

Contesting is at the Heart of Amateur Radio in Thailand

Contesting has remained at the heart of Amateur Radio in Thailand ever since international contests enabled HF activity in the country for 5 years during the mid-1980s. At the time, HF Amateur Radio operations were forbidden by the authorities, and it was only thanks to repeated requests for permission to operate in international contests that Thailand remained active on HF.

Contest activities from the club station of the Radio Amateur Society of Thailand (RAST) then helped to convince Thai authorities that the hobby offered many benefits and demonstrated the high level of interest in the hobby in Thailand. This eventually led to fully legalized HF activities that are still gaining in popularity today. The number of Thai stations taking part in HF contests has enjoyed impressive growth over the past few years. Thailand now ranks third in the world after the US and Japan in terms of the number of Amateur Radio operators. The percentage of amateurs with Intermediate or Advanced class licenses — and capable of operating on HF — also has been growing rapidly.

In the Beginning: Challenges

Amateur Radio was provided for under Thailand's Act of 1955. However, regulations to supervise the activity had not been drafted at the time. Established in 1963, RAST had assumed the role of issuing call signs and took responsibility for its members' operations on the air.

However, big changes would occur during 1982 after Director-General Suchart P. Sakhol of the Post and Telegraph Department (PTD), Thailand's telecommunications regulator at the time, sidestepped the issue of the lack of Amateur Radio regulations by setting up "Voluntary Radio" for channelized operations on 2 meters. In 1981, to help skirt the issue of legality, the PTD began organizing exams and licensing Voluntary Radio operators for 2 meters, issuing call signs with a VR prefix and a serial number; HS prefix call signs were a secondary assignment, and their use was discouraged.

"No, this is not Amateur Radio. Thailand is not ready for that yet," the director general said at the time. But these actions seriously undermined RAST's authority,

flew in the face of international conventions, and effectively took 2 meters away from existing hams.

Then, in 1982, RAST suffered another major setback when its president since 1971 — Col. Kamchai Chotikul, HS1WR, died. The PTD had moved to inspect, register, and seal all HF Amateur Radio transceivers in the country. Some 800 radios were registered, and licenses were issued to the owners to possess, but not to operate, their radios.

On January 1, 1983, HF operation in Thailand was formally declared illegal, and the government announced that anyone operating HF Amateur Radio equipment without authorization would be arrested. This presented a crisis for RAST and for many of its members who had been active HF operators.

Contests and HF Activity

Officers of the society discussed ways of lobbying to gain permission to operate on HF legally, and it was decided to begin by establishing a club station and then to submit requests for permission to operate during international HF contests.

RAST's vice president at the time, Prof. John Hugh Jones, WA3SLK (SK), proposed that such a club station be established on the campus of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), where he was also the Vice President for Academic Affairs. He authorized setting up a temporary station inside campus buildings. AIT had the advantage of being a neutral location in an academic environment. This is how the HSØAC club station was born there some 34 years ago, although the call sign initially was HSØA.

The society then made formal requests in writing seeking permission to operate in international contests, including the CQ World Wide and CQ WPX contests, the IARU HF Championship, WAE contests, All-Asian DX, and others.

These requests were submitted to the PTD on an almost monthly basis, and all were approved with permission granted to operate. In early 1983, RAST's operations on contest weekends began.

This was how Thailand was able to maintain an international presence on the HF bands, while quietly "nudging" the authorities to get on with drawing up regulations to govern the hobby. RAST would "remind"



Figure 1 — The CQ World Wide CW contest team at HSØAC in 2000 at the club station on the campus of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) north of Bangkok.

the regulator of this desire with each formal request to operate in a contest, which the PTD would approve while sending monitoring officials to witness the activity. This, incidentally, led the contest operators to become good friends with many of these monitors.

At first, contest operations were set up in classrooms and sometimes in converted storerooms, but later AIT assigned some space beneath a dormitory and built walls around it to provide a “shack” that was dedicated to RAST’s operations from the campus.

This contest activity achieved several objectives. These included maintaining Thailand’s presence on the HF bands, allowing hams in other countries to contact Thailand, and reminding the Thai authorities — who were supposed to be drafting Amateur Radio regulations during this period — of the enthusiasm among Thais and expatriate residents to get on the air.

It also provided an outlet for contest operators who otherwise could not transmit from anywhere else in Thailand, giving them a way to meet with their friends, be it on the HF bands or in person as fellow operators in the shack. In addition to getting together during contest weekends operators would regularly meet at AIT to carry out antenna work beforehand.

The contest pile-ups from Amateur Radio stations worldwide also demonstrated to Thai officials the demand for contacts with Thailand and reinforced the argument in favor of legalizing HF Amateur Radio operations in the country. With this coming in the wake of the Vietnam war, at a time when there was a perceived, albeit dwindling, threat posed by communist insurgents, Thailand’s National Security Council (NSC) ruled that HF Amateur Radio was an “inappropriate” activity — one they further claimed the PTD was “incapable of adequately monitoring.”

RAST committee members — particularly Yongyuth Napasap, HS1DS — played a key role in convincing NSC officials of Amateur Radio’s benefits. These efforts paid off when regulations governing Amateur Radio, drafted jointly with RAST, were finally announced in August 1987, to become effective on January 1, 1988.

Ironically, the introduction of Voluntary Radio in 1981 had accelerated the legalization of Amateur Radio in Thailand. Coming at a time when there were no mobile phones, the activity had drawn a lot of Thais into the hobby, and after ham radio was fully legalized and regulated, most of them accepted the international nature of the hobby and embraced all its aspects, adopting HS and later E2-prefix call signs. Many of them upgraded to Intermediate class licenses to gain HF privileges.

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Figure 2 — An action shot of the CQ WW CW 2000 featuring Champ, E21E1C, in the foreground.

HSØAC in the Modern Amateur Radio Era

Following the full legalization of Amateur Radio in August 1989, the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej was formally awarded the call sign HS1A in a ceremony attended by officers of RAST. Five years later, in November 1994, RAST gained the prestige of being placed under His Majesty the King’s Royal Patronage.

Under the new regulations, RAST was assigned HSØAC for a club station, and this became the call sign for the station at AIT, which has used it ever since. For almost 20 years the station was located in the basement of a student dormitory on the AIT campus, but in 2003 the university needed that space for other activities, and it offered RAST a small utility building the school no longer needed.

Thanks to its conversion to a club house following the receipt of a generous donation from the Yasme Foundation, HSØAC was soon able to move into this building while an impressive array of antenna towers was erected at the new campus location.

In October 2011, however, disaster struck when floodwaters inundated much of northern Bangkok in what was effectively a tidal wave. At AIT, the flooding reached a depth of 2 meters in a matter of minutes at the station on campus. The floodwaters remained at that level for more than a month, destroying most of the equipment and damaging the premises; the extent of this damage only recently became fully apparent. This was a major setback, and

a long period of evaluation followed, to determine whether to re-establish the station at AIT or to move to another location.

One offer from a resort on the outskirts of Bangkok was carefully considered, but there was strong support for rebuilding the station at AIT after more than 300,000 baht (USD 8,470 at today’s exchange rate) was received in donations, including another generous contribution from the Yasme Foundation as well as financial support from International Amateur Radio Union (IARU) Region 3 directors from IARU’s “Fund for Special Projects-Founded by 9V1UV.”

Work began in earnest to rebuild and re-equip HSØAC on the AIT campus. When Jakkree (Jack) Hantongkom, HS1FVL, was elected president of RAST in May 2014, the restoration work at HSØAC kicked into high gear with teams of volunteers working over several weekends.

When the work was completed, three operating positions had been installed and newly constructed monoband antennas mounted atop three towers. A formal opening party held at the station on August 3, 2014, was attended by more than 100 RAST members.

Up until late 2016, RAST members routinely used HSØAC to operate in all major contests, with the society encouraging new operators to gain on-the-air experience from there while the club station also provided an opportunity for hams licensed overseas who were visiting Thailand to get on the air legally after they became society members.



Figure 3 — In a big team effort, a homebrew 40-meter monoband Yagi is erected for HSØAC at AIT in June, 2014.

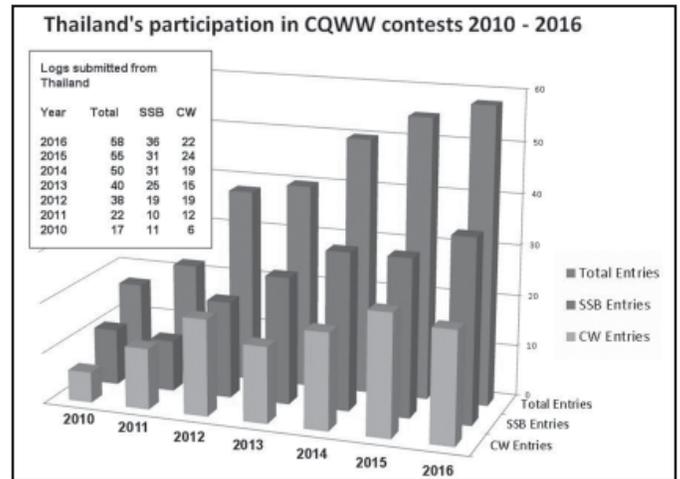


Figure 4 — The dramatic rise in Thai participation in major contests, as evidenced by logs submitted in the CQ WW since 2010.

Indeed, contesting continues to play a role in Thailand in helping hams to gain access to additional bands, as is evidenced by the country's performance in the CQ World Wide VHF Contest each year.

Contesting is Alive and Well Today

Looking at the statistics for 2015, there was more activity in Thailand for the CQ WW VHF that year than in any other country of the world, apart from the US and Ukraine. Notably, much of this activity was on 6 meters, since, until today, this contest offered the only opportunity for Thai Amateur Radio operators to operate legally on the 50-54 MHz band.

Interest in gaining access to the HF bands among Thai operators continues to be high, with the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), the current regulator, along with RAST's support, having conducted several Intermediate class examinations. In addition, last year the NBTC and RAST organized Thailand's first Advanced Class examination, which allows those who passed and upgraded their licenses to use equipment with an output power of up to 1 kW.

RAST Secretary Chalermphol "Champ" Muangamphan, E21EIC, heads the Thai Volunteer Examiner team that regularly conducts ARRL VEC examinations that allow Thai radio amateurs to obtain a US Amateur Radio license. Those who pass the exam are then able to use their US license to upgrade their Thai license to a class that permits HF access.

This VE group has even given US exams in neighboring Laos and Malaysia. In the case of Laos, it has enabled Laotian citizens to finally have a means to become radio amateurs, since Laos has no Amateur Radio licensing program of its own.

Previously, while foreigners could operate in Laos based on licenses from their home countries, there was no way for Laotian citizens to get on the air.

The authorities in Laos have now accepted the possession of a US licenses by Laotian citizens as qualifying them to obtain a Laotian license as well. Exams in Malaysia have, among other things, provided some Eastern Europeans working on sea-based oil rigs in the area a chance to take Amateur Radio exams. The fact that Champ is a world-class contester leads him and his team to encourage those taking the exams to utilize their newfound HF band privileges to participate in contests.

The legacy that contesting has had in promoting Amateur Radio along with a growing interest in HF activity is reflected by a steady increase in participation by Thai radio amateurs in international contests.

This is evidenced by the number of stations in Thailand submitting logs in the CQ World Wide contests, both for SSB and CW, which has been steadily increasing over the past few years. This can be seen in the chart, which shows that the total number of contest logs submitted for these contests has increased from 17 in 2010 to 58 in 2016.

The past 3 decades have seen a number of transitions at HSØAC, which has overcome all hurdles or potential setbacks thanks to the enthusiasm and leadership of RAST and to the support of its members and individuals and agencies that have made donations in the past. Now, however, it faces a new challenge.

The Sad Legacy of the 2011 Flood

It appears that HSØAC will now have to move to a new location following serious subsidence at the club house on the AIT

campus — a delayed consequence of the 2011 flooding, which apparently damaged the building's foundation. This was unknown to the team that rebuilt the station.

In fact, in 2012 and 2013, there was a debate within RAST whether to relocate the station elsewhere or to rebuild. After the many generous donations, however, it was decided that sufficient funds were in hand to restore the club house at the existing location on the AIT campus.

Back then the team was unaware that the severe flooding had washed away soil around the foundation, and evidence of this only recently became visible when, in mid to late 2016, the ground below part of the HSØAC club house began to subside. This caused part of the floor to drop and, in turn, cracks to develop in the roof, disabling the shack bathroom.

This time, however, equipment and furnishings were removed and stored securely away from the site, while a search continues for a new location. The society would like to build not only a club station but also a headquarters office on property it intends to purchase. So, RAST decided to raise funds again. Under the leadership of RAST President Jack Hantongkom, HS1FVL, committee members are confident that these goals will be achieved — hopefully in the near future — after which HSØAC will return to the air once again.

The author is a vice president of the Radio Amateur Society of Thailand under the Patronage of His Majesty the King (RAST) and has been active as an Amateur Radio operator in Thailand since 1978, including participating in contest operations from the RAST club station in the 1980s. He has held the call signs HS1AMH, HSØ/G4UAV, and HSØZDX.