

NCJ Profiles: Ralph Bellas, K9ZO

There are many ways to measure our personal achievements and progress in this great hobby — QSL card collections, framed awards, DXCC standings, contest scores, etc. But, perhaps there's nothing more illuminating than to take a journey back through our own dusty logbooks. Consummate contester Ralph Bellas, K9ZO, does just that, as he reflects on his own accomplishments over the past 45 years. Here is Ralph's fascinating Amateur Radio story in his own words.

Researching this narrative inspired me to pull out my first ARRL paper logbooks and figure out what I have been up to since I was licensed as WN9CGL in July 1969 while in high school. I remember the class in electronics sparking an interest in the magic of radio waves. My Novice exam was administered by an Amateur Extra class licensee in a nearby town, and I needed a ride since I couldn't drive yet. Back then it took weeks for the FCC to process applications. I spent that summer away from home at the Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research, and when I returned home my license was waiting. It was weeks later before I made my first contact.

I recall the technology and culture of that time, now a part of history. That July Neil Armstrong became the first human to step on the moon, to be remembered for his words, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." There was no Internet yet, but ARPANET started that year. Information was hard to get, and I had to walk to the library and use the card catalog. There were only a handful of books about radio. That was the year of the first Concorde flight. A quartz watch was hot stuff, the first ATM was installed, the Boeing 747 had its first flight, UNIX was developed, and the first microprocessor was invented. Music came from groups that included the Beatles, the Doors, Led Zeppelin, and Janis Joplin. The famous Woodstock music festival took place, but I was just a bit too young to hitchhike halfway across the United States. Anti Vietnam-war sentiment was high. There were still remnants of the civil rights movement. Walmart incorporated that year. Gas was 35 cents a gallon. Stereos had accessory reel-to-reel tape players and used record players with 45 and 33 RPM vinyl records. Electric guitars were king, and a few local FM stations were on the air to entice teens away from ham radio.

My old stack of paper logbooks seemed taller than I; I search through them to figure out when I first learned about contesting. I also looked for early indications about my future.

Logbook #1 (August 1969-March 1970)

My first contact was from the club station at a local grade school. The logbook recorded that it was with a station in Iowa. The next contact was across town on 15 meters from my neighbor's shack in his dad's garage — about 75 feet from my own shack. He had a rig already and a Windom antenna up about 15 feet. I signed "9." We had to be very particular, because the FCC would know where we were. There were a couple of other contacts, but most of the pages were filled with "CQ" and "test" entries. Back then we logged all transmissions, because we knew that the FCC was listening. Today I make more contacts in 5 minutes than were in that entire logbook. At that time you had to work about 45 minutes at McDonald's to afford a logbook, then ask your parents to write a check, and mail it to the League. I found a note in the log about interference with a neighbor's TV and radio. QRM and QRN were noted more often than QSOs. So were "Didn't answer" and "Lost, too fast" and "Frequency occupied." These were really signs of the future.

Logbook #2 (March–December 1970)

This looked about the same as the last book, but I did work my younger brother. In retrospect I'm not sure how this happened, since there was only one rig in the house. Later there was another similar contact, but I'd included a note that he was in the backyard with a QRP rig. There were hardly any contacts, but there were references to high SWR, the rig not working, and a note that might have been written at 2 AM by a Novice teenager: "No FCC guy will be listening. As far as I know I am in the band." We were crystal controlled in those days, and we had no concept at all about accuracy of measuring frequency or what would happen if the wrong crystal was used. There were some entries for the 1970 ARRL November Sweepstakes CW, and a check and state were recorded occasionally, but I suspect none of us in the local high school radio gang had a clue as to what this was about. Perhaps there were 16 attempts at contacts. In December I made my first DX contact.

There were only a few QSO entries at the beginning of 1971. I passed my General exam and became WB9CGL, graduated high school early, and moved to London. Shortly after I arrived I took the Underground to the RSGB and met Steve, G3UFY, who took me under his wing. I was quickly granted a reciprocal



Figure 1 — K9ZO operating K9W on Wake Island. [Ralph Bellas, K9ZO, photo]

license, G5ATU, and Steve let me operate from his shack, when I came to visit that weekend. It was eye opening. He showed me how to operate.

The following weekend was the CQ World Wide WPX SSB (March 1971) — my first chance at a sideband contest. The G4ALE Contest Group (significant suffix) had planned a multiop effort from G3SJJ. Peter had a quad and a lazy H on 40, plus an amplifier, and they were excited to use the rare G5 prefix. I noticed 4X4NJ, I1FLD, SM7CRW, DJ3HJ, HA5KDQ, YU4EBL, CT1LN, G3TXF, W9IOP, K4PUZ, W2SZ, K4ZA, and VE3GCO in the first couple pages of the log. Those 600 QSOs made for a big score in those days.

The next weekend we were off to Scotland. I recall a number of simultaneous contests, and GM5ATU/p was used in a low-power 160 meter British contest. We spent many a weekend operating portable around southern England and Wales — radio, climbing cliffs, going in caves, learning about alcohol.

In July I went to Belgium and operated as ON8WF. From there I had my first chance to really run stations from ON4PB, using their 4 element quad at 60 feet. There sure is a lot of interesting DX to be found when you are DX, and running stations is fun! This was another hint of the future.

Logbook #3 (March 4, 1972–April 9, 1972)

After returning to the States I put up a tower. Since we did not know about gin poles or climbing belts yet, we assembled the entire 50 foot tower, rotator, mast, cable, and antenna, and we pulled the entire unit up to the house bracket. I had enrolled in college and just celebrated my 19th birthday.

I learned something while overseas. Every line in the logbook showed a contact. I was on the air all the time and stumbled upon the ARRL International DX CW contest and was tickled to have a contact with the folks back in England. That was the magic of radio! There was some pretty good DX in the log, although nothing rare or too far away. I can only imagine what I missed. Since I was on all the time, I stumbled upon the Florida QSO Party and logged a couple pages. Information could be scarce back then. None of the young ops got magazines. Heck, we did not even know they existed. Learning propagation was pure chance; we learned by being on the air. There were lots of regulars from uncommon places like KZ5, 9J2, CR7, CN8, 9X5, 9L1, 5W1, KR8, and ZD8. I continued to fill logbooks every couple of months. I even worked a guy on Wake Island. Who knew I would go there on a DXpedition 40 years later as part of the K9W team!

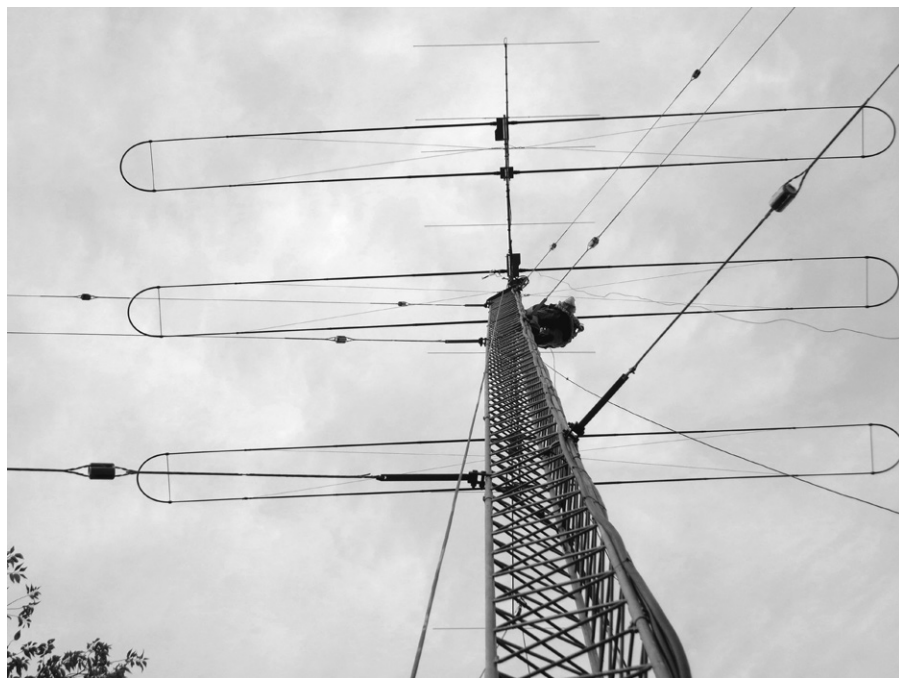


Figure 2 — New antennas going up at K9ZO. [Ralph Bellas, K9ZO, photo]

This pattern continued — DX in the log, but not chasing DXpeditions, working locals on 75, stumbling across contests such as the July 1972 CD Party on CW. I recognize calls such as W1AX, WA5LES, W9YT, W6OAT, WA1FCM, WB6OLD, W2AE, KØZXE, K9BGL, W1FBY, W8EDU, WB4OGW, K9UIY, W6MAR, K3ONW, K4BAI, KH6RS, and a lot of others. I even worked some locals on 2 meter FM during this time. I found another CD Party in the log. This time it was SSB in July and more call signs became familiar. A note in the margin: “75 meters a complete mess.” Nothing new in the past 40 years!

I started to go to local club meetings and eventually cycled through as president, vice president, and secretary-treasurer. I made lots of European CW contacts in the evening. I discovered the WAE Contest on CW and sent lots of QTCs. I ran across the New Jersey QSO Party, and I even found a paper check sheet tucked into the logbook. Hmm. That actually was pretty efficient for the time. I participated in the Illinois Phone Net — 28 checkins. We were still years and years away from toll-free long-distance and the Internet. All Asian Contest, Delta QSO Party, Ohio QSO Party, South Carolina QSO Party on one weekend. I could barely keep up with all the radio activity. I never made a big effort, just lots of contacts, DX, rag chews — almost all on CW. The LZ Contest came. I was learning about new countries. I used the World Book Encyclopedia from a bookcase in the living room back then. The pattern continued.

Logbook #8: W/VE Contest. VE3BMV, VO1AW, VE5US, VE7ZZ, VE7WJ, VE3KZ, VE7IQ, VE5RA, VE1AI, VE1ASJ are in the log. Still DXing, I worked VK2EO on three bands in 20 minutes. It was a three-band rag chew, not moving someone for a multiplier! Saturday — California QSO Party, Massachusetts QSO Party, RSGB 21/28, VK/ZL Phone. I had a 2 element spider quad, 2 element collinear on 40, and a Zepp on 80 with a Johnson Matchbox and a TS-511. Illinois QSO Party, 430 contacts. My first SS SSB was in 1972, and I made 658 contacts, missing VE8, KL7, and Wyoming. This foretells the future. Lousy, low antennas work, (I’ll never learn this), and VE8 is always so hard. SS CW, then CQ WW CW.

The logbooks keep filling. I traveled to Chicago by bus to take the Advanced exam. More of the same, more of the same: College, living at home, doing radio, going to the local radio club, Field Day. I’m into logbook #16 by December 1973. Logbook #19 took 2 weeks to fill. I started to keep track of my off-times in contests, rather than just work everyone I ever heard. In 1974 I actually entered SS SSB, logging 996 contacts and 75 sections. I moved out of my parents’ house in 1975 and rented the second floor of a house. I remember that I had a 70 foot tower with a 20/40 dualbander in the backyard, and the guy anchors were in neighbors’ yards. The shack was tiny. I just pulled the refrigerator into the kitchen and used that alcove.

It was a good location — lots of JAs, contests all the time, some RFI to the church

nearby. The highlight of logbook #28 was when I took a couple weeks off and married Connie. I did not operate on my wedding day. She was always supportive of my radio contesting, DX trips, Dayton, and radio friends. But, I do occasionally get reminded of the time I went to K4VX to operate and offered my station to a guest op while I was gone.

In 1977 I took another bus ride to Chicago to take the Amateur Extra exam. I continued a fierce pace of on-the-air activity — DX, contest, DX, contest. I would get on for whatever contest was on during the weekend. I became K9ZO. In 1978 we rented a house that had a 90 foot tower and an amp. I was in graduate school for geography then and didn't quite have the time I used to, but I was on for SS SSB — 1200 contacts and a sweep. There was a note in logbook #47, "No operation, too tired from SS," as if it was a confession for not getting on the air the following Monday. ARRL DX the next spring — lots of JAs. In the summer of 1979 we bought our first house, just outside of the city limits.

The 1980s

During the 1980s I put up a 120 foot tower and a 4 element 40 meter beam. I was constantly taking it down and fixing it. It worked when it worked, though. I had a second tower at 70 feet and eventually used a pair of 204BAs which gave me increased flexibility. Pages of JAs. The 50 cent logbooks were now \$1.75. Contest, contest, contest! I broke my wrist around then and learned to send with either hand. I sure can't do that today! Connie was a good cook, yet refined her menu depending on the contest mode. It had to be different for SSB and CW. No peas. They roll off the fork. No cutting. You had to have hands free. My fellow operators still remember the wonderful meals she served during multiop contests.

We had our first son, Eric. Note in log: "THAT WAS SUPER!" The next few pages were CQ WW SSB entries. Back then Mom and baby stayed in the hospital for a few days, so I could get on. But between birthdays for my wife and son I never got off for CQ WW SSB much. I didn't put full efforts into SS that year either.

I kept up the activity for the next few years. Logbook #64 brought me into 1983. Contests, running DX in the evenings, always active, but not particularly competitive. I just liked getting on the air and seeing what conditions were like. Propagation drove me.

My work with a computer company for most of this decade took me to Connecticut, and I was able to operate with KB1H from the East Coast. I switched to three-ring binders for logs and measured

activity by inches of log pages. 1984 was particularly good, and we were blessed with twin boys, Adam and Justin. I was at the Ten-Ten breakfast when I was paged to go home quickly. I took a week off the air — a long pause for me. I recorded noticeably less activity that year, just about an inch of logbook. Conditions were good for the rest of the decade. Lots of kid activities, but I still was active, particularly in the evenings when the kids were asleep. I took up studying business and completed an MBA and moved away from computer repair. The world was changing rapidly.

The 1990s

I worked at a university as assistant director of the MBA program, then director of the college of business computer labs and brought the Internet to the college. It was an exciting time in technology, a theme that would continually repeat itself. I taught marketing at the same time, and sampled a DXpedition in 1992 as XE2/K9ZO. I walked across the border carrying what I needed for a contest. I still remember my sister arriving in the middle of the night with a pizza. At home I was fortunate to have a station I could play with every day after work, but I spent a lot of time doing activities with the kids on the weekends.

In 1997 I ventured to Hawaii (KH7R) to be part of a multiop crew and got to try a DX contest from a place very different than Central Illinois. I began working for a large insurance company, designing computer software systems, coordinating large projects, and technical architecture. Toward the end of the decade I managed to squeeze in a vacation contest trip with Team Vertical to 4M7X. I loved going away to operate and have fond memories of another multiop from HC8N.

The 2000s

In 2000 I went with K7BV as part of the USA Team to WRTC in Slovenia. There was such hospitality and organization and a great chance to meet other operators from around the world. You realize quickly how good they really are!

I still was able to get on the air a lot and added a third tower. I'd forgotten how good low towers and tribanders work for US contests. I did some SO2R, but some antennas were only three feet from each other, and the technical challenges were difficult to overcome.

Since school was handy I enrolled in the computer science program and finished a master's in 2001. It was good preparation for the work I would end up doing for the next decade. I recall proposing to control radios through the Internet. Some ops were doing this through telephone lines, but I was told that there would be too much

latency for the audio, and I had to pick another final project. I ended up building a streaming media server.

In 2002 I attended WRTC as a referee and was able to operate from Latvia, and Lithuania before the event and then from the G3UFY home in England. Who would imagine a contest operation nearly 40 years in the past would have led to a relaxing meeting at the pub with G3SJX and G3UFY?

Contesting technology had long since moved to computer logging and Internet DX spots. I still enjoyed Sprints and Sweepstakes, but there were fewer and fewer paper logs.

My twins always enjoyed being outside with engines, dirt, and grease, so we started a landscaping company. Before long we had to expand, and we constructed a commercial building for the operations. We built two more large garages over the next couple years for all the equipment. I remember in the summer finishing work and going to the shop to get the concrete forms ready for the next pour — so much concrete that could have been used for a tower. I kept busy with my regular full-time job, the new venture, and occasional teaching. But, I still found time to get on the air. I became reacquainted with Craig, K9CT, who had been off the air while working on his business. It was fun to find someone as enthusiastic as I was and talk business! I escaped a few times for DXpeditions to the South Cook Islands (ZK1ZOO in 2003), to Belize (V31RA in 2005), to Venezuela (5J1W in 2005), to The Kermadecs (Microlite Penguins, ZL8R in 2006), then Nicaragua (YN2Z in 2008), and Bermuda (in 2009). The first son got married. We preferred to give attention to the grandkids, yet I still was able to operate a lot.

2010 and Beyond

Sint Maarten declared independence in 2010, and I was part of a fun and successful PJ7E DXpedition. At home we had more marriages and grandkids. There was less radio time but more quality time and a focus on what was really important. We are blessed with family, including my folks who live in town, and I get to see them frequently. I began to operate multiops from K9CT as his super station, finished with K3AW and N7MB and others from the Society of Midwest Contesters. We have had some fantastic scores.

I still managed to get away to the South Orkneys (Microlite Penguins, VP8ORK in 2011) and New Zealand. Severe winds damaged 400 houses in our area in 2012, and ours was among them. I found my whole radio infrastructure was 30 years old, and everything needed work. Progress is slow, but I painted three towers and



Figure 3 — The Bellas grandkids. [Ralph Bellas, K9ZO, photo]

started replacing all the antennas, feed lines and cables. I missed not being able to get on the air every day as in the past.

Last year I retired from the university as an adjunct faculty in marketing and am left with only two jobs. That left time for a trip to Wake Island (K9W in 2013). Station reconstruction is at the point where I can get on the air, but there is still plenty to do. It has given me a reason to upgrade the technology in the shack and reevaluate antenna choices.

I have found contesting and DXing to be very interrelated. During the week I always loved to run Europeans. Often the rate was better than during a contest, because I never was a big gun and there is much less competition. For years I went down to the basement radio shack and put in an hour or so practicing after the kids went to bed. This helped me with call sign recognition, and I learned the seasonal and daily changes in propagation. This improved my ability to recognize good conditions and when to switch bands during contests. In a DX contest it is so easy to miss long path openings or not to know how long they would last. Some openings

are very short; others increase the chance for an unusual multiplier. Best of all, if you are sure there should be propagation, it increases your confidence to ask someone to move to another band for a multiplier. In multi situations your second station can pull out a few extra contacts from casual operators who might not be on during the regular openings.

I've again seen wonderful changes in technology — tubes, transistors, ICs, to SDR which advanced contesting. Shack control is better too. Rotator controllers, antenna switches, and cables are now part of a wi-fi network, and we can control our stations from across the globe. We saw VHF packet clusters turn into Internet spots. Getting signal reports to see how we stacked up under difficult conditions has been replaced by the Reverse Beacon Network. We have a much better idea how the competition is doing. Paper logs, paper check sheets, photocopying logs, mailing them in have been replaced by real-time scoring and logs submitted electronically minutes after an event finishes. Post-contest QSOs on 3.830 have been replaced by chat rooms, IM, online services, and

texting by cell phone.

I have continued to work toward getting things in top shape for eventual retirement and will always enjoy going to the shack in the morning with a mug of coffee and scouting the bands for DX. There will be time for casual contesting, but I sense I have entered a new life stage, and we have enjoyed watching grandkids in soccer and baseball. I'm so fortunate to have my five grandkids in town, and two more are on the way.

Contesting is really fun, but it's an easy choice whether to go to the hospital for the birth of a baby, attend a school event, enjoy a first birthday or call "CQ Contest." There is so much to look forward to, and I want to learn new technologies, relaxing with that first morning cup of coffee, contest participation and family activities.

Thanks, Ralph, for sharing with us the various stages of your ham radio career as reflected in your logbook collection. It's always fascinating to learn how successful operators got their start in radiosport and find ways to keep their skills current.