

How do I?

An occasional series

This week: Receiving QSL Cards Via the Bureau

Editor's Note: This article is being updated in November 2023 as a result of some changes taking place in the Third Call Area Incoming QSL Bureau. The general principles apply to just about any Incoming QSL Bureau, but some details may be unique to a given Bureau.

For starters, let's mention that a QSL card is proof of having made a radio contact. When we say QSL Card we have in mind something tangible having many of the same characteristics as a post card – size, shape, and thickness.

Many radio clubs at the size and scope of a “National Association” provide a QSL Card Sending and Receiving service. Some charge a fee for using these services. Others include use of the service as part of the standard membership fee.

Germany has a relatively small number of amateur radio operators. The national association is the DARC. In Germany, all local clubs are DARC affiliated. If the non-resident membership fee, stripped of most membership privileges, is 99 Euros a year, or \$107.62 at today's rate, I don't think you can really complain about the cost of ARRL membership!

One of the advantages of being a German amateur is that by joining your local club and DARC, you have access to their QSL distribution network. As I understand it, whether you want to send a QSL card across town, or across the planet, you simply take it to a club meeting. The QSL representative collects your card and forwards it as appropriate.

In the United States, QSL card processing is sort of a split system.

Inbound cards are routed to Incoming QSL Bureau Sponsors. The Sponsor for the Third Call Area is the National Capitol DX Association (NCDXA). QSL cards for any US call sign that has a number 3 in it are directed to the National Capitol DX Association. It doesn't matter where the owner of that call sign actually lives. If the number is 3, his or her cards go to the Third Call Area QSL Bureau.

You do not have to be an ARRL member to use this Incoming QSL Bureau service.

Outbound cards follow a totally separate path. See our article titled: **Sending Your QSL Card to a DX Station** for information about the ARRL Outgoing QSL Bureau.

Under the NCDXA Third Area Incoming QSL Bureau umbrella, the first step involves a high-level sortation of the inbound cards. Inbound QSL cards are sorted and sent to volunteers (known as Sorters) according to the first letter following the "3" in the call sign. For example, one Sorter may handle all the cards for the letter I, as in call sign AF3I. Another Sorter may handle all the cards for the letter P, as in call signs KB3PQT and N3PRO. And yet another Sorter may handle all the cards for the letter F, as in call signs N3FWE and KC3FFI.

Our opening paragraph says that changes are taking place at the Incoming QSL Bureau. What are these changes?

- 1.) The focal point for any non-radio communications between ham radio operators and the QSL Bureau is changing. For many years any communication, such as letters or eMail, was sent to the QSL Bureau address at their location of record. Now, those communication flows are being streamlined and sent directly to the person who sorts the incoming QSL Cards for your call sign letter of the alphabet. This person is called the Sorter. The call sign letter I am describing immediately follows the number in the call sign.

The QSL Bureau website now has a matrix showing each letter of the alphabet with a link to the call sign of the person who is the Sorter for that letter. Anything I need to ask or tell my Sorter can be handled by looking up his or her call sign. In turn, that call sign provides me a link to the Sorter's eMail address. I no longer send anything to the QSL Bureau headquarters. Anything I want to send goes directly to my Sorter. Easy Peasy

- 2.) The other change involves how the individual Sorter wishes to handle the mountains of paper that cross his or her desk

In the past each ham radio operator was required to supply the Sorter with several Self-Addressed Stamped Envelopes (SASE). As the Sorter processed the incoming QSL cards they would be stuffed into that ham's SASE. When the SASE became full the Sorter would seal the envelope and drop it in the mail. When all of my envelopes have been used I would get a note from my Sorter asking me to replenish the supply of my envelopes.

Sometimes the mountains of Self-Addressed Stamped Envelopes would be difficult for the Sorter to manage. Different sizes, different quantities, different textures, different colors, varying amounts of postage, insufficient postage, varying penmanship, you name it. "Different" equates to "Difficult".

Some of the Sorters now request that ham radio operators DO NOT send SASEs to the Sorter. Instead, some Sorters ask that their hams send some money, which the Sorter will properly account for and use when needed to purchase envelopes and stamps. This concept helps the Sorter keep his or her office neat and tidy with just the right amount of envelopes and postage stamps for the short term activity.

Some Sorters are flexible. They are willing to receive either SASEs or Money and keep track of the details either way.

Whether you and/or your Sorter have opted to use the Envelope Process, or the Money Account process, you will periodically receive the QSL cards the Sorter has for you. The Sorters have a pretty good understanding of how much incoming QSL card activity you generate by DX QSOs you make. Some Sorters might mail a partially filled envelope to you once a year if your DX activity does not generate enough activity to fill an envelope sooner.

And, the Sorters have a very good understanding of how many cards (by size and weight) will fit into an envelope for mailing to you. When the envelope reaches a limit (size or weight) your Sorter will mail it.

Just about everything about participating in the Incoming QSL Bureau starts with learning who is your Sorter. Once you know who is your Sorter you want to know how to communicate with that person – by mail, by eMail, or by some other means,

When you first communicate with your Sorter you probably have a three-part question on your mind.

- 1.) Do you accept SASEs?
- 2.) Do you accept Money Accounts?
- 3.) If you offer both options do you have a preference for which type of account I use?

Once you know the answers to those questions you can take one of the paths that your Sorter supports.

Appendix A – The Envelope Path:

If your Sorter is willing to have you provide SASEs you need to know how to send your envelopes to your Sorter

Your Sorter could tell you what to do, or you could use my instructions (below).

Buy some 6 inch by 9 inch envelopes.

Get the kind that DO NOT HAVE A METAL CLASP. Metal clasps trigger a postage surcharge.

If you rarely work DX consider sending two envelopes.

If you routinely work DX consider sending three envelopes

If you are Big DXer consider sending four or more envelopes.

Write your own Call Sign (and nothing else) where the RETURN ADDRESS usually is placed, Use nice, neat, block letters

Write your own mailing address in the TO: area of the envelope. When filled, you almost certainly want this envelope to be sent to your home address.

Buy some FOREVER STAMPS.

The QSL Bureau Sorter will seal and mail your envelope when it contains enough cards to “use up” the amount of postage you affixed. One ounce worth of postage will cover about 5 cards. Two ounces worth of postage will cover about 14 cards. Do not go above two ounces worth of postage because the over-stuffed envelope will trigger a:”bulge” rule and the postage price goes up.

If you are **Postage Savvy** you know that additional ounces can use a different stamp that costs less than the stamp that covers the price of the first ounce.

If you just want to get the job done stick two Forever stamps on the envelope

Do not seal these envelopes.

Buy one bigger envelope. Let’s say 9 inches by 12 inches.

Write your Sorter’s address in the TO: area of this envelope

Look up your Sorter in the website matrix and the link that takes you to QRZ.com

Write your own Return Address where the RETURN ADDRESS normally goes.

Stuff all the 6 x 9 Self-Addressed Stamped Envelopes you prepared in a previous step inside this bigger envelope. Avoid making bulges. Postage goes up if the envelope is thicker than ¼ inch.

Seal the bigger envelope.

Take the stuffed bigger envelope to the Post Office.

Let them weigh it and tell you the price for mailing. Pay the nice man or lady

Appendix B: The Money Account Path:

Learn who is your Sorter and get his or her address.

Decide how much money to put into your Money Account with the Sorter

Write a note telling your Sorter a few essential details about yourself.

Your Name

Your Call Sign

Mailing Address

eMail Address

Perhaps your telephone number

The amount and form of money you are sending (Cash, Check, or something else).

A “thank you for your service” closing message might be nice.

Mail the note to your Sorter.

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