

A Rookie Goes to Curacao

I've been a ham for more than 40 years, so not too many people would call me a rookie. Like many of the contesting or DX-ing persuasion, I dreamed of being on the other side of the pileup. After several local Seattle-area hams trekked down to P4ØV in 1988 and came back to talk about the experience, I became enamored with the idea. I always wondered: Could I do that? Twenty five years later, I was determined that 2013 was going to be *the* year I gave it my best shot. Why 2013? It was going to be one of those rare years when the CQ World Wide CW did *not* fall on the weekend immediately following Thanksgiving, an important family gathering. With careful planning, I could actually go out of town to play with radios — as long as I got back for the holiday.

I started my planning even before the 2012 CQ WW. I asked Ward, NØAX, if he

had any contacts with contest teams that would take on a rookie, and he put me in touch with Geoff WØCG. If you've ever dealt with the PJ2T team on Curacao, it probably involved Geoff. Even better for me, Geoff was now a Northwest local and had given programs on PJ2T at the Northwest DX Convention. Not only did Geoff agree to let me tag along on the 2013 CQ WW CW team, he invited me to come down for the 2013 ARRL DX CW as a warm-up. As tempting as that was, two trips to the Caribbean in 1 year would have stressed the matrimonial ties too much. So, it was game on for the CQ WW in 2013!

PJ2T is a well-oiled machine. Geoff acts as the local facilities organizer, and someone else in the Caribbean Contesting Consortium (CCC) takes the role of team leader. For this event, that was Rick, NØYY. The rest of the team was made up CCC

regulars and prior visitors. These included Gene, KB7Q; Marty, K2PLF; Jeff, K8ND; Jim, W8WTS; Mike, RWØCN/VE7ACN; Andy, W9NJY; Jorge, DF9LJ, and Ray, NM2O. Mike's wife Natasha rounded out the crew. All were experienced with PJ2T or other Caribbean contest stations. As the rookie, I had never been near the Caribbean, and the only member of the team I ever met before arriving was Geoff.

We started getting acquainted in the spring, when Rick started e-mail threads dealing with planning details, thoughts on strategy, and analysis of the 2012 results. What did people want to eat? Where were they going to sleep? Arrival and departure times? What bands would be the best match to skills? With this large a team, should we make this a Multi-Unlimited entry? I just tried to keep my mouth shut and absorb the information. As the rookie,



Curacao offers more than just great radio propagation. [Michael Dinkelman, N7WA, photo]



N7WA running a pileups on 15 meters.
[Geoff Howard, WØCG, photo]

I made it clear that I would work any band at any time. Just stick me in front of a radio with a computer to log on, and then tell me when to get off. It was also suggested that we practice with *Morse Runner*, which I did in full QRM/QRN/QSB/LID activity Level 4 mode. This was helpful, as the real contesting ended up being easier than *Morse Runner*.

Come fall, my personal excitement level was rising. I had been assigned to the 15 meter team. I followed the news related to the September PJ2T antenna work party. I followed the activities of the SSB team that went down for CQ WW at the end of October. I pounded on *Morse Runner*. I posted a picture of PJ2T in my cubicle at work. (You're going *where?* To do *what?*) I even checked out the webcam and weather reports more times than I should rationally admit.

Before I knew it, the days had flown by, and it was time to go. It was a very wet and dark November departure for what is the longest non-stop flight in the contiguous 48 states — SeaTac to Miami.

By coincidence, half of the team was to be in Miami at the same time. We would have an opportunity to get acquainted while waiting for the flight to Curacao. I even had the chance to meet other contesters headed out to other islands. We arrived in Curacao the Tuesday before the CQ WW CW and were greeted by temperatures in the 80s — with humidity to match. We spent the evening getting settled. Not all the operators can stay at PJ2T proper, so we'd rented a house a short walk away. This location, the Moran House, became the central gathering spot for meals and relaxation for those staying at PJ2T. It had a pool that was marvelous for resetting the body and mind. I hadn't come prepared for jumping in the ocean, but I probably jumped in that pool a couple times a day. Tuesday evening, some of the veterans started working DX with their PJ2/



The swimming pool that made all the difference. [Michael Dinkelman, N7WA, photo]

call signs, while the rookie listened on the side trying to absorb it all.

Wednesday was scheduled for antenna work. One team was headed north to the ridge antenna. This involved climbing and cutting through nasty sticker bushes and cactus. My team was to lay out the receiving 4-square, which involved threading our way through the same nasty sticker bushes and cactus that could poke through clothing and skin with no effort at all. Despite the heat and humidity, which just saps your strength, it was mandatory to wear jeans. I traded my usual Birkenstocks for work boots. We rolled out a rather large roll of coax and dragged it through the bushes — machete in hand.

I should mention the outrageous number of lizards scurrying all over the place and iguanas jumping out of trees. (Iguanas climb trees?) Hours later, our team had found the 4-square mounting posts, mounted the whips, and connected the coax. It was all hooked up, except, it seems, we had rolled out the wrong roll of coax. We rolled the coax back up and rolled out the right one. This time, we knew where the end point had to be, but we had the added exasperation of an open connector in the middle of the run. That fixed, I jumped in the pool.

While we were doing all of this, a third team was trading out the Yaesus normally used at PJ2T for the Elecraft K3s that team members had brought along. This was an experiment for PJ2T, and one I was happy to see, since I was already acquainted with the K3 and its performance.

Wednesday afternoon, after my trip

to the pool and after my K3 had been installed, I started getting acquainted with 15 meters from Curacao. It only took a few calls to attract raging pileups. This was what I had come down for! I took the band late into the night and restarted before daylight on Thursday.

Later on Thursday, Gene and I went for a ride. Gene had rented a car and wanted to explore some of the island. For me it was chance to see some sights, and I was happy for the invitation. We ended up on the west end of the island in a region known as Westpunt. We saw beaches, small towns, a really nice church, and lots of sticker bushes and cactus. It was an unexpected and enjoyable diversion. After we got back, I jumped in the pool again. The rest of Thursday was a repeat of Wednesday: Working the radio into the night and back at it Friday morning.

Friday afternoon, it was time to shut down and get some mandatory rest. It was also time for more dips in the pool. Back at PJ2T, the logging machines were getting their final configuration for the CQ WW, and personal logs were closed. We had our last pre-contest meal, Rick handed out shirts to celebrate the occasion, and we talked last-minute strategy.

Twenty minutes before the contest, we started warming up the bands. It isn't legal to use PJ2T as a call sign until just before the contest, so we used personal call signs and logged by hand. With 5 minutes to go, we switched to PJ2T. At 0000 UTC, we launched into full-bore contesting. In Curacao, the CQ WW starts at 8 PM local time. That's quite a difference from the 4

PM local starts in the Pacific Northwest. In Curacao, it's dark by then, and 15 does not start with a bang. During the first 6 hours, I logged 135 contacts. It wasn't a great start, and when I looked back at the hundreds of contacts on 20 and 40. I wasn't feeling great about my efforts. On the plus side, I'd snagged a fair number of multipliers during that first shift. By 2 AM, I was flagging pretty badly, and the rate was nil. I went to bed, planning to be back in the chair before sunrise.

That next morning, as I walked back in the dark at 5 AM, I distinctly remember asking myself aloud what the heck I was doing there? Fortunately, I didn't hear an answer. I figure it was mostly the lack of sleep, too much heat, and altered biorhythms. Back at the radio in air-conditioned comfort, I could hear Europeans via long path on 15, but working them wasn't easy, and I only managed to snag a few stations in Northern Europe. Yet, once the sun cracked the horizon, the band started turning, and by 6:30 AM, 15 was hopping. Everybody in Europe was heading up to 10 and 15. The 20 meter guys slowed down, and 40 pretty much stopped. My two 15 meter

teammates, K8ND and W8WTS, were also the 160 ops, so they had been up all night and were more interested in catching up on sleep. Jeff finally kicked me off the radio about noon, telling me not to kill myself and to get some rest before coming back at 6 PM. I happily walked to the Moran House knowing I had just put the first 1000 Qs into the 15 meter log and that our team had almost pulled even with the 40 meter ops. I'm sure I jumped in the pool. Jeff and Jim continued applying pressure, and we were within striking distance of 20 by the time I returned.

The second 24 hours was a repeat of the first, except our 15 meter team was now neck and neck with the 20 meter team. We were tied in zones, way ahead in countries, and slightly ahead in contacts. Oddly, *WriteLog* was reporting 41 zones on 20 meters. I half-wondered if PJ2T had found the *Zone of Iniquity* (google it!) and would not have been surprised to see Ray Tracy walk through the door. Alas, propagation was to favor 20 in the final hours. Fifteen was totally shut out for the last 30 minutes, and we made no contacts. In the end the 20 meter team topped us by 60 contacts,

but I felt good that our band was the solid runner-up. After a few pictures, it was off to the Moran House for beers and a great post-contest meal.

My flight out was early the next morning, and I wasn't able to help out with the teardown. I felt bad about that, and if I ever do this again, I'll make sure I'm around. The early flight also left me with many hours to kill while waiting in Miami for my connecting flight home. A pleasant surprise was discovering that my friends Mike, K7IR, and Adam, K7EDX, from SteppIR were on the same flight. We had a good visit swapping stories from each other's trips and looking at pictures. QSL requests for PJ2/N7WA were already waiting when I got home, but catching up with sleep became my primary concern. I am glad I had the holiday period to recover.

If you've never worked the "other side" during a DX contest, and the opportunity arises, *grab it!* I don't think a day goes by that I don't think back on my PJ2T experience, and I'm glad I did it. Most of all, I want to thank my teammates at PJ2T for making it a fun and enjoyable experience.