

# Navassa Revisited

Approaching Navassa from the south.

BY J. ROBERT ESHLEMAN,\* W4QCW

**I**N August of 1954, W4VZQ, WN4HBC and myself put Navassa Island on the air for the first time post war. The island had been represented briefly by K4NI of Navassa Light in the 1920s. Our efforts resulted in some 1300 QSOs, but due to low sunspot activity the results were disappointing. In 1957 another group of teenagers visited the island and made several hundred QSOs during an eight-hour stay. The last legitimate DXpedition to Navassa took place in 1958. In the early 60s the U.S. Coast Guard abruptly altered its policy of permitting amateur visits to the islands. As the years passed Navassa became rarer and rarer until a recent survey by the Geoff Watts DX news sheet listed Navassa as the most wanted country — ahead of Albania and Iraq!

In 1964, a former dental schoolmate, Ernie Hendry, K4CAH, began to make a concerted effort to persuade the Coast Guard to reverse their position. Two years later Frank Harris, WA4HTR, and myself joined in the effort. An unauthorized DXpedition to Navassa that same year only served to strengthen the Coast Guard's resolve to continue to deny permission for visits to the island. The return of Barry Goldwater to the Senate last year renewed hopes that the rigid position of the Coast Guard would be modified. The splendid cooperation of the Coast Guard in making the Heard Island, VKØWR, operation possible also raised hopes of a policy change.

Whatever the reason, the persistent efforts of Ernie, K4CAH, Herb, W4KET, and Lou,

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W4PJG, were rewarded when Commander H. C. Wyatt sent Ernie a letter in late May informing him that as of June 22, 1969, permission would be granted for small groups to visit Navassa.

Ed Roller, K4IA, was dispatched to Kingston, Jamaica, to arrange a charter and to carry one of the three beams we would need. A 60-foot twin diesel belonging to Hill's Deepsea Fishery Ltd. was chartered for a five-day period beginning June 21.

## Planning

With less than four weeks until our scheduled departure and with the members of the group separated by as much as a thousand miles, planning such a major trip was a big task. Two factors eased this situation greatly. The group kept nightly schedules on 3830 and 7205. Secondly, a group of amateurs in Kingston headed by Chuck Brydges, W4WXZ, were making arrangements for customs and local transport. They also secured most of the food, drink, gasoline and camping gear which our party of twelve would require. By this time ten amateurs, K4CAH, K4FU, K4IA, KV4FZ, W4DQS, W4KET, W4PJG, W4QCW, W4USQ, WA4HTR, and two biologists were committed to make the trip.

On Saturday morning, June 21, nine members of the group and nearly one-half ton of material were assembled at the PAA counter in Miami. Thanks to some previous arrangements made by the Florida gang with PAA, we were only charged eighty dollars in excess baggage. "Never was so much carried by so many for so little!"

*Between January and March this year, W4QCW knocked off more than the necessary 500 contacts to become first holder of the new 5BDXCC award — and then topped it off by joining a DXpedition. Here's the story of K4IA/KC4.*



At Kingston we were met by Chuck Brydges, W4WXX, communications officer at the American Embassy, and a contingent of Jamaican amateurs, 6Y5s CB, JR and LA. By the time we had finished our complimentary glass of tropical punch, Chuck had moved our mountain of equipment through customs without a hitch. Minutes later a small motorcade headed for Lloyd's (6Y5LA) place. We changed into our "island" clothes and then split up; several shopping for last-minute items including fresh food and the rest of us going down to Pier Zero to load our gear and supplies aboard the *Miss Jekyll*. She was a 60-foot single diesel fishing boat. The twin-diesel vessel we originally chartered had been captured by the Colombians the preceding week. The significance of the substitution of a single diesel vessel for a twin diesel didn't dawn on most of us until the following morning. Although it appeared that sleeping space would be at a premium for the seven crew members and our party of twelve, there was plenty of extra space in the ship's hold. This extra space was filled with crushed ice, a luxury few DXpeditions of this type experience. With the loading operation finished we all headed uptown for something to eat and to do a little souvenir shopping, leaving Tom and Gene, the University of Florida biologists, aboard to guard our gear.

When we returned at 2200 GMT expecting to sail within an hour, Tom greeted us with a long face. During our absence a minor Jamaican immigration official had visited the boat and learned of our trip. He informed Tom that the *Miss Jekyll* was not licensed to carry passengers and we did not have work permits enabling us to go as crew members; therefore, the trip was off. Up until this point everything had gone so smoothly that I could hardly believe I was actually on a DXpedition. Problems just like this had delayed the first Navassa DXpedition for eleven days.

Ernie and Chuck left immediately to try to clear the obstacle. When they still hadn't returned thirty minutes later, Herb, KV4FZ, gave

Dale, W4DQS, five-to-one odds that we wouldn't make the trip. Clearly, this was the low point of the trip. A few minutes later Ernie and Chuck were back with good news; everything had been smoothed over. Instead of leaving immediately the captain delayed us another hour until two more crew members were rounded up. Finally at 2400 GMT Saturday evening we got underway. This should put us within sight of Navassa by sunrise and there by 1100 or 1200 GMT, even if things went slower than expected.

### Under Way

When I could still see Jamaican coast six hours underway I began to suspect our arrival time would be somewhat later than expected. By this time about a third of the group was afflicted with seasickness. We were bucking both the wind and the current and progress was antagonizingly slow. The seas were running about ten feet at this point and I knew from past experience a landing at unprotected Lulu Bay would be impossible unless the seas calmed down appreciably. By 1500 we still had not made landfall and the captain decided his estimates of wind and currents were wrong. We changed our course from east to north and churned along for three more hours before Navassa was spotted straight ahead. Fortunately, the swells were only running three to four feet as we cast anchor about 200 yards from the landing. Dale and I, the two Navassa veterans, were accorded the dubious honor of being the first to be sent ashore aboard a very dilapidated looking twelve-foot runabout. About twenty trips were required to transfer our party of twelve plus several tons of supplies ashore. Each of us had to scramble up a wire rope ladder suspended from a catwalk thirty feet above the water. All of our precious equipment and supplies were handlined up to the catwalk by three Jamaicans with unbelievable stamina. Working without gloves in temperatures around 100°, these sturdy fellows brought up every single package without a mishap. Unloading operations lasted from 1930 until after 0100 GMT with



At left, W4PJG (1.) and W4USQ operating the phone positions while at the right, W4KET (1.) and K4IA hold down the c.w. positions.



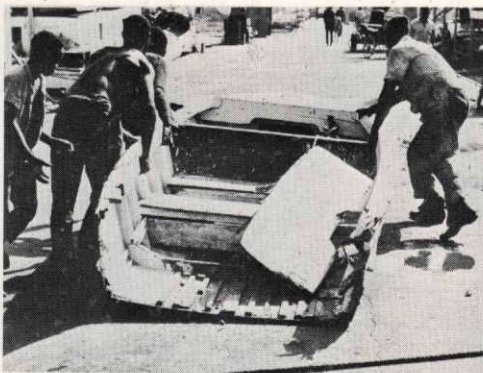
Ernie in the true tradition of a captain the last one to leave ship and come ashore.

Herb, W4KET, Dale and I had the multiband vertical up and the first station on the air in just over an hour. We opened up on 7205 at 2040 GMT with 6Y5LA followed by WA4WIP our QSL manager. As more fellows came ashore we were able to get two more antennas up, a forty meter inverted vee and a triband three element beam. This gave us three stations for the first night's operation.

When the pile-ups subsided a bit by midmorning Monday, the two cw stations and their antennas were moved about 100 yards to a spot overlooking Lulu Bay. This eliminated about 95 percent of our interference problem especially when we were using cw and ssb on the same band. Antennas at the cw station consisted of a 3-el triband beam on a 25-foot mast, a multiband vertical and a 600-foot long wire across Lulu Bay. At the ssb station we had another 3-element tribander at 25 feet, a 2-element tribander at 25 feet, and separate inverted vees for 40 and 75. With a few exceptions, the cw stations were manned by Ed, K4IA, Hank, K4FU, Dale, W4DQS, and Herb, W4KET. The ssb stations were manned by Ernie, K4CAH, Lou, W4PJK, Bob, W4USQ, and Frank, WA4HTR. Herb, KV4FZ, and I were designated as multimode operators and put in time at both locations.

Monday afternoon the USCG *Hollyhock* pulled into Lulu Bay and sent a party ashore. Although our beer supply was dwindling rapidly, Ernie decided to offer cold beer to every crew member who came ashore with the hope that this would assure Coast Guard cooperation for future DX-peditions to Navassa. Later that evening a grateful crew sent us two gallons of chocolate ice cream.

In many respects Monday was our big day. We had a four-hour, ten-meter opening to the States which produced hundreds of QSOs. Herb, KV4FZ, made the first 160-meter QSOs ever recorded from Navassa, and the 80-meter stations were solidly activated. Sunday night 80



We entrusted our lives to this little boat without realizing that the transom was practically rotted out! The little runabout fell apart as we loaded her aboard ship for the trip home.

cw was tried briefly with the vertical but was given up due to our extremely poor signal. On 75-meter ssb I was able to hit QSO rates as high as 40 per hour with a barefoot transceiver and an inverted vee with the apex at only 20 feet. Numerous west coast stations, as well as ON4UN and G13OQR, were worked on 75. Our only serious mishap occurred Monday afternoon when Ernie slipped and fell into a rocky crevice while erecting a forty-meter antenna. Fortunately, our medical kit contained some pain killers and muscle relaxants and we were able to make our patient reasonably comfortable. A well-equipped medical kit saved the DXpedition from possible cancellation after less than 24 hours operation.

Tuesday morning the captain of the *Hollyhock* and several crew members came ashore to finish the maintenance on the lighthouse. Ernie, Lou and I were permitted to climb the lighthouse with several members of the crew. Unfortunately there was no possibility of using this magnificent 140-foot mast as an antenna support. There is over one-half mile of steep rugged terrain between the landing and the lighthouse and besides permission could not be obtained for its use. The CG men departed around midmorning. Three hours later I was surprised to see the *Hollyhock* sailing back and forth along the south side of the island. At 1900 GMT a telegram was delivered to Ernie from the 7th District CG in Miami and he was requested to accompany the crew back to the *Hollyhock*. Without our knowledge several of the Jamaicans had captured some goats and taken them aboard the *Miss Jekyll*. The Jamaicans were required to give up their hard-earned prize. We felt sorry for the poor Jamaicans and we were also concerned that the incident might mar the excellent amateur-Coast Guard relations which had existed up to this point.

Tuesday night was very productive on all bands with the exception of ten meters, but Wednesday morning found us begging for contacts. Ten meters was flat and fifteen was not much better. Ernie polled the group on their wishes for a departure time. Should we tear down Wednesday afternoon and aim to get underway by dusk or should we tear down early Thursday morning hoping to make Kingston before midnight? The temptation of a soft bed and some good food was too much — the vote was eight to two in favor of leaving.

The really hard work of reloading was once again handled by the Jamaicans, who handlined all our equipment and supplies from the catwalk to the runabout thirty feet below. Ernie kept the last station on 15-meter ssb until 2000, when it too had to be dismantled. Four hours later we hauled anchor and headed for Kingston. The return trip took only thirteen hours. Apparently Jamaica is a slightly easier target than Navassa! The climax to the whole affair took place in a little Chinese restaurant in Kingston Thursday night where the K4IA/KC4 gang plus W4WXX, 6Y5DW, 6Y5JR, 6Y5LA and 6Y5SR drank numerous toasts and consumed mountains of food.

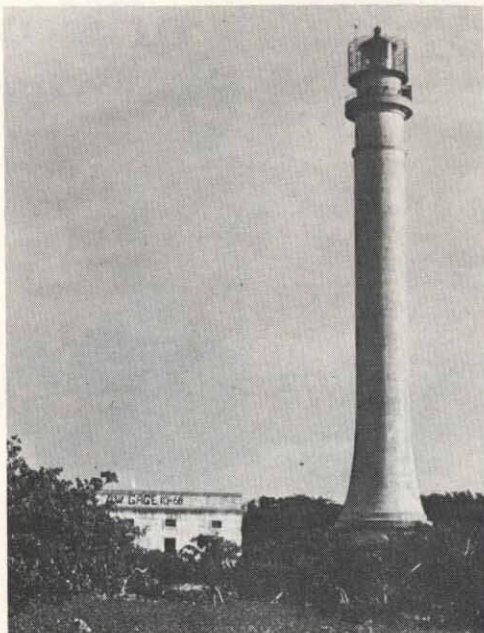


Having been on several previous DXpeditions and having knowledge of numerous other operations, I frankly wondered at the outset how ten fellows could make such a trip and return as friends. Surely someone would hog the stations or be generally obnoxious. Certainly we did experience minor tensions and disagreements, but the fact that Ernie, K4CAH, had been clearly designated as the leader of the group prevented any of these incidents from becoming major blowups. Future multioperator DXpeditions would do well to make note of this fact.

The 11,162 QSOs made in under 72 hours operation must certainly be a record for a DXpedition of such short duration, if not for all DXpeditions. The tremendous demand for QSOs on bands other than 20 meters can be at least partly attributed to interest in the new 5BDXCC award. Once again the savvy of the average DXer was demonstrated. QSO rates of 100-150/hour were not uncommon. Directional calls were honored and no difficulty was experienced in keeping schedules with hometown stations.

In closing I would especially like to thank Herb Reaves, W4KET, and Frank Harris, WA4HTR, for assistance in the preparation of this story.

QST



The Navassa lighthouse was built in 1915.