The DX Magazine FEATURE

The YAØRR DXpedition

The First Operation From Afghanistan Almost 20 Years Keeps Soviet Operators On the Move

by Romeo Stepanenko 3W3RR and
Edward Kritsky NT2X

I can't talk too much about how a license for the operation was obtained, so let's just say it's a secret! Before I tell you the story of our adventure, I would like to thank Yuri Brazhenko, President of 'Moscow-Boston Intl. Ltd.', without whose efforts what we waited for two years to accomplish would have been as impossible as it first seemed.

Our most joyful moment came when the license arrived. Then in November of 1990, we received a telex from Don

Before departure are (left to right) Eugene RA3AA, Dima UA3AGW, Yuri Brazhenko, MBI's president, Romeo 3W3RR, and Larry YL3CW.

Speedy preparations at the MBI office. Romeo 3W3RR is on the left, and Andy UA3AB is on the right.

Search W3AZD, stating that the documentation submitted to the ARRL was acceptable for DXCC documentation. Having accomplished the difficult part, all what remained now was to go to Afghanistan!

After careful calculations, a budget was formulated. Requests for funding were faxed and telexed to 23 different amateur radio clubs and organizations, but few responded. Although we were hoping for December 23 start for the expedition, it had to be delayed.

Preparations

Antennas

Nick LZ1JY, who heads antenna department in Sofia's Vector Company sent two Yagis to Moscow by train via Romania on the 20th of December. As always, the Soviet Customs Service—a state within a state—was vigilant. Instead of antennas we received a notice on December 24th that customs had detained '34 metal tubes of unknown nature' on the Moldovan-Romanian border. Fighting customs was fruitless and moreover, we had no extra time to spare. The operators of YL1WW started looking for alernative antennas very actively and soon had a portable quad antenna for 10 and 15 meters. Igor RA3AUU and Andy UA3DPX provided a Yagi for 20 and 15 meters, as well as a number of wire antennas. Regretfully, all the equipment—antennas and a total of five rigs—which we had used on the Spratly expedition in '89 (1SØRR/1S1RR) had been left behind in Vietnam. During the time I was planning the YA expedition, I didn't even have a radio of my own in Moscow. What to do?

Rigs

A month before the scheduled beginning of the expedition, I made a business trip to Japan, planning to see my friends from the XV2A and 3W5JA operations. Japanese amateurs had collected funds to help with the Spratly expenses and I found that they once again come to my aid! When I flew back to Moscow on December 23rd, I found myself paying Aeroflot (my favorite airline) an extra $1500 for 77 pounds of additional luggage and flying from Tokyo to Moscow. In the bags were ICOM-726, FL-2100 amplifier, Tono RTTY unit and a 6-element 6-meter Yagi. But a hearty thanks must go to the Japanese groups that offered funds for the Afghanistan operation, and especially the following: JA1ELY, JG1OUT, KH2H, JH3DPB, JA7JPZ, JA7DRM, JA7SGV, JR7OWD, JA3AUQ, JA3PFZ, JJ3AFV, JA3MNP, JO3GAH, JR1RCQ, JA3DLE, JA3UB, JA3AYU, JE3MAS/5H1HK, JA6LDD, JH1ROJ, JA5AQC, JE3MYG, as well as other amateurs from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 7th JA districts (they really know how to party in the 7th JA district!). Thank you guys!

Money

My appeal for financial support was quickly responded to by the NCDXF and *The DX Bulletin*. I would like to

thank the NCDXF membership, Rusty Epps W6OAT, and Bruce Butler W6OSP. Special thanks also goes to Chod Harris VP2ML. These people had trust in the success of the expedition, at at time we were still doubtful about it ourselves. After a discussion with Yuri Brazhenko, the expedition received a healthy $3,000 infusion of funds. Not only that, Yuri then offered me unlimited credit line in rubles for the trip. How come you never have enough money when you need them most?

U-DX-C sent 1,000 rubles and Larry RA4HA donated 20,000 rubles. Unfortunately, rubles aren't worth much these days...

Operators

It was obvious I couldn't go by myself. It would have been hopelessly inefficient and would certainly eliminate the possiblity of round-the-clock operation. There was also the little detail of 660 pounds of hardware to lug along. After reviewing the candidates, I chose Larry YL3CW, the second chief operator of club station YL1WW. The correctness of my choice was born out during the operation—throughout the trip we didn't have a single argument—and compatibility among operators during DXpeditions is of greater importance than operating abilities. Larry consulted with his 'boss,' and after some hesitation, his wife gave him permission to go. The team was now complete.

Coordination

Even before I received my approval from the DXCC desk and even before anyone knew of this undertaking, I spoke to Ed NT2X if he wanted to coordinate all efforts for this expedition worldwide. Ed reacted with surprize, excitement and happiness. He immediately agreed to help and went into action—we needed someone to help find support and at the same time be our spokesperson. Ed did his job well.

Meanwhile, in the USSR, preparations were being coordinated by RA3AR, RW3AH, YL1WW, RA3AUU, and UZ4FWD. Everything was ready now, even though it could have gone a little more smoothly. We obtained visas through our own channels and purchased plane tickets to Kabul. Through every step of the way difficulties to be overcome—that's life in the USSR.

The Adventure Begins

About a day before the departure, our office at MBI became a lab—Andy RW3AH, Dima UA3AGW, operators from UZ3AWO, Andy UA3AB, Igor RA3AUU, Larry YL3CW (who just arrived from Riga by train) and myself were all testing equipment, making up low-band antennas and trying to stuff all the antenna parts into 3 boxes when 6 boxes would have been hardly been enough. With three hours left before departure, Eugene RA3AA drove us to the airport, where we called our wives to say goodbye and heard once again what our sweethearts had come to think about radio in general and their crazy husbands in particular! Now it was time to board the plane—Yuri had managed to sneak our 'luggage' through a diplomatic 'back door'— since none of us wanted to to explain to customs that we aren't in the business of exporting 'unlicensed merchandise.' At 3 AM on December 31, the plane finally took off. We were looking forward to landing in Kabul in a couple of hours. We were in for a surprise.

Elsewhere

In two hours we were landing ... in Tashkent. Our cargo was taken into the warehouse, while we were told to wait for the next semi-military plane that would take us to Kabul. Too bad, we were hoping to QRV few hours before the New Year. We greeted our New Year in some 'hotel' in Tashkent, accompanied by rats and roaches. Two bottles of cognac couldn't do much to lift our spirits. Only on the 2nd of January were we invited to continue the journey, by that time we didn't know what to think. And here we are—landing (or rather - falling) in Kabul, a city in between the mountains. Well, our adventures were just beginning and we didn't even know it ...

Afghanistan.

Kabul - Elevation, 5000 feet above the sea level. Temperature, minus 13 degrees centigrade. The windows of the airport building are broken; our DXpedition was nothing more than a pile of boxes containing all our equipment and antennas. No one came to meet us.

One of the operating positions. Larry YL3CW sits on the floor, to avoid bullets if they start shooting at windows.

Soon it began to get dark and the area seemed full of shabby-looking characters interested in the contents of our luggage. Then, we had a lucky break: I met Said, an Afghani who studied in the University of Simferopol, my home town! Said declares us his guests and the would-be predators scattered with disappointment on their faces.

In Kabul, Soviet citizens are allowed to walk on the streets only until 9 P.M., and only with an armed escort. Curfew begins at 10 P.M. After 10 P.M., pedestrians are shot at sight. Questions, if any are asked later. By some miracle, we and our boxes managed to fit into two taxicabs. We went to the Soviet compound: a place controlled by the Soviet government and protected by the Afghani military. We had expected some of the people from the compound to meet us at the airport, but when we got there at 2 A.M., we found that no one even knew that we were coming.

A huge German Shepherd dog which has been around since the beginning of the war, sniffed our boxes for explosives, and, finding none, left us in peace. We were given a room which had been rearranged by an artillery shell during the previous April. No problem—we decided that it was good luck, since there would be less chance of recurrence of the same phenomenon in the near future. Unpacking our boxes, we discovered that while in Tashkent someone stole the WARC band dipoles, quad loops for 10 and 15 meters, a gas pistol and few other items. Oh, well, it could have been worse.

One of our QTHs near Kabul.

Politics

I would like to say a few words about the political realities of contemporary Afghanistan, so that the reader may better understand our problems. There exist several completely independent military formations in Afghanistan, and they all control each other. These include the army, the security forces, the Ministry of Internal Affairs forces, and the National Guard, which consists of former Mujaheddin freedom fighters. Last year, the army started a coup which was later suppressed by Internal Affairs. In addition, one must take into account the anti-goverment rebels who surround the city. They were mere 18 miles away, having moved to the mountains for the winter.

A similar situation exists in the country's political life, with various political formations giving rise to one result—suspicion everywhere.

More politics

On January 3rd and 4th we're trying to win permission to raise our antennas. "We can't give you permission to put antennas up," officials at the Ministry of Communications told us. "Besides, we are surprised that you even have a license, since many listed frequencies are currently used by the military." But our license carried a lot of weight, since it

Romeo 3W3RR operating.

Facts About Afghanistan

The total area is about 647,000 km^2 or a little smaller than the state of Texas. Afghanistan is bordered by the countries of China, Iran, Pakistan, and the USSR.

The climate is arid to semiarid with cold winters and hot summers. It has a terrain of mostly rugged mountains with plains in the north and southwest. The natural environment consists of damaging earthquakes which occur in the Hindu Kush mountains; soil degradation, desertification, overgrazing, deforestation, and pollution.

The population is about 14,825,013 (July 1989) with a growth rate of about 2.3%. The life expectancy at birth is 43 years for males and 42 years for females.

The two main religions are Sunni Muslim 74%, and Shi'a Muslim 15%.

Languages spoken are Pashtu 50%, Afghan Persian 35%, Turkic languages 11%, and thirty minor languages make up the last 4%. The literacy rate is

Agriculture is the most important sector of the economy, supporting about 80% to the population and accounting for about one-third of all exports.

Wheat, a staple of the Afghan diet, makes up 60% of toal grain production. Two-thirds of the population rely on raising livestock for a major portion of their income and food. Sheep and goats are the principal sources of meat. The war has been more disruptive to farm production than industrial output. Official data shows a 25% increase in industrial output for 1985 compared with 1980, while agriculture rose by only 5%.

Industries include small-scale production of textiles, soap, furniture, shoes, fertilizer, and cement; handwoven carpets; natural gas, oil, coal, and copper.

Agriculture includes: subsistence farming and animal husbandry; wheat, fruits, nuts, karakul pelts, wool, mutton; and an illegal producer of opium poppy and cannabis for the international drug

The currency is afghani (Af) with an exchange rate is 50.6 afghanis per US$1 which has been fixed since 1982.

Afghanistan has a total of 9.6 km of railroad (single track) from Kushka (USSR) to Towraghondi and 15 km from Termez (USSR) to Kheyrabad transshipment point on south bank of Amu Darya. There is a total of 21,000 km of highways, 2,800 are hard surface, 1,650 are bituminous-treated gravel and improved earth; and 16,550 are unimproved earth and tracks.

Inland waterways include chiefly the Amu Darya (about 1,200 km of navigable water) which handles steamers up to about 500 metric tons.

There are 38 airports, 34 that are usable and 9 with permanent-surface runways.

For telecommunications there is limited telephone, telegraph, and radio-broadcast services. Television was introduced in 1980. There are 31,200 telephones. There are 5 AM stations and no FM stations for radio, 1 TV station and 1 earth satellite station.

was issued by one of the most influential men in the goverment. In spite of the petty harrasment, the Ministry didn't try to challenge our license. Afghani bureaucrats have a healthy respect for political clout. But political connections couldn't guarantee us and our antennas safety. Putting an antenna up where it was visble automatically exposed everyone to very real danger in the form of a rocket or mortar attack or perhaps a grenade thrown into your building 'just in case.' Who cares if you have a license then?? So where could we stay?

Migration

The Soviet ambassador in Afghanistan: "I don't care where you operate from as long as it isn't from the Soviet compound. I will not expose my people to the danger of shelling because of your antennas!"

Red Cross representative in Kabul: "We can't offer you any of our villas, since you work in in conflict with work we, the Red Cross are doing!"

It was a no-win situation. On January 4th, I decide—with Larry's concurrence—that we have to act independently of official organizations, which might have guaranteed us some personal security. So, we moved to the outskirts of Kabul and obtained some firearms, which were deemed an absolute necessity. On the 5th, I was keeping a close eye on the surroundings near our new location to make sure it was safe to set up the station. When all seemed okay Larry made a loop antenna for 10 meters and hung it 10 feet off the ground so it wasn't too visible. Putting up a quad or yagi would have been suicide.

We turned on the rig and were overwhelmed with joy—the band was open. The first QSOs were on 10-meter CW, with 100 watts and our loop. 'My guys' from Moscow had been monitoring around the clock and we soon worked Igor RA3AUU, who then called our wives and spread news that we were all right. When propagation finally died, we made a loop for 15, but this time we didn't fair as well. We needed to get one of the linears on the air, but the voltage was too low at 190 V.

Late into the night, we wanted to put up something for 40 meters, but it was too risky. We remembered a piece of advice from Gene UZ3AU—"Cover the long wire with pieces of burlap and rugs—make it look like a clothes line!" We continued to operate, but it wasn't working out. A generator was needed, but we couldn't turn it on—the noise would have immediately attracted the attention of the military. It soon became obvious that we couldn't continue like this; after a short conference, we decided to move to a new location.

I can't divulge anything about our hosts—it could hurt them. And I don't want to name people who opened their houses and their hearts to us—it's not

important. It's not even important whose side they're on. I'm not political and these people were simply Afghani to me. People on both sides provided help equally to us during our DXpedition. During the operation we had changed a total of 14 locations in 21 days, travelled by helicopter and private armored vehicle, used mains AC as well as generator power, and lived in comfortable houses, shanties, and holes in the ground. We did everything humanly possible to make as many QSOs as possible and come home alive. And to those who didn't work us: please forgive us, we did everything we could!

Stats

Ninety percent of all contacts were made on a long wire 66 feet long. Our 'Afghani Special' turned out to be a great antenna on all bands except 160 and 6 meters, since it worked well without an antenna tuner, which we didn't have. Perhaps it worked so well because Kabul's elevation high in the mountains. A few days before we were to QRT we managed to put up a 10/15 meter quad, and that's when we really worked the Americans! We had a 20-meter yagi up for a few hours, but took it down quickly to avoid an unpleasant confrontation.

On the third day, the receiver in TS-440S went, leaving us with only one remaining radio. And at about this time, both tubes in the FL-2100 linear blew out. But we were used to situations like this, having experienced them before on Spratly. The IC-726 worked incredibly well, under all AC voltage fluctuations, and in all surroundings. We put an Icom rig and our homebrew Soviet linear amplifier together—you had to key the mike and press on the amp pedal simultaneously, but they worked! For 6 days at one of our locations, we had a 6-meter yagi, but no QSOs were made. There was no propagation.

At first, and for the first few days, we operated CW only, so as not to shock our Afghani hosts with the sounds of the English language. We found terrific and unexpected conditions on 75 meters into Japan, with a wall of JA's with 59+20 signals for four hours. In the following few days, LZ1KDP would put together a list for me on 75 meters, and I would work the Soviet stations split on 3645 kHz, with the help of RW3AH, RB5FV, and UA4NJ. Unfortunately, the Soviet phone sub-band on 80 meters was blocked in our Japanese-made rig, so when we were fininshed with the the Russians, we would go back to LZ1KDP and run Europeans. It was a nice tempo!

A first long-path 80-meter QSO with the USA was with W5UYD and Larry couldn't get over it! Later, we were amazed to log K1MM and VO1SA on 80. On every band we tried to give the Americans a chance—East Coast would come through fine, but California was heard for only 2-3 days—and then completely disappeared, as if it had gone off the map. Later on, when propagation returned, we tried to compensate by working twice as many W6s. On the 6th or 7th day we finally got on 20 meters, using the long wire. There were no long-path openings! Larry then tried WARC bands and got a nice pile-up going on 10 Mhz. Later, using single loops, we went to 24.9 and 18 Mhz, but couldn't get out. Switching back to long wire, we found that it worked fine!

It became necessary to change location again, but this time we're out of luck. Temperature was minus 8 celcius and there wasn't any heat! We drank a lot of cognac, but it didn't help! Our Honda 2800 generator was behaving well, so we decided to put up a long wire for 160 meters, but they just couldn't hear us. Nevertheless, we eventually made several hundred QSOs with the USSR and Europe, including, of course, contacts with OH1XX and ON4UN.

At about that time we ran out of money and had to sell the generator. At our next location, the AC varied, and even with the linear, we could only put out about 150 watts. It didn't seem like nearly enough, but we carried on anyway. Surprisingly, they heard us on the other end. Then the voltage dipped to 180 V—the radio and the amp continued to work, but the keyer only gave dots, and no dashes. Soon after, it was time to move again. And again. And again.

Up until this time, we had been afraid to run RTTY for fear that we'd kill the amplifier with a full duty cycle. Barefoot, our first QSO was with TG9VT—and he

seemed happy, too! We had good success with Japan on 40 meter RTTY; there are some good ears over there. Larry and I took turns at the keyboard, and so as to give an amplifier a rest, we moved to WARC bands, CW. The AC voltage increased to 210 V and we were suddenly getting 700 watts out. Larry and I immediately knew what we wanted to do—QSY to 10-meter phone!

And what a pile-up—I've never heard anything like it in my life! We were forced to listen on a wide spread, between 28500 and 28580 kHz. Later, we did the same on 15—listening between 21300 and 21400. A narrower spread wouldn't fit the immense pile-up and we couldn't have picked out any calls. So, dear colleagues, please don't get upset with us for the above. If we had gone with a 20-30 kHz spread, our rate would have been two to three times slower. This expedition learned from Spratly trip to repeat every call worked in order to avoid duplicate contacts.

Misbehavior

There were a few unpleasant moments. I personally can't understand why a number of well-known hams in the USA and Canada were compelled to make 10-14 QSOs with YAØRR, on the same band and on the same mode. There are at least 3 'winners' who managed 6 QSOs each in two hours! These people know who they are and so do we. We plan to let the amateur community know about these 'rotten apples.' My anger is gone now, but how many others *didn't get through because of such self*-ish behavior? Overall, however, our proverbial 'black list' contains no calls from the USA or Japan. Larry, nevertheless, repeated how he never heard so many undisciplined JAs and Ws!

Our list is, however, full of Europeans. Why is it that some people just don't get it—US and JA openings are short, while Europe is heard around the clock on every band! At any moment we might have lost power, or might have been forced to move to another location, or the the tenuous propagation to North America or Japan might have simply closed down. But every time I called 'QRZ USA,' IK2ECC came back with a blasting signal—six times in a row—and covered up weak DX signals. Or another Italian station with a fat signal and no callsign began telling Larry for ten minutes how Russians 'call Americans to make money,' and that 'Russians are (expletive deleted)—' Larry finally blew his top and in good English told the anonymous caller what he thought of him and the other 'breakers' on frequency!

To any and all who thought we did it for the money, the fact is that we lost money, just as we did with the 1SØXV trip.

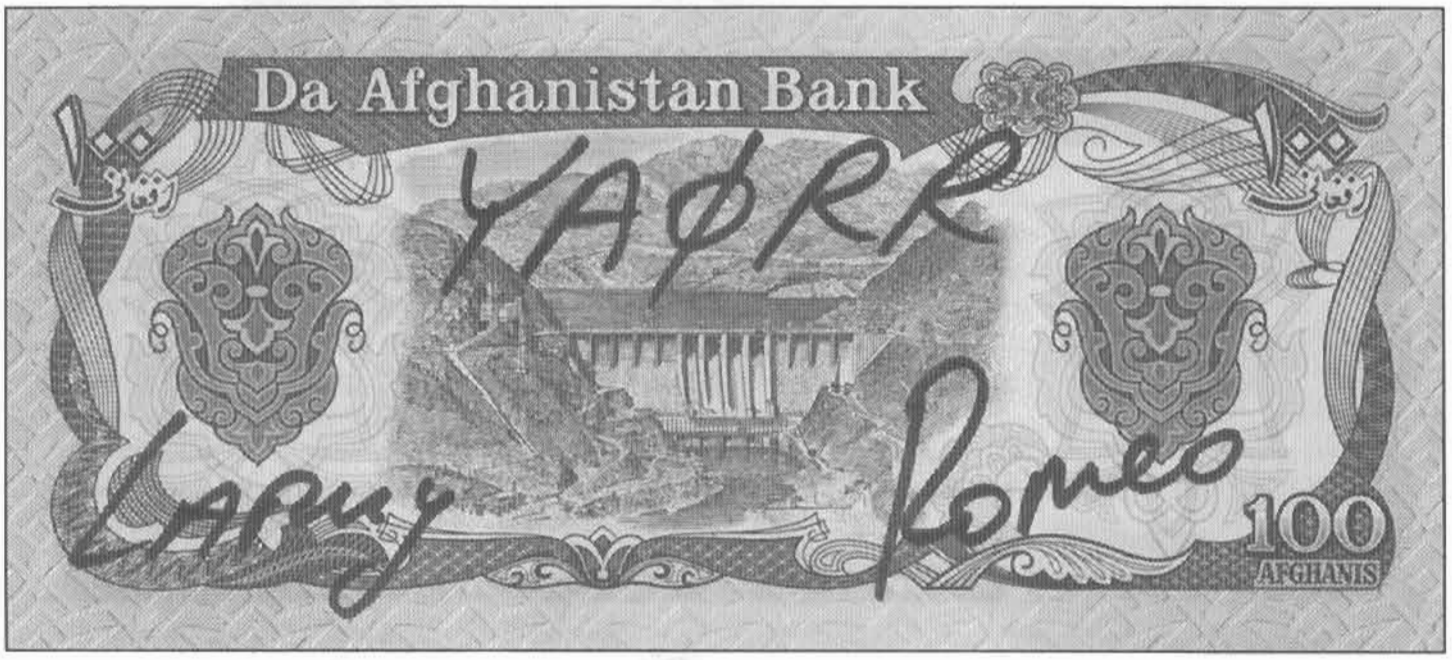
Wrap Up

The operation was over on January 21, and Larry and I flew back to the USSR the same day. We couldn't believe we were going back home until we landed in Moscow, 360 pounds lighter, having left antennas and some equipment behind. We were very disappointed to have missed Jacky F2CW, who arrived in Kabul on the 20th, but we had been operating from the mountains and wouldn't have been able to reach the city in time without putting ourselves at great risk. Some of our memories are fading, but I know that Larry has his own story to tell, and so does Ed NT2X.

The expedition brought back 31,128 QSOs on all bands except 6 meters. 4,500 QSOs were made with the US, about the same for Japan, the rest being with Europe and the USSR.

The sole QSL route is: Romeo Stepanenko, Box 812, Sofia 1000, Bulgaria. I don't wish a repeat of a difficult situation with Spratly cards, when cards were delivered much later. I plan to print the cards myself and mail them out of Sofia to all amateurs.

Logs will be computerized and 'DX hogs' with multiple QSOs on the same band/mode will be waiting for their cards at the end of a l-o-o-o-o-o-ng line.



The same will be done with future expeditions, if and when they take place. I wish to thank Don WB2DND for the donation of his logging program.

Pirates

A word about pirates: there were about seven that were active beginning December 23. As was reported by monitoring stations, they were operating out of Central Asia, the Far East, and Israel. When I worked one of them, he almost convinced me that his name was Romeo!

Roll Credits

I would like to thank all amateurs and groups that helped us with donations, special apeciation goes to: Moscow-Boston Intl, Ltd., NCDXF, HIDXA, INDEXA, DX Bulletin, U-DX-C, EU-DX-F, U-CW-C, Danish DX Group, DTDXA, Shizuoka DXA, Rigaradiotechnika, 59 Magazine, RA4HA, AA5ME, W5BOS, W3ACE, VP2ML, Lone Star DX Association (Texas), Mile Hi DX Club, TG9VT, K2ON (SK), JA3GM, N6HVZ, LIDXA, Acadiana DXA, CDXC, DX News Sheet, West Jersey DXG, JA3DLE/1. Our gratitude also goes to: NT2X, RW3AH, RA3AR, RA3AUU, UA3AGW, LZ1KDP, YL1WW, UA3AB, WA2IKL, W2MIG, W2JGR, W6PQS, K2WR, N2KW, Tri-State Packet Cluster, UQ2-037-116, UQ2GA, RA3AA, YL1ZW, YL2PZ, UT4JWJ, LZ2PO, LZ1JY, UZ3AWO Club, UA6CL, W6OSP, W6OAT, WK6E, UA3DPX, UV3GM, UV3DCX, UJ8JLT, UV6HRR and to all who helped with equipment, antennas, and advice.

The authors would also like to thank Peter KU2M, who edited and collated this material and did his best humble best to translate it from Hamese into English.

Thank you, all and we'll see you from another location!

YAØRR—the Other Side
Part II
by Ed Kritsky NT2X

There were many events that took place throughout the Afghanistan DX-pedition. I'm trying to reconstruct these happenings, as they were remembered by the participants.

When Romeo found me on the air in late November of 1990, he told me, matter-of-factly, that he had a license for Afghanistan operation. I remember thinking to myself: "No, you don't, it can't be, who is he kidding?" But a real surprise came several seconds later, when he asked me to assist the expedition by being a coordinator and a spokesperson. I nearly fell off the chair! Of course, I'll do it, it is an opportunity of a lifetime, no occupation in the world can prevent me from getting involved in the expedition of this importance and magnitude!

By now, I'm accustomed to the quick moves by Mr. Romeo 'Unstoppable' Stepanenko. This one was no exception—they wanted to have everything completed by the end of December and get on the air by New Year's Eve. My attempts at persuading to give me more time for fundraising and information dissemination were unsuccessful, partially because airline tickets to Kabul would increase in price twofold on January 1. My only desire is was: "Don't let it become another crazy Spratly trip!"

We immediately agreed upon an on-going meeting place: 21210 kHz, every morning 12:30 GMT. Fifteen-meter propagation was really good to us—we haven't lost a single 'rendezvous' in over 30 days because of a bad opening. Our group consisted of Andy RW3AH, Toivo RA3AR, Igor RA3AUU, and Alex YL2AG operating