

The 5J0A San Andres Island 2007 CQ WW CW Contest Operation

Tom Menas, K3WT

DXpeditions. From the time I was first licensed in 1962, I had read about DXpeditions but never thought I'd actually go on one. The exploits of Gus Browning, the Colvins and others conjured images of exotic locales with pileups just waiting to contact me. College, work and family always took priority, however. Finally, with both of our children moving out and establishing themselves in the work world, I had time to seriously consider a DXpedition.

My first close brush with being part of a DXpedition came when I was invited to join fellow members of the Twin City DX Association (TCDXA) and Minnesota Wireless Association (MWA) — Vlad, N0STL, Ron, N0AT, Bill, W0OR, Tony, KM0O, and Tom, W0ZR — on their 2005 CP6CW DXpedition to Bolivia. While I initially signed on, for a variety of reasons I ultimately decided not to go.

I watched from the sidelines as they prepared, departed and triumphantly returned. "Wait till next year," I said to myself.

At an end-of-year 2006 lunch with Bill, W0OR, critical mass was achieved. We decided on San Andres Island for a variety of factors. It was relatively easy to get to, it was tropical — a definite draw for us frigid Minnesotans — and, while not a truly rare DXCC entity, it was uncommon enough to generate interest within the DX/contesting communities for the 2007 November CQ World Wide CW Contest.

The die was cast. My initial hurdle was to convince my wife to share my "vision." This happened without incident — or without too much of one.

Several months passed before we took the next step of seeing if others might be interested. Conversations with Ron, N0AT, and Vlad, N0STL, revealed that they were champing at the bit to go on another DX outing. Tony, KM0O, had already made plans to operate that weekend from Thailand as XU7MWA, so he was unable to participate. So the cast of characters was set. The four of us would go.

Planning

In June we agreed formally to move forward. I had already begun to research accommodations and licensing, so I was charged with fleshing out those details. Bill, W0OR — who had handled the logistics of getting his earlier crew to and from Bolivia — took on the same responsibility for our DXpedition. Vlad, N0STL, and Ron, N0AT, would wait to see if accommodations, flights and licensing worked out before contributing their skills to develop



Figure 1 — Team 5J0A (L-R): Vlad, N0STL; Bill, W0OR; Ron, N0AT, and Tom, K3WT



Figure 2 — The station: Vlad, N0STL (left), at the run station with Ron, N0AT, at the multiplier station.



Figure 3 — The 5J0A QTH at the Red Crab Apartments: The station was located in the lower apartment on the right side of building.

operating, computer networking, equipment and antenna plans.

A Web search revealed that the Florida DX/Contesting Group, led by Bill, W4WX, and his team had been to San Andres in 2004. He generously shared information regarding that experience during several e-mail exchanges and a couple of telephone calls.

Rafael of the Red Crab Apartments confirmed that two units would be available. Rob, HK3CW, our key person in Bogotá, offered us a "ham" discount for using his firm, Satto Translations, to apply for the license using a special call sign for the contest, as well as for individual licenses. Rob certainly went above and beyond the call of duty on our behalf.

Bill got a line on a combination of relatively inexpensive flights using Northwest and Copa airlines from Minneapolis via Miami and Panama City. We'd debated the merits of routing through Bogotá instead of Panama City but settled on the latter city because customs clearance would be in San Andres itself. Customs turned out to be non-factor; we hired a porter to shepherd us through customs — a key strategic move.

The group decided to go forward with the purchase of the tickets, a deposit on the apartment and applications for the necessary Colombian licenses.

We spent the next months having bi-weekly team conference calls and personal meetings as we nailed down the myriad tasks to carry out the trip. We consulted frequently with Bill, W4WX, about where we should set up the station, our options for installing the antennas we wanted to bring (no, we could not run a coaxial cable across the road to the beach), how we could get 220 V power for our amplifier and so forth.

We requested a variety of call signs but were told that only San Andres residents were eligible for an HK0 prefix. Instead, we had to choose from 5J0 or 5K0, although we could still append HK0/ to our US call signs. As with many governments, the issuance of Amateur Radio licenses in Colombia involves not only the federal government but the national radio club. After many communications with Rob, HK3CW, as our emissary between the Colombian Ministry of Communications and the LCRA (La Liga Colombiano de Radioaficionados), we were able to obtain the 5J0A call sign for use during the CQ WW.

The other three operators had participated in prior DXpeditions and been at the receiving end of a pileup. For my part,

I was somewhat apprehensive about my ability to measure up to their skills and did not want to be the weak link. So I did what any competitor would do. I practiced in the months beforehand with *Morse Runner*, the excellent contest simulator created by Alex Shovkopylas, VE3NEA. *Morse Runner* is an outstanding training aid that I urge all to try to hone your operating skills, whether for a DXpedition or operating from home.

First Steps Abroad

The date was finally at hand. There we were on a hot and humid day in the tropics less than 48 hours removed from the tundra that's called Minnesota. You have to picture us: Four geeky-looking folks with 16 pieces of luggage, each weighing close to the 50 pounds-per-bag airline limit. Two golf bags contained our antennas.

It turned out to be a three-ring circus. First, the van driver who should have picked us up did not show because he thought we were coming the next day. So we had to fend for ourselves with the *taxistas*. We ended up getting two cabs. The golf bags sat on our laps, partly extending

out the windows. We attracted a fair share of onlookers as we crammed our luggage and ourselves into the taxis.

After a 4 or 5-mile drive along the southeastern shore, we arrived at the Red Crab, where we received a warm welcome from Lucy, our housekeeper, and her son Alfonso, the groundskeeper and general handyman. Since no one else was staying in the four-unit building, we had our pick of rooms. We designated the ground-floor apartment as our station location; this gave us access to the adjacent empty lot. Almost immediately, however, we discovered that only the bedrooms were air conditioned. The common room, where two picnic tables and benches had been set up for us, most definitely was not.

"No problem," we thought. "We'll just open the windows to let the ocean breezes cool us."

Wrong! Yes, opening the windows *did* provide a refreshing breeze. The downside was that we had to contend with mosquitoes and a very persistent species of ant unique to San Andres. The ants respected neither humans nor equipment as we set up camp in their fiefdom. They marched

across and *into* our computer keyboard. Ron, NØAT, found that the little creatures just swarming over some long-forgotten throat lozenges left in his luggage from a prior phone contest.

It didn't take us long to decide that being locked in a heat chamber was a far better fate than being subjected to an onslaught from our insect friends.

Ron, NØAT, and Vlad, NØSTL, began assembling the station equipment and computers. Establishing a dialup Internet connection wound up taking a couple of days as we needed the correct access codes and so forth. Once online, we found our station's RF played havoc with the modem. Ferrite cores on each cable fixed that problem.

We initially planned to have three stations: A run station, a multiplier station and a spotting station. Murphy altered those plans. Bill, WØOR, had recently purchased a used Yaesu FT-1000MP and was looking forward to putting it through its paces as the multiplier rig. Alas, that was not meant to be. The luggage gods at the airlines intervened by delivering a blunt force trauma blow to the main tuning knob, rendering the rig inoperative. Fortunately, all of the other rigs arrived intact.

The run station had an ICOM IC-756PROIII teamed with an ACOM 1010 amplifier, which performed admirably. An ICOM IC-7000, intended to be the spotting rig, was enlisted to serve as the multiplier rig.

Antennas!

With equipment in place, the first task was to get on the air as soon as possible. We did that by temporarily erecting a Butternut HF2 (40 and 80 meters) on the front lawn with a minimal number of radials on the ground. The terrain consisted of about one foot of sandy soil over coral bedrock — certainly not the best RF ground. While in Minnesota and viewing some images that Bill, W4WX, had taken on his visit, we thought we could set up our verticals across the road on the beach, possibly even in the surf. But the "little" two-lane road in reality was the San Andres version of a north-south Interstate, the beach frequently in use and the surf strong. Beach-side antennas definitely were out!

The HF2 played like gangbusters on 40 but dismally on 80; at least we were on the air that first evening. While we were passing out Qs on 40 and some on 80, we began to assemble the more complex Butternut HF9 vertical in the dimly-lit and oppressively hot living room. Ron, NØAT, began muttering about the number of small screws, washers and nuts, so I lent a sympathetic ear and took over the task of completing the assembly. I think Ron was *really* saying that he wanted to get in some operating time. Anyway, by bedtime the HF9 was essentially completed.

The next day, Wednesday, two teams fin-

Table 1
A portion of the 5JØA operator schedule during the 2007 CQ WW CW Contest, November 23-25

		LOCAL					
		TIME	UTC	SLEEP	MULT	RUN	SPOT
Evening		19	00	NØSTL	WØOR	NØAT	K3WT
		20	01	NØSTL	WØOR	NØAT	K3WT
		21	02	K3WT	NØSTL	WØOR	NØAT
		22	03	K3WT	NØSTL	WØOR	NØAT
Night		23	04	K3WT	NØAT	NØSTL	WØOR
		00	05	K3WT	NØAT	NØSTL	WØOR
		01	06	WØOR	K3WT	NØAT	NØSTL
		02	07	WØOR	K3WT	NØAT	NØSTL
		03	08	WØOR	NØSTL	K3WT	NØAT
		04	09	WØOR	NØSTL	K3WT	NØAT
		05	10	NØAT	WØOR	NØSTL	K3WT
		06	11	NØAT	WØOR	NØSTL	K3WT
Morning		07	12	NØAT	K3WT	WØOR	NØSTL
		08	13	NØAT	K3WT	WØOR	NØSTL
		09	14	NØSTL	NØAT	K3WT	WØOR
		10	15	NØSTL	NØAT	K3WT	WØOR
		11	16	NØSTL	WØOR	NØAT	K3WT
	12	17	NØSTL	WØOR	NØAT	K3WT	
Notes	Spot operator was in charge of filling band maps with Internet spots or with spots from his radio. He does not transmit. Spot operator also was in charge of turning antennas, fixing things, talking to visitors (in Spanish) and getting beverages for the other two ops. The spot shift is <u>when you eat</u> .						
	Anyone could swap shifts with anyone else. If you wanted less operating time, someone would oblige.						
	After your second spot shift, you were in charge of waking up the sleeping op, taking into consideration the amount of lead time he needed.						
	If you got up early from your sleep time, you can relieve the spot op early, so the spot op could get to sleep early, then move into your mult position at the top of the hour						

ished all antenna work. Vlad, NØSTL, and I were tasked with setting up the SpiderBeam in the empty lot, which turned out to be not quite so empty (more on that in a bit). Bill, WØOR, and Ron, NØAT, worked to permanently install the HF2 and HF9 and erect an inverted L for 160 meters.

While our “empty” lot was clear of buildings, it was flush with a thicket of waist-high brush. We knew we couldn’t assemble the beam unless we had a clearing. Thinking like a local, I borrowed a machete lying near a coconut tree and spent an hour and a half Indiana Jones-style clearing several paths to the beam site and making a clearing to set up the beam — and I have the blisters to prove it.

As a joke, Vlad and I concocted a story that we’d encountered a snake, but that I’d used the machete to sever its head. You should have seen the looks on the faces of Ron, NØAT, and Bill, WØOR. They would have to anchor the guys of the 160 meter inverted L along with the horizontal wire to some trees in the empty lot. After keeping up their anxiety level for 15 or 20 minutes, we let them in on the joke. Talk about sighs of relief.

By day’s end, all antennas were in their final positions. The 160 meter inverted L was lashed to the railing of the upper deck and extended vertically with a 25-foot fiberglass mast. On top of that was a deep sea fishing rod (60 feet at the tip). At the other end of the building on that same level we installed the HF2 with counterpoises cut at 66 and 33 feet respectively. This provided a significant improvement over the ground-mounted configuration. We mounted the HF9 in the front yard with a number of radials.

For a 160 meter receiving antenna, we mounted a K9AY 160 meter receiving loop 30 feet up in a coconut tree (*Why* did we leave that slingshot at home; it took almost 10 tries to position the supporting rope). More than 90 percent of the time, the K9AY loop outperformed the 160 meter inverted L on receive, so it was a great addition. The inverted L used a counterpoise six feet above ground. Because of the poor ground, we had plenty of RF floating around the shack when we operated 160. At best, we had to shut off the run station computer and log 160 meter contacts on the multiplier station PC.

Operator Scheduling

One thing that Ron, NØAT, brought to the operation — based on his prior DXpedition experience — was to establish an operator schedule, which he developed before we even left for San Andres. Getting agreement beforehand permitted us to focus on setting up the station and operating. The beauty of his schedule was that every operator got to operate at various times across a variety of bands. This way, everyone got to operate the run station during peak periods. The schedule rotated through a pattern of sleep, mult, run, spot, mult, run, spot, sleep. Table 1 will give you an idea of how it worked out.

Over in a Flash

On the last day of our visit, the 160 meter inverted L unceremoniously heralded the end of our activity in a rather humorous manner. In the wee hours, Ron, NØAT, was working a sked with some Europeans when the amplifier suddenly shut down. An astute person,

Ron quickly discerned two things: There was a problem at the feed point, and he was not going out in the dark to figure it out. So, he sagely dispatched Vlad, NØSTL, to do the troubleshooting. It wasn’t long before we heard a great shout from outside, and Vlad excitedly bolted (and that’s the operative word) into the room.

During the week a coating of salt mist had formed, creating a path for the two terminals of a capacitor to short in a brilliant flash of flame — a real fireball. That event served to remind us that it was time to button up the run station and finish packing.

How Did We Do?

Well, not so bad — which, in polite Minnesotanese, means we did “pretty well.” The good news was that we logged nearly 6000 QSOs. The bad news was that 500 of those were dupes, many apparently resulting from confusion over our call sign. We were frequently spotted as “HJØA,” not as 5JØA. This definitely was a factor in slowing our rate. Table 2 provides a picture of our net contact breakdown.

Table 2
5JØA results

Band	Contacts	Zones	Countries
160	61	10	22
80	494	18	67
40	1607	30	108
20	1626	28	97
15	1448	24	93
10	75	10	14
Total	5312	120	401

Some Thoughts on Learning the Local Culture and on DXpedition Planning

A DXpedition should not be *solely* a DXpedition. As much as possible, participants should make an effort to enhance their experience by reaching out to the locals. Here are some things we tried.

We made the decision to ask our housekeeper, Lucy, to prepare local fare, so we could sample authentic cuisine. In doing so, we not only got to sample some interesting dishes but got to know Lucy much better.

Drawing on his past DXpedition experience, Ron, NØAT, brought along a variety of items he’d received from vendors at his work to pass out in appreciation. Big hits were a small pocket knife, a tape measure, a key chain, a multi-blade screwdriver and a pack of playing cards. Small gifts like these can open doors to the local culture that otherwise might remain closed.

The playing cards proved quite a hit with Lucy’s nine-year-old son and his nine-year-old cousin. Because I could speak Spanish, they asked me to teach

them to play poker. The next day, they showed up with determined looks on their faces. They wanted to play for money!

Another great experience I had resulted from cajoling by Bill, WØOR, to do some snorkeling along the coral formation across the road from the Red Crab. Be ready to step out of your comfort zone a little.

To cap off the week, we hired Manrique, the local taxi driver, to take us on a tour of the island. It seemed as if he knew everyone there, and he showed us many things the typical tourist might not have seen.

In summary, take some time to enjoy what your DXpedition locale has to offer. It’ll be worth it.

The Web to the Rescue

Planning and preparing for an event like a DXpedition takes many months. This certainly involves sharing the excitement with non-hams (relatives, co-workers, acquaintances and friends). When explaining to non-hams what we

were going to do, it struck me that we were ham radio ambassadors and that most people did not “get it.” I encountered questions such as, “What *is* ham radio?” and “Oh, I thought they didn’t do that anymore.”

Even those who were familiar with ham radio still could not comprehend why we were going on this trip. “Why do you want to do that?” we heard, or, “How are you going to do that?” and, “Just where *is* San Andres Island?”

One early decision was to establish a Web site, www.frontiernet.net/~5j0a, to document our trip for members of the ham radio community. We turned to that site and added a link entitled “Understanding Ham Radio.” This section aimed to answer the sorts of questions non-hams might have about ham radio in general and regarding our radio expedition in particular. This turned out to be a big help in explaining the entire process. Check it out. You may want to do something similar for *your* contest DXpedition.

In addition, operating before and after the contest as HKØ/ using our home call signs, we made more than 3500 QSOs. So, we definitely passed out some needed contacts.

In terms of providing “a rare one,” we had been asked by Joe, W8GEX, if we could operate on 60 meters, which we did by using the 160 meter inverted L and the PROIII with Ron, NØAT, at the mic. Some 30 stations were among those making first-ever 60 meter QSOs with San Andres.

High Points

Of course, operating the contest was a highlight of the trip, but there was much more. The camaraderie was something only those who have been on a DXpedition can experience. The memories of San Andres — from the gracious people to the tropical locale — are something we'll all hold on to. The endless pileups were a joy that can't be matched. The first-ever 60 meter QSOs certainly were noteworthy too.

All of this lays the groundwork for future DXpeditions. If you haven't been on one, *ya gotta do it!* It's a thrill of a lifetime. Thanks to all who contacted us, and we'll see you next time, wherever that might be.

NCJ