

Desecheo Island KP5

Pirates, Real Ones, Not the Radio Type, Add Excitement to a Caribbean DXpedition

by Randy Rowe NØTG

Our team had just returned from KP1-Navassa Island in January 1992, when we began thinking of the often quoted "Where do we go next?" Soon thereafter we chose Desecheo Island-KP5. The idea of going to Desecheo in the winter time appealed to us from two points of view. First, as a personal thing; we like the warm weather as a break from the winter and second, that time of the year would surely produce more favorable results on 40, 80, and 160 meters, as opposed to going at some other time of the year.

John Ackley KP2A had been involved in producing a very successful operation just a year prior to our opera-

tion. It was in August, however, so we felt there would probably still be considerable demand on the lower frequencies in the winter season. Knowing of John's operation I contacted him and as always, John was most helpful. He pointed us toward who to contact, reliable boat transportation, licensing, plus lots of useful information about the island for our operational set-up.

There were many others who helped provide that initial information that is so important, such as N1DX, WA8LOW, and W8HJF. In addition, once the DXpedition had been announced, there was support from several sectors. QRZ DX, The DX Bulletin,

JA1ELY, JA1DM, and many others were very helpful in passing information out about the DXpedition. Radio Works donated all of the antennas and feed line. W6PQS led the way in providing RTTY equipment through the RTTY DX Association. The 2500 Club, a group that solely supports our particular DX team, assisted with funds to offset the shipping, transportation, and QSL expense. We are also grateful for the support from several clubs and the many individuals who also contributed.

Then, there were the KP4 hams and their gracious hospitality. KP4 was the point where the team met to leave for Desecheo. We were met at the airport by KP4RF, KP4PQ, wives, and others. Arrangements were made to have KP4RF serve as a point of contact on certain frequencies during the operation from KP5, should any difficulties arise.

The Team

The KP5 DXpedition team consisted of the following: Randy NØTG/KP5, Dave WØRJU/KP5, Ron AA4VK/KP5, Murray WA4DAN/KP5, and Bob KW2P/KP5. As a personal note, this team has been together in close living conditions under sometimes difficult and challenging problems. They are the most compatible, competent, considerate, and fun friends that I have had the pleasure



The first landing site, near to the planned operating location, had to be abandoned when the surf dumped the Zodiac.

of knowing. As a team, we attempted to operate the DXpedition in a fair and efficient manner. We continuously examined our operational procedures, equipment, input from others—seeking always to make improvements in our operations and assure that it was a fun time for everyone on both ends. We attempted to keep the frequency spreads to 5-10 kHz, to confirm the calling station's callsign so that there was no doubt in his mind, to announce our callsign often, to give QSL information frequently, and to treat everyone with equal appreciation and respect.

We all gathered in Rincon, Puerto Rico. Dave WØRJU travelled on Christmas Day, arriving that evening. The next day, my son Carter (not a ham, just came along to help) and I travelled to Rincon from Dallas. During that time Dave was busy rounding up supplies locally in Rincon. Ron AA4VK, Bob KW2P, and Murray WA4DAN flew down the following day.

Planning

Planning the DXpedition was a fun time for all of the team. For nearly a year prior to the date of departure, we corresponded with each other and met



The alternate landing location meant a tough scramble over the rocks to the operating site.

on the air weekly. Discussions ranged from antennas and equipment to food and insect repellent. There is no such thing as too much planning. Dave WØRJU and I had an opportunity about six months prior to the planned DXpedition date to travel to Puerto Rico. We took this opportunity to check out what provisions could be purchased locally, rather than shipped. Additionally, we

planned all the arrangements for food, gasoline, water, containers, antenna masts, etc. Most importantly though, we made arrangements for the boat transportation. We met Frank Anderson of "Moon Dog Charters," who operated out of Rincon, Puerto Rico; a delightful and helpful boat captain. Those arrangements included having the Captain take us out to Desecheo Island for a short tour. This was a real opportunity in advance of the DXpedition to take pictures and to plan the set-up for the coming winter. So, here we were on Desecheo without a radio. It was the middle of July. The waters were very calm and the landing was very straight forward. Little did I know at that time how different the waters would be during the winter time when we returned with the full team.

The Island and Landing

Desecheo Island is a small uninhabited island off the coast of Puerto Rico. It is considered a National Wildlife Refuge and, as such, comes under the control of the U.S. Department of Interior. Landing permission is obtained by written application and signed waivers of



One of the luxury beach-front bungalows at the Desecheo Hilton. This is the operating tent of Dave WØRJU.



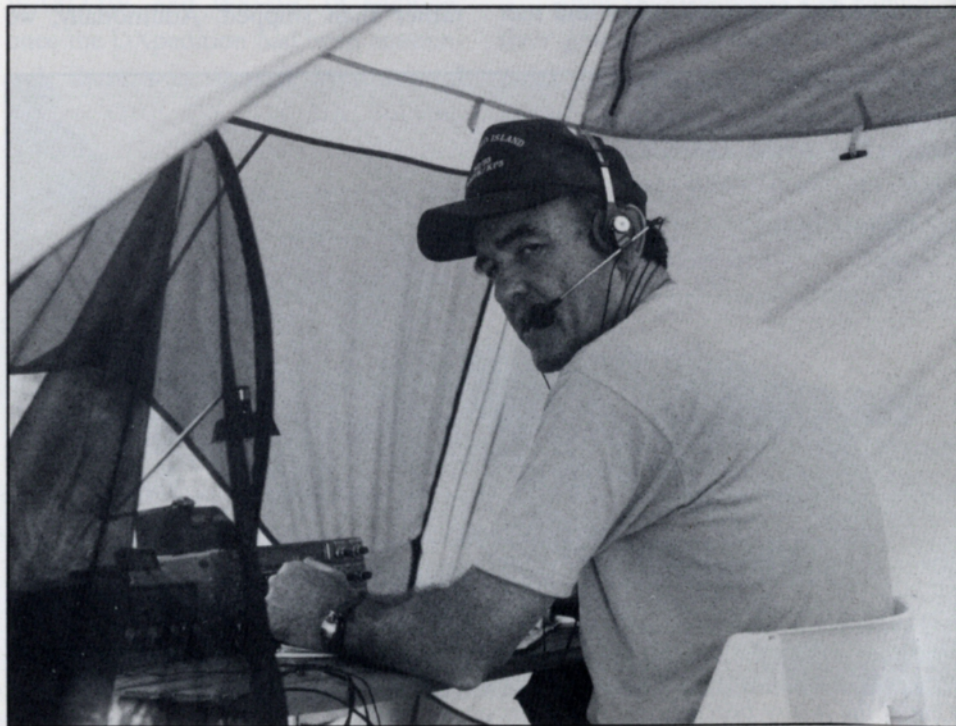
The constant wind forced the operators to lash their tents securely to the rocks. Randy NØTG uses a foam rubber pad to combat DXpeditioner seat fatigue.

liability. Also, the Department of Interior specifies only a relatively small area of the island from which operations are permitted. We observed many lizards and crabs, and Ron spotted one snake. To our pleasure, we had no pesky insects such as flies or mosquitoes.

We wanted to leave on the boat from Rincon at sunrise. The boat Captain, however, said that for the previous several days the seas were running very high. Thus, it would be required to postpone the departure until later in the day, and perhaps even for a day or two. We waited for several hours, while the Captain kept checking the sea. Finally, in mid-morning, he said that he thought he could get us on the island—"let's go."

Landing by boat presents a challenge with the action of the sea, very different in the summer than winter. It was winter and the waves were very active. There were two possible sites for landing, one near the planned operating site. The other was the more traditional site, a cove with about a 20-foot opening between the volcanic rock that leads to a small beach. This site is about a quarter of a mile from the operating site. Our first attempt at landing near the

operating site proved to be too dangerous and was unsuccessful. After one shuttle trip on the small zodiac from our boat anchored off-shore, and taking a big drink in the Caribbean, we opted to try the other site. This site was safer, but it was still a very tedious operation. It took several hours to off-load all of the equipment and supplies.



Ron AA4VK operating SSB.

Next came the task of carrying supplies and equipment a quarter of a mile to the operating site. It was very tiring trudging through the rain and climbing over the volcanic rock. It took us essentially all day to transport the equipment and set up a limited operation. Exhausted, we left most of our gasoline, water, and the spare generator on the beach at the landing site for transport the following day. We made a few contacts that first night to let word out that we were there. The rain and wind were very difficult to contend with; however, we did get things organized.

"Pirates"—not the radio type

Pirates...? Perhaps overstated, but we found it unbelievable. Here we were on an uninhabited island, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. After a first restful night and feeling refreshed from the difficult previous day of landing, we all woke up at sunrise. From our elevated position above the water we observed three small boats leaving the cove where we landed about a quarter of a mile away. We noticed a small orange dot in the center of one of the small boats and

we knew immediately that it was our back-up generator that was being stolen.

We hurried down the beach and over the rocks to the landing site. By this time the "pirates" were well out of sight. As we approached the area, it was observed that neither the gasoline nor the water were where we left them. After looking around, it was discovered that all the containers had been moved behind a large rock formation. Would they be coming back? It looked that way. Did they know that we were at the other end of the island and would they be approaching us for other items? Needless to say, we were concerned.

So, we headed back to the operating site and got on 20 meters with a general call that we needed some help. Jeff N4YIC came back. Jeff kindly placed a telephone call to Oscar KP4RF, our point of contact in Puerto Rico. Oscar immediately met me on 40 meters to learn first hand about the situation. Jeff and others stood by to assure that everything was communicated. KP4RF called the Border Patrol as well as the U. S. Coast Guard. It was not too long until the Border Patrol came ashore, taking a description of the events. While the Border Patrol was there, a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter appeared overhead.



One of the many attractions of Desecheo's elegant resort is free helicopter rides. Murray WA4DAN joins with the Coast Guard to recover their stolen generator.

They sent a tethered basket down and Murray WA4DAN jumped in, was hoisted up, and got a nice ride out over the Caribbean looking for the thieves.

In a couple of hours, an individual, at the direction of the Border Patrol, came ashore, kindly returning the generator. He indicated that it was found

stashed in a cave on the other side of the island. We are not sure who this kind individual was. After this exciting beginning of the DXpedition, things settled down, but it was reassuring to see the U.S. Coast Guard chopper fly overhead checking on our well-being each day.



Bob KW2P/KP5 knocking off SSB contacts.

Operations

We were active on the island for 4-1/2 days, making 23,000 contacts. All-band, ladder-fed wire antennas provided by Radio Works were used exclusively. No amplifiers were used. The antennas were mounted on 30-foot masts. The masts were chain-link, fence-top railing tubing. The tubing pieces were coupled to give us the 30 feet using specially made couplers, with guy attach points by Dave WØRJU in advance of the DXpedition.

Pile-ups were consistent on all bands. Very seldom was there a working out of the pile-up. The demand for RTTY was tremendous. Nearly 600 contacts on RTTY were made by

KW2P/KP5. Bob worked the other modes as well. Dave WØRJU tried 160 meters as much as he could: 224 contacts resulted. Noise was a problem. Murray WA4DAN seemed to never stop or need any rest; he just kept charging ahead, working thousands before it was all over. Ron AA4VK especially came alive during the evening; the later it got, the better he seemed to enjoy it. I operated almost exclusively CW, as did Dave. Thirty meters seemed to be especially popular for me.

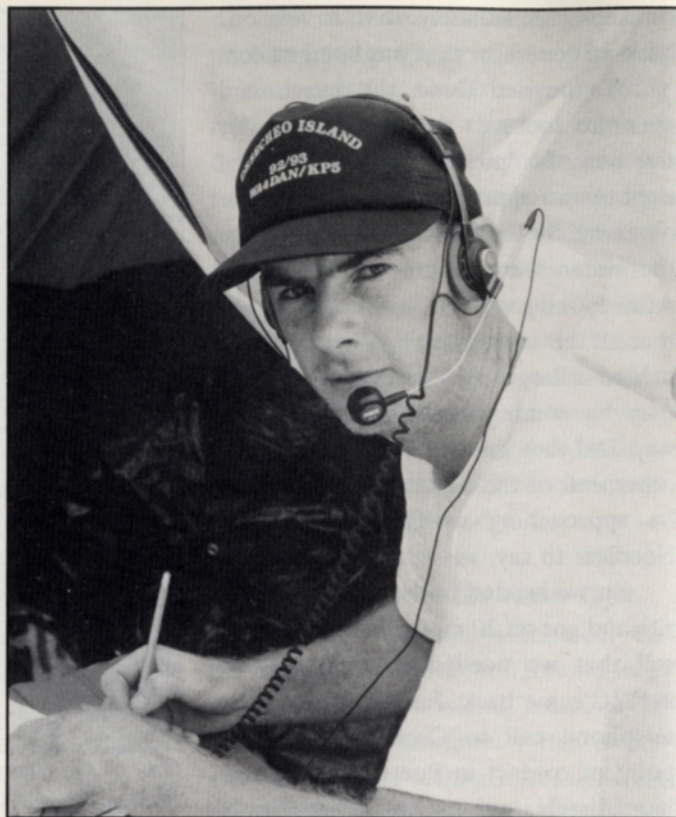
We were able to have five stations operational at almost any hour of the day. There were periods of rest for everyone, but there were often five stations operating simultaneously. This was achieved by everyone having his own complete station set-up, including antenna and tent. We attempted to spread everyone's tent/station as far from the generator as we could in order to achieve separation from interference with one another.

There was a pretty even balance of contacts on all bands, including the new bands. CW contacts accounted for 26% of the total. Because of the need in Japan, we hoped to work more JAs than we did. The declining sunspot cycle had

its effect, allowing for only short openings to JA. There were 500 JAs contacted. There were many excellent openings to Europe, producing approximately 25% of the total contacts.

Equipment consisted of each person having a complete station. We used a Kenwood TS-440S, Icom 751, Icom 735, and two Yeasu FT-890s. The power plant consisted of a 3500-watt Sears model.

There were a couple days of excessive wind and periodic rain showers. Once we got passed that, living conditions were fairly comfortable. Temperatures were generally in the upper 80s. We purchased a small refrigerator in Puerto Rico—just large enough to keep soda and lunch meat. This was a wonderful



Murray WA4DAN is a well-travelled DXpeditioner.

item to have on the DXpedition. Food was purchased in Puerto Rico and consisted mostly of canned items.

QSL

Logging was done manually during the actual operation on the island. However, when we returned home, all the logs were collected by a team consisting of Steve KD5ZD, Orin N5ORT, and Mike N5WNG. How can we thank these fellows and others who helped them? Mike wrote the software and Steve and Orin entered all the logs into the computer. Then, these same fellows pasted labels on the cards and mailed responses back to all those requesting cards. They will never know how grateful the Des-echeo Team are for their efforts, as well as the many thousands of recipients of the cards. Thanks guys.

Now, where to next?



Five antenna masts surround the helicopter landing pad. The beach was the site of the first, unsuccessful, attempt to land.