

VP2ME Reflections

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After the dust had cleared and the log checking wrapped up for the 2013 ARRL International DX Contest (CW), the five-operator team at VP2ME (W9RE, N5OT, AA4NC, N4GG and W6DR) was edged out by the TI5W team in the DX Multioperator, Two Transmitter, High Power category. According to the final tally, TI5W logged just 10 more contacts but picked up one additional — and very crucial — multiplier. Mark Beckwith, N5OT, recalls the VP2ME team's organization and contest effort.

The Runup

Our little ragtag group decided it was time to come out of retirement. We last operated, as PJ4R in 2008 at the now well-known station on Bonaire put up by Noah, K2NG. When our teammate Don Crain, W4OC, underwent a serious bout with cancer, it put a damper on our team efforts.

Earlier this year, Hal, N4GG, and Mike, W9RE, started eyeing the station that George, K2DM, has set up on Montserrat. George had teamed up with a tourist rental landlord — David and Clover Lea, proprietors of Gingerbread Hill — who had the right location, the right rent and the right attitude. It seemed to be a good fit for our style of operating, and we decided to give it a try.

We soon learned, however, that Will, AA4NC, already had rented the site for the ARRL DX CW, so we proposed to Will that he join our team, and he went along with the idea. Then followed months of e-mail exchanges to pin down the details, not least of which was that the three amplifiers on site were not functioning. Our team has a reputation for fixing other people's amps, but when I found out they had a broken three-hole Alpha, I asked the other team members if I could invite David Ritchie, W6DR, to join us, since he has restored and repaired more Alpha three-holers than anyone else I know outside of Alpha.

We decided to use Elecraft K3s, but we only had two. Our back-up station was a rather barebones Kenwood TS-570. Antennas included two tribanders, a homebrew Shorty-40, and wires — all put up from



The VP2ME station setup with (L-R) N5OT, W9RE and N4GG in the background [AA4NC photo]



Cheers! N4GG, W9RE and N5OT [AA4NC photo]

scratch upon our arrival (they are in storage when not in use). A *huge* asset was a permanently installed 54 foot crank-up tower.

Our worst nightmare was getting an Ameritron AL-80 that George had repaired in the US and shipped back to Montserrat through customs for the second time in its life. This took months of planning before the expedition plus 2 person-days once we arrived on Montserrat. VP2ME ran the legal limit on Montserrat, 1000 W, although at times we used a 500 W amp.

The Contest

The ultimate close race aside, the contest was relatively uneventful. Since our last outing in 2008, the Reverse Beacon Network and skimmers have revolutionized *everything*. These potent tools allowed us to keep an eye on TI5W, our only confirmed rival. To be sure, the RBN also helpfully kept us informed that we were weaker than everyone else on every band — or so it seemed. We never knew for sure who else was in M2 — we couldn't tell with PJ2T [the PJ2T team placed third in the M2 category, right behind VP2ME — *Ed*], and we assumed — correctly, as it turned out — that PJ4X was in the MM category.

Day 1 was the best we have ever had, compared to all of our previous outings, but by the end of that day, we knew we had sacrificed 20 meters to 10 and 15, which were our best-ever since 2004. When we came up on the 24-hour mark, we began wondering if we might catch the 6Y1V record. To our collective dismay, we found that none of us had brought any of our previous logs along, so we were at a loss to project accurately what might happen on Day 2. An e-mail back to W4OC got Don working on an answer to that, and for the rest of the contest we enjoyed an open channel. Don projected that we could beat the record, and he kept us posted with on-the-air observations with respect to how the other stations seemed to be faring.

Then, going into the second night, it seemed like the bottom just fell out. It was like we had slammed so hard the first day that there was little left to do anywhere on any band — just CQs and embarrassingly low rates. It began dawning on us that the VE4 we must have left on the table on 160 the first night might come back to haunt us.

Sunday morning, when the high bands opened and the rate did not pick up, I be-



Running the pileups are (L-R) N4GG, AA4NC and N5OT [W9RE photo]

gan to seriously doubt we were going to break the record. So, I took a nap. When I woke up, our team was moving so fast I could not believe my eyes. Propagation and rates had picked up, and we were back in the 300+ per hour zone (both stations combined), 10 and 15 continued to produce stations we hadn't worked, and we were still gaining steam. Quick projections led us to conclude that we would likely break the record! Of course, we didn't know if anyone else might be headed in that direction as well.

Post-Mortem

A tip of the hat is in order to the TI5W team, because although we passed the record 90 minutes before the contest ended (amid much cheering and beering), the TI5W crew, hot on our heels, passed the same record only a half-hour later. We obviously spent too much time cheering, as they quietly sprinted to the finish. They made up a 30 minute deficit and passed us, all in only 60 minutes. We should have known.

In the end, they posted 9102 contacts to our 9012, but they obviously got the VE4 on 160 [Initial claimed scores had put VP2ME a few QSOs ahead. — *Ed*]. We gave it our best, and although we finished in second place, it was to a crew that definitely deserved to win.

QRS?

Several of our operators commented that, although we tended to slow down our telegraph keys as the contest went on and wound up more in the 27 to 29 WPM range, the TI5W guys never seemed to drop below about 38 WPM. How interesting that two distinctly different operating philosophies appeared to make little, if any, difference — all other things being equal. That's the unanswered question for radio contesters, I suppose.

As we posted on 3830 after the contest, "Montserrat and Gingerbread Hill are a perfect QTH — friendly people, fantastic weather and a view toward the ocean that could make you look away from your radio."