

# Running a Special Event Station

## with particular reference to JOTA and TDOA

### Introduction

These pages are compiled from notes and experiences in running a special event station as a very inexperienced beginner in the field of Amateur Radio. Our own TDOA station was a great success. Six participants went on to gain their Novice licences within six months while two dads gained their full B licences in the same period. I was determined to make the event a success and would like to help others to do the same. Our biggest headache was the cost of using the local school. Our few operating problems could have been solved by having a second operator at each transceiver to explain operating procedure and to record details of contacts for certificates.

### Location

First find a suitable location, preferably at no cost, that will be available for the whole 48 hour period without interruption. It should have dry cover, an electricity supply, water and toilets, and a suitable site for aerials. Car parking and convenient access are also desirable and any nuisance to neighbours should be avoided totally. Pay attention to security, making sure that the site and valuable equipment can be attended at all times. Use one door for visitors and monitor other exits.

### Callsign

Well before the date, arrange who is to be responsible for the radio station and apply for the callsigns. This is free. Send for the Scout or Guide information sheet, which has up to date information, and for a list of all the British JOTA or TDOA callsigns.

You will need QSL cards, which Radio Amateurs use to confirm contacts. These can be bought ready printed or to your own design. If you design your own, do not specify the year so that any remaining cards can be used next time the callsign is activated. A supply of plain faced cards is essential if the visitors are to design their own cards. QSL cards are exchanged via a bureau and take months to arrive. Do make it clear to young artists that the card they have decorated will go for ever and let them make a copy to keep. They may have forgotten all about the event if and when their reply card arrives.

### Publicity

When you know the dates and times of operation, the callsigns and any other newsworthy facts prepare a press release and send it to every known source of free publicity. By the terms of the licence the station must be open to the public, but you may not want uncontrollable numbers, so gauge your publicity accordingly. Only the determined will find you if you are off main roads.

### Safety

The operators themselves are usually safety minded but do check that there are no overloaded circuits or trailing leads on the floor. Where possible, route cables well above head height. Aerial guy lines should be located with care and their positions clearly marked.

## **Food and drink**

Radio amateurs get thirsty and hungry. They appreciate food and drink in return for their services and someone needs to be responsible for supplying this and clearing away regularly so that nothing is spoilt by spillages. If no separate dining area is available, finger food is perhaps more convenient than knife and fork meals. Check if anyone has special dietary needs. Catering could well be a challenge for patrols or an opportunity to gain a badge or award for something other than Radio. Visitors also need sustenance, which might produce a small profit to help with the costs. Make sure you have all the equipment you will need before you run out at 3 a.m. on Sunday morning. A microwave oven is very useful, as are plenty of electric kettles. If you are selling items, don't forget a float of small change.

## **Activities**

Decorate the locale with posters and displays of Amateur Radio, World Scouting or Guiding activities, and have copies of magazines available to look at. You may find a much needed leader or helper if your unit looks lively. Make sure everyone is busy and not bored and have lots of ancillary activities. Making QSL cards keeps younger members happy for ages. One side of the card can be printed with the required technical information while the reverse is blank for individual designs. The station callsign should be in letters at least 10mm high and suitable stencils make this easier. Plotting and logging contacts is a responsibility accepted happily by young shoulders. If you can provide a suitably secure display area, old receivers and equipment will keep dads and granddads happy and a display of QSL cards will impress, especially if some exotic locations are represented.

You should have a large map of the World, a map of Europe and a map of Britain. Most contacts will be within the UK, so the British map needs to be quite large. Use pins or flags to mark the contacts so that the maps can be used next time.

Devise word-searches and other pencil and paper games and if possible have displays of packet radio or computer generated Morse code practice available. It is a good idea if children write down the message they want to give on the air. It should give their first name, their unit and the location and any other details such as age and hobbies. They can be given the opportunity to practice with a tape recorder if they are at all nervous. Making a QSL card is that much more worthwhile when you have a contact to send it to.

A competition for visitors based on questions from the display material increases spectator participation and combats boredom if the operating conditions are poor.

## **Photographs**

Make sure someone is on hand to take plenty of photographs, preferably with no other responsibilities. Magazines welcome good action shots from these events and if the press don't turn up you have your own publicity to fall back on. However a word of caution, unlicensed operators should not be shown in poses that appear to infringe the radio operating regulations. Photographs intended for publication must have members in correct uniform.

## **How to become a Radio Amateur**

Information about becoming a Radio Amateur should be readily available, especially about local clubs and courses. Where youngsters are themselves licensed amateurs they should wear their own

callsigns. It is always encouraging to others to learn of local successes, and in particular the new Novice Licence is aimed at absolute beginners and especially the under 14s. All sections of both movements have badges or awards to work for. Make sure that each unit likely to visit your event is aware of the scope the event provides and where appropriate include the material in your unit programme well in advance of the day. Copies of each syllabus should be readily available at the event. Testing may be shared by several people so a syllabus slip for the individual candidate avoids duplication or worse still accidental omissions. If you plan to award badges during the event, a needle and thread of the appropriate colour gives instant satisfaction.

## **Certificates**

Every visitor taking an active part in the event appreciates some record of achievement, especially those who cannot or do not feel ready to be tested for a badge. Because QSL cards take ages to be exchanged, a certificate for those who made radio contact or a sticker is enough to satisfy most youngsters. If part of a syllabus has been covered make sure the candidate has written confirmation of this before leaving the venue.

## **Budget**

You will need to make some estimate of costs before embarking on the event. Usually radio amateurs are only too willing to operate without any form of payment, but you should ensure that they are not out of pocket and any travelling or other expenses are met. Keeping them supplied with food and drinks usually more than compensates for their efforts. To save embarrassment, make sure that they can be identified as recipients of free food if they have to go to a service area where payment is being taken. If your premises are free, it would be kind to make some contribution to heating and electricity costs. It should be possible to monitor consumption by reading the meters at the start and close of the event and paying according to the applicable tariff.

A flat fee per unit will usually cover the cost of stationery such as certificates and QSL cards and any prizes. Items for sale has the disadvantage that someone is required to be responsible for the stall who might be better employed elsewhere.

If you plan to have other related activities, such as electronics workshops, remember safety equipment and a First Aid kit. You may find it wise to set a lower age limit for construction with soldering unless you can offer one to one supervision. If possible offer priority advance booking with a deposit or full payment in advance. A stock of unused kits ties up a lot of capital but bulk buying often lowers the price. Remember to allow for between 5% and 10% wastage of components when costing. It is kind to offer help should the product fail within a reasonable time.

## **Reports**

Both The Scout Association and The Guide Association require a brief report of the event for their annual report. It is as well to bear this in mind at the outset as it requests counts of numbers attending. I found a system of colour coded stickers a simple and effective head count. At the entrance each visitor was asked to wear a colour coded name badge. Each badge was numbered so at the end of the event the number attending in each category could be seen at a glance from the next sticker number. First names written on each badge made it easier for the radio amateurs to introduce visitors on the air and helped overcome shyness. As well as photographs of the participants in action, their own verbatim comments add life to what can easily be a very dull report. Get the report written as soon after the event as possible while it is fresh in the mind.

If you have any awards or presentations that cannot be made during the event do so as soon as possible afterwards. If you expect 50 badges to be gained do not rely on being able to buy them the week after JOTA or TDOTA. Better to get a few too many and sell the surplus off to those less well prepared.

### **Manning the station**

The event is run for the youngsters. Make sure each transceiver has adequate workspace and a degree of quiet, especially if the signals are of mediocre quality. For logging and certificates, some basic information about each contact is required. A 'secretary' at each station who keeps the records, organises the turns at the microphone and maintains order, takes a lot of pressure off the operator who needs to concentrate. A third person to answer spectators' questions is another stress reducing Godsend. Try to position operators where the equipment and the faces of those at the microphone can be seen; backs are boring.

### **The visitors**

If the event is well supported and several groups are expected to attend, run an appointment system with those who have least distance to travel being given early or late slots. Make it quite clear that large numbers of unsupervised youngsters will not be tolerated and encourage parents to come along to help. The aim is to have a steady stream of visitors. Those who wish to stay longer, especially if to work for a badge or to give positive help must have their parents' permission. It is a good idea to have younger visitors in the daytime while reserving the evenings for older members, not forgetting those who were so busy caring for the youngsters during the day that they had no opportunity to make their own contacts.

### **Finally**

When it is all over make sure each Radio Operator gets a personal 'Thank You' card, preferably made by a child. It will do much to ensure that next year's event gets off to a flying start.

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## **EQUIPMENT CHECK LIST**

### **Radio Operators including Secretaries/explainers**

Log sheets, large pad of scrap paper, pencils, pens.  
Small slips to record individual contacts for certificates  
Space for Short Wave Listener logging.  
Call books and list of JOTA/TDOTA stations.  
Free food indicator badge, own callsign and name badge and JOTA/TDOTA callsign sign.

### **Doorkeepers and marshals**

First Aid kit, cash box, badge certificate book and badges, badge syllabus sheets, supply of all stationery, sticky labels, receipt books, lost and found box.

### **Catering**

Cooking and serving equipment, washing up liquid, tea towels,  
Plentiful supplies of food and drink.

### **Electronic workshop**

First Aid kit, safety equipment, tools, documentation and good lighting.

### **QSL card making**

Plain cards, coloured pencils, felt tip pens, letter and number stencils.