are so many who have shared with me and from whom I have learned a lot about operating portable and mastering low power radios. My quest has taken me to mountaintops in Alabama, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. I’ve trekked up mountainsides without a trail, in the snow, when there was no cell phone or GPS coverage, when it was nearly 100 degrees, in the rain, and while swinging from limb to limb. My four-wheel driving ability has improved considerably. Most of us hams are physically able enough to do this program (no substantial giants required); after all I am 71 years old, overweight, and have had two heart issues. I highly recommend you get involved in this program if you are new to our hobby - I don’t think you will find anything that advances your ham radio knowledge base as much as this program will. SOTA familiarity equals ham radio proficiency and adeptness.

Some might say that they don’t have enough experience to go straight to SOTA participation. Well, my friend and president of our radio club, Larry Dale (KD4FTN), has introduced a new club activity that ought to make all, regardless of experience level, feel comfortable with SOTA preparations. This new activity is called “QRP in the Park”. I encourage all of us to get involved with “QRP in the Park”, either as an operator or a mentor.

As I think back on the last five years many wonderful memories come to mind concerning SOTA. Probably the most memorable are the outstanding and breathtaking views from many of the summits. And while on the hikes there were so many opportunities to enjoy all the plant and animal life these local mountains contain. Interesting have been the bears seen, snakes missed, and hornets outran! I’ve stood in eight inches of snow, nearly driven into a four foot snow drift, taken cover from dancing lightning and loud thunder, 4-wheeled over some pretty rough jeep trails, all the time trying to stay safe, warm, and/or dry. And what has made these memories most valued have been the partners I’ve had while climbing to the mountaintops. My good friend, Tom Price (KI4CVU) just about carried me back to the Jeep after one of my heart issues on the trail. My best partner, Craig Wallen (AC4M) has carried my pack when I felt I just couldn’t go anymore. Good memories and good friends have come with SOTA.

Locally, there are a number of folks willing to share with you how they tackle their quest in the SOTA program. You ought to consider consulting with David Gulley (K14AAU), Ron Burns (K14TN), Liz Burns (K1LIZ), Erik McCord (WX4ET), Craig Wallen (AC4M), Chuck Milhorn (AA4IT), Walt Beaton (NE4TN), or myself. And there are others; I just don't bring them to mind at this moment. After all, I am 71 years of age! Also, I recommend you check out the several SOTA web sites to learn more about how the program works, e.g., activators and chasers, point system, database record keeping, etc. Just do a Google search on "Summits on the Air" for the latest information.

After 106 summits I am almost there. I have two more summits to go and by then I ought to have arrived at the magical 1,000 points. Hopefully, the next time you see me you can speak to me in that most wanted dialect by saying something like "Baaaaaa"!

--John.
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