

## **History of the VE6/VA6 (Alberta) SOTA Association – The 1<sup>st</sup> Decade**

October 1, 2022 saw a low-key but enthusiastic celebration within a small part of the Alberta amateur radio community, as the VE6/VA6 SOTA Association reached its 10th year anniversary. Alberta first became an official SOTA (Summits on the Air) entity in the fall of 2012, although the SOTA awards program started in the UK a decade earlier, in 2002. Globally, SOTA participation has grown steadily, to around 10,000 "activators" and another 10,000 "chasers" (with a good deal of overlap in these categories), organized in about 200 regional associations that encompass nearly 100 countries. Canada started in 2009 with the VE2 Association in Quebec, and subsequently expanded until there is now has a separate association for each province and territory. (Yes, even PEI and Saskatchewan, although areas that are not well – endowed with hills qualify for a slightly relaxed definition of a qualifying summit.)

A large amount of setup work was required on the part of Alberta's first association manager, Walker McBryde, VA6MCB, to whom thanks are due from Alberta activators and many chasers over a wide area. This involved exhaustive research into summit locations, altitudes and place names, as the global SOTA management team has strict rules about which heights can be included in the database as potential activation targets. The toughest one to manage is the "prominence rule" which requires that a summit have at least 150 meters of vertical prominence from the surrounding terrain. This means, for example, that a peak near to another, slightly higher one can only be included as a separate summit if all possible routes between them require a descent and re-ascent of at least 150 m vertical. Walker had to do a lot of looking at altitude data, and even summit names were sometimes a challenge, requiring him to consult various sources and apply his own knowledge as a mountain guide.

An update undertaken in 2016 resulted in nearly 1300 mountains and foothills in the database for VE6. Of course, some of these peaks will never be activated, due to the difficulty of approach or access restrictions, etc. but these "unobtainium" summits are offset by some popular and easy foothills - many within a day trip of Calgary - which have been activated dozens of times. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Association Manager, Ian, VE6IXD, who took over for Walker McBryde in 2021, orchestrated the process for a 10th anniversary update to the summit database, using more advanced satellite data. Simon Melhuish of the global management team helped guide VE6 through the process with useful software scripts and pre-loaded altitude data, although a good deal of work was still needed by Ian and some local volunteers to check prominences and research place names. It was a real treat on the exact Oct 1<sup>st</sup> date of the anniversary to see another 994 summits posted to the SOTA database. Many of the new ones were obviously accessible and therefore anxiously awaited by VE6 activators looking for new climbs and first activation honours.

As of 2022, Alberta has nearly 30 activators on the VE6 SOTA roll of honour, (see <https://www.sotadata.org.uk/en/roll/activator>), of whom about two dozen have done more than one activation and about 15 have been regulars. This is a far cry from the first 5 years, when VA6MCB and VE6IXD (together with his good friend Sherpa John) were the only regular participants, with an occasional appearance by a few others, such as VA6TTX (Paul), VE6CCM (Jack), VA6FUN (Mike) or VE6AGR (Ken). Ian did a good deal of trial-and-error learning in those early years, in particular developing an appreciation of the utility of alerts and self-spotting, and recognizing situations when an amplifier is called for. This knowledge was put to great use in mentoring subsequent newcomers to this radiosport, starting with VE6AGR.

A key turning point seems to have been a spring day in April, 2017, when Ian organized a two-summit activation (Buffalo Hill and FH-06) which was attended by a whole group of amateurs who were just getting interested in SOTA. A number of these subsequently became “frequent flyers”, including VE6AGR (Ken), VE6LCE (Rich), VE6LEW (Lewis), and VE6VID (Malen) - the last of whom went on a subsequent SOTA blitz which has only accelerated with every passing year.

The activator list kept growing slowly after 2017, as various amateur radio people approached the group or connected in other ways. The VE6/VA6 SOTA Association has never actively recruited new activators, although this may have happened indirectly as a result of presentations made to various ham radio clubs. Rather, people with an interest have either sought out experienced activators or started solo careers, and in recent years, this has included a number of people with considerable mountaineering skills and experience. The VE6 SOTA group has always tried to be inclusive and welcoming – and “interdenominational” in terms of club affiliations – but is inherently limited in size as hill – climbing is not for everyone. Newcomers have generally found readily available mentoring (and generous loans or gifts of gear) from VE6IXD (the Pioneer) and VE6VID (the Homebrew Antenna King), among others.

Communications among the group were considerably facilitated by the creation of a reflector under the *Google Groups.io* umbrella, which was set up by VE6SVJ (Stephen) in 2018. He was also the group’s first regular activator in CW mode, inspiring several others who had only done voice modes previously to pursue some fluency in CW. By the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the VE6 SOTA logs showed 5 amateurs who had activated from hilltops on CW. An expansion into other modes from CW and traditional SSB or FM has also taken place, including digital (mostly FT8) and digital video (pioneered by VE6IXD). Over time, more activators have also dabbled in a wider variety of frequency bands, ranging from 160 m to 6 cm.

VE6/VA6 members have played with grey-line activations (not very successfully), summit-to-summit special events, periodic VHF/UHF contests, and various challenges issued by the global SOTA organization. Certain members have also done a good deal of activating while travelling in other jurisdictions, ranging from other Canadian provinces to Europe, the USA (including Hawaii) and Japan. Diversity has also been reflected in the climbs, which have ranged from easy foothills to hard-core mountaineering in main - range peaks. The latter has been a particular specialty of VE6FPV (Peter) and VA6MPM (Paul), resulting in a number of impressive first activations and several magazine articles and photo presentations. The more modest foothills hikes have seen a number of spouses or other family members come along to see how it’s done. The family inclusiveness award arguably goes to VA6GOK (Gokhan), who has taken his growing family on a number of activations, and memorably once had to drag a 2 – year old down from the snow-band just below the ridge – crest on Hailstone Butte!

10 years on, VE6/VA6 land is well established as a recognized SOTA hotspot within North America. As of the Oct 1, 2022 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary date, we had 3 out of the 6 people in Canada who had qualified for the 1000 - point "Mountain Goat" award, with several more close behind. In answer to those who may think SOTA is only for the young, our very first VE6 Goat, Ian, VE6IXD, made all 250 or so of his qualifying climbs as a senior citizen. His “Goat Day” activation gave rise to a nice local tradition whereby someone doing their 1000 – point activation gets a little hilltop celebration help from fellow activators and other friends and well – wishers.

On the chaser side, VE6/VA6 also has a half-dozen people who have attained the “Shack Sloth” award, including VE6FUN (Mike) in Smoky Lake, AB who has always been far and away the leader in Alberta, also ranking high up in the Canada - wide and global standings. Local amateurs have been wonderfully supportive as chasers too, having saved a number of activations with 2m simplex contacts on days when HF QSO’s were too sparse.

It is no wonder that certain items of VE6 SOTA swag, like our logo’d baseball caps and buffs, are valued by VE6 SOTA participants, certain visiting activators and a select group of frequent chasers who have found these items in their mailbox. It all illustrates the "Alberta Advantage" when it comes to SOTA -- we are blessed with a fabulous array of hills to climb, very few access restrictions, lots of decent wx, scenery that just won't quit, adventurous and friendly activators, and lots of supportive chasers. Here’s to another fun decade, and looking forward to someone writing a 2<sup>nd</sup> installment of this story at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

73 es GL de VE6AGR 2022.10.25