

The Organizational Nuts and Bolts of PJ2T

As many of you have done, I've worked PJ2T from the US in many contests and competed against them as VP5H and VP5S, frequently losing out to this talented team. I gave up and joined them in 2017 as a member of the CCC and hope to actually visit the station in 2018. Here's a glimpse behind the scenes at PJ2T and the tremendous work the team members expend to keep the call on the air! — Scott Wright, K0MD

As the years pass and tens of thousands more contacts are logged from PJ2T, I'm often asked how we've been able to keep all of this going for 17 years. Usually the very next question is, "How much longer do you think you can continue?" A broader question sometimes follows: "How the heck do you do it?"

A Brief History

I became hooked on Caribbean contesting in the mid-1990s. The loud signals and seemingly endless pileups accented by views of palm trees and the blue ocean outside the shack were intoxicating. It quickly became obvious that if I wanted to keep getting this Caribbean fix, I'd have to take the lead in organizing operations there. I gathered my friends, and, several times, we rented Jody's place at VP5JM. Gradually, we augmented the hardware there. I remember what seemed like an endless drive from Ohio to Miami in rotten weather in K4LT's truck to drop off tower sections and crates for ocean shipment to Provo.

Somewhere in these years of VP5 operation we decided to call ourselves the Caribbean Contesting Consortium (CCC). The name was nicely alliterative, and to this day we're not sure exactly what it means. But, K4LT's wife crafted a clever logo for us, and the name stuck.

Those Field Day-style contest operations were tremendous fun, but exhausting. Also, we quickly saw that a 2-point country was not the place to be for CQ World Wide. Several of us had been tossing around ideas about how we might pool our resources and buy a place for our contest station. We wanted to graduate beyond "Field Day" and have something permanent. After carefully researching the entire Caribbean for a couple of years, I finally concluded that the ABC islands (Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire) were the



Some of the PJ2T challenges with antenna installation on a Caribbean Island: Goose Steingass, W8AV, drilling into solid rock.

best possibilities. The combination of few bad storms, good air service, 3-point QSOs, stable governments, and fairly advanced infrastructures were appealing. At about that time the PJ9JT house in Curaçao, then owned by John, W1BIH (SK), came up for sale.

The concept of a group purchase scared off my friends, once things became real, so my wife and I decided to buy John's house for our future retirement years and to provide a platform for our contesting. My radio buddies and I (initially W0NB, K4LT, and W9EFL) dove into renovation of the house, and, after much investment of sweat equity, turned the place into a viable contest station, as you've read elsewhere in these pages. The retirement house concept collapsed along with my marriage in 2008, but I negotiated to keep the house, and it now supports what has become PJ2T.

Our Organizational Setup

PJ2T functions as a loosely organized group of about 20 contesters, who pool their resources in order to maintain and operate the contest station in Curaçao. The membership of the group has changed

almost entirely over time, given ever-changing personal circumstances, but we're fortunate to have a stable cadre of enthusiastic participants.

The CCC club holds an annual meeting on the Friday of Hamvention®, and typically more than half of our membership shows up. We also discuss club business when we have a number of members on the island, usually for the CQ WW CW and ARRL DX CW.

When we began operating in 2000, my pact with the club was that every radio club dollar would be reinvested into the location. In 2001, we built a perimeter wall that required 3,600 concrete blocks and 6 weeks of work. In 2003, after saving up some more funds, we built patios and a sun shelter that has become known as the "Ocean Pavilion." This has served as PJ2T's meeting and dining room ever since. We did as much of the work as possible by ourselves, and my arms were sore after days of pouring buckets of concrete into forms while standing atop a stepladder. In a major project 3 years later, we built an additional bedroom, added sidewalks and an ocean-viewing platform, and a tiled sun deck on the roof. During a single day

in 2006, we poured 580 wheelbarrows of concrete for the roof slab, hauling each up a derrick I'd fabricated from a couple of Rohn 25 sections, some tower pulleys, and a rope tied to our pickup truck. Since then we have enhanced the interior with new tile floors, all new beds — one at a time, air conditioners for the bedrooms, and replacement of rotting soffits around the house.

On the station side, major projects have included the addition of a triplexer, better multiplier antennas, a sophisticated antenna switching system, new operating desks by NØYY, antennas on a high ridge near the house, ever more reliable amplifiers (AL-1200s), and, recently, the addition of two K3s and some new PCs. Looming in the near future is the major job of replacing our 100-foot Rohn 55 tower. The simple business model we started with in 2000 has worked very well, and we manage to have a lot of fun.

Finances

We struggle financially. The station was built in 2000-2001, when each of us threw in a modest amount of money and equipment. These pooled resources did the trick, and we did the work ourselves on the cheap. Since then, each group member contributes dues (~\$500/year) to help support ongoing equipment and antenna maintenance, to occasionally buy goodies, such as the K3 or a new amplifier tube, and to help support the house.

As I've mentioned, we had hoped to buy the W1BIH house as a group, but when it came time to actually ante up, support for that idea fell away. To save the deal, I leveraged my own home in Ohio — a bit of a fiscal stretch — to become the owner on



Geoff Howard, WØCG/PJ2DX with the chisel and hammer (and sweat).



Geoff Howard, WØCG (second from left) as a global ambassador for radio contesting: (L-R) Rodinei Carvalho, PY4LH; Howard; Stephano Silva, PT2IC, and Julio Marhonas, PP2BT.

the condition that our contesting members provide some annual assistance through dues. That system has enabled us to remain solvent year after year.

During a contest, we essentially rent the place from ourselves. After each large contest operation we collect a total of around \$1,200 toward support of the house, plus an additional \$75 from each operator toward equipment needs. When divided among a typical team of 10 or so operators, this cost seems tolerable.

For many years we also rented out the location, when our own members did not want to operate in a particular contest. This arrangement helped support both the station and the house. Recently, though, we have had to cut back almost entirely on renting, because the station has become too complex for visitors to use effectively without support. In situations when one of our members is able to be on the island to help our visitors, rentals do still pan out.

Contributions also have helped us to survive. Often at the end of a contest when we pass the hat for shared expenses, a member will round up the amount of his payment, sometimes liberally, to help us survive. Even some non-club visitors have done so. A couple of years ago, two guests for the ARRL 10 Meter Contest surprised us by generously leaving behind unsolicited donations amounting to several hundred extra dollars. In another instance a visitor heard that our treasury had gone negative, and he left us with a check to

put us back into the black. Now and then our members — one generous member in particular — will send in a little additional for dues, and all of this is a great help.

Sometimes there are snap fundraisers. One of our members, a lover of the K3, offered to donate 50% of the cost of a K3, if the rest of the membership would match his contribution. Multiple members quickly donated their share, and we got our new transceiver. This happens for the house too. Sick of contesting in sometimes 100° indoor temperatures, one of our members contributed a hunk of cash toward a big air conditioner. A quick “cool” fundraiser followed among our membership, and we soon had a 36,000 BTU air conditioner for the shack. Another operator, tired of being poked by mattress springs, donated a bed. Yet another, fed up with warm beer, donated one-half the cost of a new refrigerator. Our “clubhouse” is truly a group effort.

The income streams (dues, self-rentals, visiting renters, and contributions) have barely — just barely — kept us afloat and on the air. The station is much more modest than we would like. It would be wonderful to have more mult-chasing capability, more automation, and more antennas, but the resources are simply not there. It's all that we can do to march in place, but we still manage to have a lot of fun.

How We Do It: A Week at PJ2T

Operators typically fly in on the Tuesday

before a contest. We always have one rental vehicle to collect people and luggage at the airport. This works out to be much less costly than using taxis. Now and then our operators will opt to rent a car in order to have more freedom of movement.

Until 2009, most operators would be put up at Sunset Waters Beach Resort, an American owned-and-operated hotel that was a short walk from the PJ2T house. The four beds at the PJ2T house filled quickly, and Sunset Waters was an attractive place for everyone else to stay. We ate most of our meals at the hotel restaurant, and the logistics of our contests were fairly simple.

In 2009 Sunset Waters went bankrupt in the wake of the world economic crisis and the accompanying dip in tourism. Suddenly, it became very much more difficult to stage contest operations. Arrangements had to be made to rent one or more houses in the PJ2T neighborhood. Doing this was a huge administrative burden, but we had no real choice, because commercial lodging is a long drive from PJ2T's neighborhood.

Even worse, with the hotel's demise, we also lost our restaurant. This meant that someone had to plan meals for teams upward of 12 people, buy all the groceries, and then cook and serve everything. Lately, we have been sharing food responsibilities, and things are somewhat easier. Another innovation has been to offer a 50% airfare subsidy — underwritten by the team — for an op or spouse who is willing to serve as chef.

Prior to a contest weekend, ops spend a lot of time on the air, getting familiar with propagation and station setup, punctuated by swims in the ocean in front of the house, touring in town, and general decadence. There's always maintenance work, and many of the operators pitch in where needed. For me, one of the greatest privileges of being at PJ2T is meeting new people and making new friends from all over the globe, and those friendships are cemented over beers in the PJ2T Ocean Pavilion, or over hot sticker bushes and cactus, climbing around on antenna projects.

Contest weekends now seem routine. At 0001, when people have been fed, the first Qs are in the logs, the logging network is working, and everyone is smiling is my moment finally to relax and exult that all preparations are over and the people are happy. After 17 years and hundreds of contests from Curaçao, I've learned to accept the pragmatic realities of contesting, to wit:

1. Not all teams are equal, and skill, and commitment levels vary greatly.

2. The bands will give us what they give us. The best ops in the world can't overcome poor conditions, local low-band



PJ2T annual property maintenance.

noise from storms, or a solar flare. We can only do our best with the conditions provided.

3. Africa will always win. The overwhelming low-band advantage of lots of close-by multipliers cannot be overcome. An arc from Morocco that covers most of Europe is only 1,600 miles. The same-sized arc from Curaçao only encompasses Florida and a small part of southern Georgia. One learns over the years to take it as it comes, knowing that many of the forces that control contest outcomes are beyond any of us to influence.

Sometimes we *do* win, though. In the CQ WW, if no large station in our category is on the air from Zone 33, we may win a plaque. We may also win a plaque if an M2 "category swapper" does not opt into the MM category just hours before the log submission deadline. We have "lost" three plaques that way. Most of the time in the CQ WW, though, we are satisfied with no plaque but a respectable score vis-à-vis other stations in our hemisphere. Odds of a win are higher in the WPX, and very much higher in the ARRL International DX Contest, where our geography trumps that of CQ Zone 33 stations.

Monday after a contest is usually a day of rest, and on Tuesday, it's back to the airport as team members fan out to the many points of the compass, with 10,000 or more PJ2T QSOs in our log and another contest in the archives.

Threats

Assessing how much longer we can survive requires a review of threats. A key threat would be losing the ability to attract a group of about 20 contesters — our critical mass. Since our start in 2000, we have lost our great friends Joe,

W9JUV; Noel, W9EFL, and Scott, N9AG. Others from our group have reached the age where international travel is not attractive or physically viable, and we miss their good company. Still others have faced life changes outside of their control. Sometimes, the schedule of an enthusiastic contesteer who's able to make it one year is co-opted by something else the next. We have been fortunate that when a valued member stops coming to the island, a new and enthusiastic one has stepped in to take his place. If that process were to stop, so would PJ2T.

Another threat would be a leadership vacuum. PJ2T will not work unless one person is willing to put in unimaginable hours coordinating everything from the US, and then doing lots and lots of work on the island. Since I have moved a lot farther away from Curaçao (I'm in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho), and as I approach 70, our group needs to find strong new leadership, as inevitable forces make it harder for me to keep up the pace.

Bankruptcy, however, is the biggest threat. It could sneak up on us fast. For years we have been using a suite of Yaesu transceivers that were either sold to us on liberal terms or donated by W8TK. But the salt air and corrosion processes are proceeding relentlessly, and most of those radios have been relegated to the salvage heap. Only three FT-2000s remain, but who knows for how long? We were given a K3 from John, K8WDN, after he died, and that has started a migration from Yaesu to Elecraft. But, we don't have the funds to go beyond the present pair of K3s. So, when the FT-2000s die we may be in trouble.

Even worse, the 100-foot Rohn 55 tower that supports six of our Yagis and a couple

of wires is dangerously corroded and needs to be replaced. The cost of doing that is presently well beyond our resources, and if we can't raise the necessary funds, we may be looking at severely reduced operations or even shutting down altogether.

Hurricanes are on everyone's minds, especially after 2017, and that's another obvious threat to PJ2T. One reason we set up in Curaçao is the three points in CQ WW, but an even bigger one is that the ABC islands are south of the nominal hurricane belt. There has not been a serious hurricane in Curaçao for 130 years, and we were very fortunate to be spared the sad fate of our neighbors to the north last fall. Even better, climatologists tell us that the hurricane tracks have migrated about 100 miles north over the past decade, and that trend is expected to continue. Still, nothing is certain and a major storm would be the end of PJ2T.

Licensing has been a serious PJ2T threat until just recently. Since 2000, we were only permitted to use the PJ2T call sign during the 48 hours of a contest, and each of those occasions required applying in advance and paying a fee. We've never been certain that permission to operate would be granted. Thankfully, in August 2017 we were finally issued a permanent PJ2T club license, following a complex 6-year application process, so the regulatory threat to PJ2T now appears greatly diminished.

Going Forward

After such a long a time, it's hard to imagine the contest community not having an easy PJ2 mult on every band. You can help to assure that we don't go away. We are always searching for new contesters to join our family, and we are also most grateful when we receive your help with our resource base. Thanks for your contacts in the past, and we'll keep seeing you on the bands for as long as we can.