

NCJ Profiles: Alan Maenchen, AD6E/KH6TU

Being a ham for almost 60 years, Alan Maenchen, AD6E, has learned a thing or two because he's seen a thing or two. He built high power amplifiers in high school, operated RTTY for the Navy in the Philippines, worked DX pileups from rare islands, honed his SO2R contesting skills, and has managed two state QSO parties. Ham radio has played an important role in virtually every aspect of his life. Here is Alan's personal Ham Radio story.

The Early Years

I've been a ham for almost 60 years, and it's shaped my life immensely. When I was growing up, my father had a small workbench where he would fool around with basic electronics. I gravitated to that, first by winding wire around some nails to make an electromagnet, and discovering the principle of EMF kickback.

About that time, my parents gave me a Hallicrafters S-38E receiver, which I hooked up to some random wire around my bedroom. I could hear some short-wave broadcasts. In 8th grade, a classmate was into making/fixing audio gear. As high school freshmen, Don (now N6RX) got a Novice ticket and that pushed me to get mine. But CW was not my friend, and it took a while before I could pass the test. Eventually I was on the air with WN6BID in late 1962.

I obtained a used Heath AT-1 transmitter and some 40-meter crystals. My dad allowed me to put a 40 dipole on the roof so long as no one could see it. My first attempt to call CQ was met with frustration, as no one would answer. Within a few minutes, I got a knock on the door. Another Don, this time W6TYM (now W6OA) had come running over to tell me that I was getting callers on 20 meters. Success!

Homebrew Heaven

My high school was fortunate to have a ham radio club and doubly fortunate to be in Livermore next to one of the big national labs. The lab did a lot of engineering and fabricating of specialized equipment for their work of testing nuclear weapons. One day our ham club advisor got a call from the lab to see if he wanted some of their surplus equipment. They literally dumped several truckloads of "junk" into a warehouse, and we had access to parts that most could only dream about. From that treasure trove, I built several CW transmitters and amplifiers. Everything



AD6E operates TX3X.

was there: Power transformers, resistors, capacitors, tubes of all kinds. By the time I went to college I had built several DX-60 knock-offs, amplifiers using 4CX250Bs, even a 4-1000A amp. I also learned the hard way to avoid high voltages.

My First ARRL November Sweepstakes

I went to San Jose State and took up electrical engineering. Math was not my strong suite, but I eventually "got it" well enough to survive. Ham radio was taking a back seat, although the school had an active ham club (W6YL). That was my first introduction to contesting. The station had

a full Collins S-Line and an 80-foot tower with a big multiband Yagi. We decided to try this thing called Sweepstakes CW. One of the club members had access to the Stanford computer system via a dial-up modem, so we did dupe checking that way. This was 1968, and we had computer logging. It took three of us to operate one station. One to operate, one to log with a pencil, and one to type it into the computer terminal. "It's a dupe" came after we'd already worked the station. We didn't do very well.

Navy Boot Camp

I extended my college career by not

taking all the classes required to graduate, but I wasn't allowed to attend for a sixth year, and I ended up getting drafted. Instead, I signed up for the Navy, which gave me a delayed enlistment so I could take that last class needed to graduate.

Iaced the aptitude test for Morse code, and got assigned to radio school. After passing their graduation requirement (18 WPM) I asked to sit and copy more (better than mopping floors). The Chief agreed, so I got myself up to about 24 WPM, then ran down to the San Diego FCC office and passed the Amateur Extra test. That was the last ham radio thing I did for many years.

In the Navy, I worked on RTTY gear in the Philippines for 3 years. I didn't care for the military, but I did learn scuba diving, get married, and fathered a daughter. Ham radio wasn't allowed but a MARS station was on site.

Ham Radio Hiatus

After separating from the Navy, I looked for a job, but it became apparent that no one wanted an EE with no experience and 4 years out of school. So, I used the GI bill to return to San Jose State and earned an MSEE degree. After that, I never had any problem getting jobs, but ham radio was nowhere to be seen in my life.

Although I wasn't active, I maintained my ARRL membership and read *QST*, where I saw the announcement that the FCC was issuing A-prefix call signs. I applied and got AD6E.

Back on the Air

One of my first jobs was with Granger Associates, which made HF antennas and

some UHF radios for police departments in the Third World. I got involved with the UHF products, but one day I discovered a big chassis in the dumpster. It was an engineering prototype of a 4CX1500B amplifier. With tube! I dragged it home, and months later had it working. I got an old Argonaut 509 transceiver (QRP) which could drive the amp to full output (the amp had a 4X150 driver). So, I was back but really didn't know what I wanted to do. Rag chewing just wasn't my style, so I started going after DXCC. QRP wasn't cutting it either, but if someone wouldn't answer, I warmed up the amp. Sometimes I'd call with 1500 W, and once a station answered, I'd do the contact as QRP.

As my DXCC total rose, it became more difficult to find new ones. To the rescue, came the CQ World Wide CW Contest. That put me over the top, and I got the certificate. No longer with a goal, I kept working new ones when they became available, but eventually lost track.

The CQ WW was fun. I tried other contests including CQP and SS. About that time, packet radio became something new and different so I tried that on 2 meters. There was a local digipeater, and one of my first contacts was with W6OAT who invited me to the Northern California Contest Club.

NCCC is a great place for budding contesters, although it took a while to blend in and get to know some of the old hats. It wasn't long before I started putting more time in the chair and doing better. While CW has always been a challenge, I mostly did CW events. K6ZM was a great Elmer for me. I did some contests at his hilltop

station and learned a lot, even though I didn't really have a lot of time available.

Pileup From Wake Island

By luck, in 1992 I was working for a company making commercial satellite radio equipment. My specialty was the modem equipment. The company got an Air Force contract to install a T1 link between KH6 and KH9. The company sent me to KH9 to install updated gear, and I the gear I had included a portable oscilloscope and a TS-930. That was my first exposure to operating from the DX side of the pileup. I never announced my trip. I just got on the air one day as AD6E/KH9. A JA answered my first CQ. It didn't take long before I had a full-blown pileup. It was fantastic! I did the best I could and ran split. My low 40-meter dipole worked well on 15, and we had sunspots, so I got out. I also had to work, so it wasn't a full-time thing, but I did put 1,000 contacts into the log, all on CW.

The Contesting Bug Bites

That experience whetted my appetite for "rate." Later, in 1999, K2KW invited me to join "team vertical" in the CQ WW from 4M7X. They were out to *win* and had a very impressive crew of top-notch operators. N6BV designed and N6BT built no fewer than 43 verticals, and it took almost a full week to install them and six QRO stations. The big push was for *rate*, with the goal of 200/hour for as many hours as possible. It was a staggering amount of fun. Unfortunately, we were skunked by the Bavarians who put on an amazing run from CN8WW. Having our generator die on us Saturday afternoon didn't help our score (see www.n4lcd.com/Venezuela-4M7X-DXpedition.pps).

Kenny, K2KW, told me he was addicted to rate, and I have to admit that I do too. At 4M7X, N6BV and others made the 200/hour goal several times. I'm still trying. I've gotten close, but never over the line. Yet!

My First Real DXpedition

In 2002 I got an opportunity to join the TI9M team. It was unusual in that it was organized by a local who wasn't really a DXer and didn't know many DXers. He put out an email asking for applications and money. I wanted to go, but I had no idea who this guy was. So, I called him. He ran a B&B outside San Jose, Costa Rica, as a ham radio vacation spot. The person who answered the phone was none other than K6KM, who was there on vacation. After getting assurances that it wasn't a scam, I sent in my contribution. None of the operators knew each other except that N6KT (Killer Tomato) had also signed on.



The KH6TU station.



The antennas at KH6TU.

Rich — aka HC8A — had the world record for the most QSOs in a weekend. I learned a lot by listening to him work the pileups.

Kimo, KH6U, was organizing a trip to Kure (KH7) but was having trouble pulling it off. We took it over with his blessing, sailing 6 days and some 1,600 miles from Honolulu to Kure, then 10 days to get back in heavy seas.

Other trips followed to places like P29 (IOTA trip), 3D2C, T33A, and TX3X. After the TX3X trip, I had to promise my wife that I wouldn't do that anymore. I'm not so young, and she worries too much.

Garry, NI6T, describes a DXpedition as Field Day on steroids. I totally agree. If you've never been on one, try it. It's way more work than you'd expect but well worth it. Team camaraderie is a good reason. "Jungle Engineering," as N6BV put it, is another. When something doesn't go right, figure out a solution with what you have on hand. It can be very challenging. But the real challenge is *rate*.

Field Day Preparation

One of the ways I was prepped for that sort of thing was Field Day. My first one was as a freshly minted General back in high school. The Livermore ARC (W6ODP) put on a 13A effort. As a newbie, I was put in the 80 CW tent, where we had fun working other stations with a surplus ARC-5 set. Later, the W6YL group got into FD competitively, and we made the Top 10 box in 2A with some amazing wire beams. That led to California QSO Party (CQP) county expeditions on my own. Activating a rare county in CQP is a lot of fun, since it combines camping with

radio. I've set several county records over the years that still stand.

My involvement with CQP eventually led me to become the CQP chairman in the mid 1990s, when computer logging was just catching on. CQP is a major event, with hundreds of logs to sort through and check. After a couple of years, I was starting to get 3.5-inch floppies along with printouts. When that became about 50% of the entries, I wrote some *QuickBasic* software to go through the logs line by line cross checking with what was in the *other* log. I think CQP may have been one of the first contests to have computer log checking. While not very sophisticated, it worked remarkably well.

After the CWops club took off, K6RB asked me to start a new contest called the CW Open. It's quite different than most contests with three four hour-long events spread around the clock. After 3 years, I retired again from contest management, but then I was handed the Hawaii QSO Party (HQP) with some hope that I could turn it around and make it into a more serious event. I'm still working on that.

Retiring to the Aloha State

I retired in 2013. A year later, my wife pulled me to Hawaii where I now live. I admit that I came kicking and screaming, but I now think it was a great idea. I stepped up from a small city lot in San Jose with S6 QRN to 3 acres in semi-rural Maui and S0 QRN. From here I can work more rate than I ever could in San Jose. I still have a station in San Jose that I can access remotely, but don't use it much. It's usually more fun to operate from here.

After all it's all about *rate*!

Here, I have a 70-foot crank-up tower sporting two small Yagis. So long as the two are not on the same band, the mutual coupling is low enough to allow 1,500 W SO2R without stubs. I also have a Force 12 vertical for 80 and a low OCF dipole for 160. The station has a K3 and an ACOM 2000A as the primary, then another K3 + KPA1500 for the second radio. I'm located on the east side of the Western Mountains at about 450 feet elevation with a gentle downslope to the ocean about a mile away. Toward North America, I get out very well. Toward Europe, it's essentially flat out to the ocean about 5 miles away. Toward Asia, I have blockage of about 10° which limits what I can work.

Paying It Forward

Having had a fun time with my almost 60 years as a ham, I've started "giving back" as I can. I'm now doing my 11th Morse code class with the CW Academy run by CWops. If you have some time, that's an excellent program and they need more advisors. I'm always amazed at how many students sign up for these classes. There's always a backlog. While there's an unlimited amount of groaning about how poor things have gotten in ham radio, these eager students who *want* to learn will change that attitude quickly.

Aloha!

Thanks for sharing your personal story with us, Alan. Over the last 60 years you've accomplished much for yourself while having a very positive impact on the hobby.