

# "WE ARE 35 ALPHA ONTARIO ...

*...good luck in the contest, QRZ. This is VA3RAC."*

By Rick Furniss, VE3IHI

If you were in Ottawa at the Field Day 2000 (FD2000) site then you might even have said that a few times yourself. However most of you were not there to share in the making of a new Canadian FD record so let's take a look at the making of a super large FD effort.

In December 1999, the Ottawa Valley Mobile Radio Club was hunting for an FD chairperson to put the June 2000 effort on track. Glenn, VA3GLN, decided that if they would let him take a crack at his plan he'd do the job for them. Glenn thinks big and FD was no exception; on his first round of trips to the other radio clubs in town he told them he was going to put on a 12A effort! Going to the other clubs was a different approach to begin with: the Ottawa area normally has about 7 different groups all holding their own 1-3A Field Days. Glenn knew he needed a larger group than any one club could provide so he visited at least 4 of them in person and sent representatives to others. The response in the end was more than anyone could have imagined in the cold of those January nights.

At the first of what would be many FD2000 meetings 12 people showed up. Some of them were sent by the local clubs to gather more information; others were there on their own to get involved early in what seemed like a great idea. A few items had to be worked out fairly quickly; others could wait and change as time went on. One of the goals set was that this FD would be about having a BIG event: BIG as in the number of stations on the air and people involved; not big as in a large QSO count. It was inevitable that if we got a 12A on the air a large score would follow. A second and important goal was that we would have a good time and project a good image of our hobby to others.

Other topics for that January meeting included keeping what we were up to a local secret. Lots of people knew we were working on a large

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Glenn, VA3GLN, and some of the crew.

event and the public statement was that we were having a 12A station. It didn't seem prudent to give our competition, if we had any, a "heads up" on our plan. At that first meeting there was some discussion about what the Canadian record for FD size was and wouldn't it be a better goal to take a shot at that! At the next meeting it became apparent that with more people coming on board it seemed possible to go very big. A short discussion over the merits of breaking the 28A world record brought us to the point of doing a 30A! After a quick check of the bands involved and the equipment we could activate, we bumped the number up to 32 stations. Then two weeks prior to the event one of the ATV people mentioned that "we could use another band for that you know", and we were suddenly at 35A at the last minute!

The long haul from January until May was filled with FD meetings every month and then every two weeks just prior to the event. A huge number of things needed to be accomplished during the Winter and Spring months. We approached Radio Amateurs of Canada to obtain permission to use VA3RAC as the official call sign for the event. We also contacted the National Museum of Science and Technology and secured permission for us to set up the site on its grounds.

The Museum turned out to be a great supporter for FD. They gave us everything we asked for and let us have the run of the place on the Friday, Saturday and Sunday of FD. They assigned some of their staff to do PR work for us and provided us with equipment and paid staff with a forklift to unload our tractor-trailer.

Once we had a site we needed stuff to put on it. Tents, food, water, antennas, towers. The Communications Research Center in Ottawa provided 22 military "A" frame style tents, two generators totaling 64 Kilowatts and over 600 feet of aluminum tower. They even picked up the fuel bill for the generators; the big one ran from Friday until Sunday near supper and never missed a beat or ran low on fuel. Dan, VA3XDD, and Larry, VE3WEH, gave up their radio FD and instead took on the job of feeding the crew for the event.

Other people stepped in to fill the multitude of jobs needed but one of the most important ones remained open. No one wanted to be the site planner. This is one of those jobs that absolutely *must* be done. Brice, VE3EDR, stepped in and took on the nearly impossible job of site and RFI planning.

The remaining people were mostly band captains. Band captains were responsible for one mode on one band and they had to recruit enough operators and equipment to run their station for the event. This strategy worked: none of the stations were unattended for long and the workload on the captains was manageable. None of them seemed to be overwhelmed, perhaps due to their fine character more than anything else.



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We also needed antennas for the towers. The initial plan was that every captain would get at least a wire dipole strung between two supports. However most ended up with beams as more antennas became available. Antenna crews, not the band captains, were given the task of putting all this up.

As Spring arrived the meetings grew larger as more people became involved. Thirty people showing up at a meeting was not uncommon and we had over 50 in total working on the project. Band captains made lists of necessary supplies. A 100-foot spool of coax was donated: 35 stations at 50 feet of cable each meant that we needed at least 1700 feet of coax. Much more than that was actually used — perhaps as much as 4000 feet — since you need to get up to the feedpoint as well as run along the ground to the station. We positioned the stations to accommodate the power distribution network as much as the antenna locations, so it was a choice between coax or extension cords.

Computers and logging software, extension cords, tarps, ropes and lights were also on the list of required items. The list went on and on.

Radios were also in short supply. Some band captains put together more than one station. Rick, VE3IH, visited Ken's, VA3KA's, office to test software and practice on the 15m digital station and found a complete 6A station set up and working on the huge table in the middle of the room! Not a bad show considering most people go to FD, not set it up *in the office*.

The power situation became clear as well. CRC provided us with the 60 kW generator and four power distribution points. Each of these points was a breaker box and a series of duplex outlets all mounted on a piece of plywood. To connect it all together took three 400 foot runs and one 500 foot run of TEK cable, also from CRC. We were fortunate that Ernie, VE3EJJ, set up a perfectly functioning and absolutely safe power supply and distribution network for us.

It was clear from the beginning that computer logging was the only way to go. Computer logs would make changing operators a simple task. The software tracks the dupes so the new operator doesn't need to memorize the whole log or go back and look up calls. We briefly thought about networking PC's but had no network cards, no cable and no one to put it all together. Thirty-two PC's are more than many small offices use and would have been a job in itself to manage.

The Writelog program was used because it was a known product to some of the FD2000 band captains. The author kindly donated a copy of it — registered to the VA3RAC call sign — so we made copies and distributed it to the group. It worked fabulously well; it's made for digital modes and makes working 20m RTTY and PSK31 stations like "shooting fish in a barrel". The program works great on phone as well but uses few of the built-in features. No complaints on software and only one computer crash was heard all

weekend. We lost one log due to a computer failure, and after the recovery effort only 14 QSO's were truly lost. An excellent result considering we had more than 30 PC's in the field.

The Ottawa Valley Mobile Radio Club, the Ottawa Amateur Radio Club and the Pioneer Amateur Radio Club provided much-needed funds to enable the FD2000 group to buy things like food and water. The three clubs gave more than \$1600 to the effort to get it off the ground. The cooks planned a chicken dinner on Saturday night and all 150 \$10 tickets were sold out before FD. Buying dinner tickets was the FD operators' way of putting some money in the pot when it was needed. As well Pierre, VE2GPF, who had come on board as Co-chairman with Glenn, set about raising funds and donations. He sold uncountable \$25 sponsorships to every person he knew or met. Pierre also persuaded an Ottawa Councillor to pay the City licence fee for our Loeb food trailer: a savings of \$100. We also received a donation of the use of a TransX tractor-trailer for two weekends. The first one was devoted to picking up the towers a month before FD, and the second was on the FD weekend itself. We truly needed such a large truck as it took two loads to get everything on-site, then two large loads to return it all on the Monday after FD.

The space required for moving tents, tables, chairs, lights, power network, towers, cables and a golf cart is easy to underestimate. These large loads require lots of workers. Few things look better than a dozen willing helpers when the tractor-trailer needs to be loaded. These people are the heart and soul of any operation; the ones who don't go home when the fun is done. They stayed until 9:30 pm on Friday night and after 8 pm on Sunday. These are the people who make FD or any other event, for that matter, possible — they never get enough thanks.

At last the big weekend arrived! Friday morning was filled by making the pick-up of the tents and electrical

system at CRC.

Easy work for that crew; the CRC guys have lots of forklift trucks and don't mind using them. At the last minute we

decided that a gas-powered golf cart would be a nice luxury to have. A 1000 foot circle looks huge until Brice puts three 160m and three 80m dipoles into it. Then it seems small until you walk across it a few dozen times; at that point it becomes clear that the golf cart is a great idea, *not* a luxury. At 14:00 the 25 to 30 people on-hand got their instructions and set to work. By the time the sun was setting they had the truck unloaded, 22 tents up and over twenty 32 foot towers and antennas up in the air. The power network was in place and ready to run. Each tower and power point had a ground rod and strap installed. The food trailer had arrived, been powered up and had cold drinks and snacks ready by mid-afternoon. All of this was done without a single injury or incident or even a harsh word. The die had been cast, we could make it; we *would* make it!

Almost as an afterthought, at one of the last FD meetings, Glenn mentioned he was going to get a crane for us to use. At the time it seemed to be a nice idea but not an achievable goal until Frank, from the crane company, showed up about 13:00 on Friday afternoon. He was looking for a couple of guys to make up a fixture for joining our VHF antenna to his 230 foot truck crane! A few hours later we had a 13-element beam and a rotor with over 200 feet of coax and rotor cable attached and tested. By sundown we had the show-stopper of the day up and ready to go. A couple of simplex contacts, using an HT, with some Montreal stations and we were good to go.



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As the sun set a tired group looked out over a massive setup; we were almost there.

Saturday was almost calm by comparison to Friday. Only two towers and three antennas to be put up. The band captains attended to installing the radio equipment in the stations and we were all on the air just after 14:00. Everything ran fine until about 03:00 Sunday. Then it began to rain; lightly, almost a mist at first. As the hours went by it kept raining, only harder and harder. This was *not* in the WX forecast for Ottawa. By the time 08:00 rolled around some stations had stopped operating because the rain on the tents made too much noise to hear the radios. Others had resorted to headphones. Several stations had to stop and power down due to water in the radios from the leaking tents. Six inches of water and muck in the 20/15/10m digital tent ended their day early.

The Ottawa area got just over 2 inches of rain that Sunday — a new record for the day — most of it during a few hours in the morning. Inch-deep water running down the roadway, a 1' x 4' foot diameter whirlpool going down the stormdrain just steps outside the 40m digital tent. The Field Day field already had a little standing water on it on Friday and refused to soak up any more rain on Sunday. It was like living on a bog for a while but we didn't care; what's FD without a little rain? Those are all stories for another day though. On this day there was only one story for us: we had made it! We were 150 operators strong!

*We were 35 Alpha Ontario!*

