

V26H and the 2007 ARRL International DX SSB Contest

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The V26H story actually starts back in August 2006 when Robert, KG4NEP, my partner in multioperator contesting crime here in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, noticed that V26B, one of the premier contesting stations in the Caribbean, would be available for two major 2007 SSB contests: the ARRL International DX Contest at the beginning of March and the CQ World Wide WPX Contest at the end of March. Robert and I quickly agreed that we'd commit to *one* of these events. We had worked together to build his station into a solid five-tower multi-single setup that had been active for the previous four years in most major SSB events. Prior to the W4WS team's move to Robert's QTH, it had been encamped in my small backyard in downtown Winston-Salem, where two short towers and wires strung everywhere were the order of the day for five years. It was time for the two of us to treat ourselves to the chance of a lifetime — our first DXpedition during a major contest.

Crunch Time

After several months of discussion we decided on the ARRL International DX Contest. This event would work out better since we would only have to focus on the US and Canada, and we'd be able to cut our teeth on consistent 200 to 300/hour rates.

Once the station was secured, we began working out all the details. Robert would take care of getting travel cases, and we would use his Yaesu FT-1000MP and ICOM IC-706MKIIG. Also making the trip would be our station workhorse, a trusty Heath SB-221 amp, as well as a battery of headsets, tools, voice keyers, cables, coax, adaptors and more. I would be in charge of all logging, which included two networked laptops running *WriteLog* with a network switch. In addition, I was handling all travel plans, including airline flights.

Travel plans were problematic as my job made it next to impossible to take more than four days off, and I had to be back to work by the Tuesday following the contest. Robert had to watch his time off as well, so we booked flights departing the Wednesday before the contest, going from Charlotte through Miami and San Juan with a 10:30 PM arrival in Antigua. *Nice and easy.*

We booked return flights for the Monday following the contest. This meant that after the contest ended we'd have to scramble



The V26B towers at sunrise — a beautiful sight!

to pack it all up, get a bit of sleep and be at the airport early the next morning for our 9 o'clock flight. Once we got our passports updated, it was just a matter of waiting until February 28 to make our getaway.

A test pack was made the weekend before the contest. After a PVCRCNC-WEST meeting with fellow contesters at "Chrome," our favorite wing and beer haunt, we were ready for the trip.

The Best Laid Plans . . .

Things didn't get off to a very favorable start, however, since the first leg of our flight from Charlotte to Miami was cancelled. This forced us to take the next available flight directly to San Juan — good for us, we thought, except that the layover there would be about six hours. We had a day pass to the American Airlines Admirals Club in San Juan, and our stay there would have been nice had the club's air conditioning not been broken. By the time our connecting flight to Antigua arrived three hours late, we'd spent a grand total of nine hours in San Juan. (Had we known we were going to be there *that* long, we would have visited Angel, WP3R, at Arecibo, or at least hit a casino or two on the beach.)

We finally arrived in Antigua at around 1 AM, cleared customs, met our cabby, Sammy, and opened the door to V26B at a bit after 2 AM. Along the way we did have Sammy stop at an overnight convenience store for a couple of cold bottled waters and a Heineken, and they *all* tasted good.

Getting Licensed

The next morning we were up at dawn to unpack and get ready for Sammy to take us into town to obtain our licenses. *A word about this process:* We had taken the advice of previous visitors to V26B to



The V26B radio building

make prior contact with Mr William Henry with the Ministry of Telecommunications in Antigua. We got in touch with him about two months prior to our visit and requested the call signs we wanted — V26H and V26RW. He checked the existing records and confirmed our call signs, so we were able to publicize them in advance. We decided to use V26H as our contest call sign and V26RW for any operation outside the contest.

Sammy picked us up around 9 AM, and we were off to downtown St Johns and the licensing office. The procedure went like clockwork. We picked up the applications at Mr Henry's office, walked across the street to the payment office and paid made the one-year fee and application fee, a total of \$34 US, then doubled back to Mr Henry's to present him with the receipts and pick up the licenses.

We had a spirited conversation with Mr Henry while the full-color licenses were being printed. Not only is he an avid US football fan, he loves chatting about college basketball as well. He also mentioned that Antigua was trying to update its telecommunication rules to keep up with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), so the rules were in a state of flux. I mentioned using 60 meters, and he said the ministry was not yet in a position to rule on that.

Seeing the Sights, Sampling the Cuisine

Now it was time to view the sites of the city. St John's is a cruise ship port, complete with an army of taxicabs waiting to take cruise passengers on a tour of the island. The drivers all are very friendly and willing to take you anywhere. We did some shopping and sightseeing before settling down to a nice open-air lunch at Hemingway's Caribbean Café, which also came highly recommended by previous visitors. This was my first taste of the lo-



Lunch at Hemingway's Caribbean Café in St. John's is a must for any visitor to Antigua. The local beer, Wadadli, is highly recommended. Here I am just after we secured our licenses on Thursday prior to the contest.

cal beer, called Wadadli — a sweet lager that really hit the spot as we sat above the road watching the hustle and bustle of the locals at lunchtime. The seafood was marvelous as well.

After lunch we taxied to the Epicurean, a US-style grocery store to buy food supplies for our remaining three days. This store has everything your local supermarket has with one hitch: Everything is priced in East Caribbean dollars (EC\$). (US\$1 = ~EC\$ 2.65). This makes bargain shopping a bit confusing. EC\$320 later we taxied back to the station to begin putting up beverages and setting up equipment.

Pre-Contest Troubleshooting

We spoke to Ed, N2ED, about some problems he had encountered the previous weekend. It seems the Beverage lines were not working, and the top 40 meter antenna was not rotating. He also reported some intermittent SWR readings on the 40 meter stack. After setting our equipment in place at the two operating positions we started troubleshooting.

A visual inspection of the 40 meter tower established a couple of things. First, it was going to be a tall order to climb the tower and check the rotator connections. The SWR issue seemed an easy fix, however: The cap hat on the 40-meter Yagi reflector was bouncing against the guy wire, causing erratic SWR. Twenty minutes later the boom for the lower antenna was loosened, moved slightly and retightened. The SWR was better, so I took off to check the rotator line from the shack to the tower to see if it had a break. *Did it ever!*

Of Mice and Men

At the base of the building where an Internet network connection comes from the next-door neighbor's house, there's a small hole where several control cables, network lines and Beverage feed lines enter the building. I noticed a bit of frayed wire on a stretch of wire outside the building. When I checked the pile of wires on the inside, however, I spotted the real disaster. Apparently some rodents had been inside the radio room lurching on a half dozen control and coax cables. We had no crimp tools, but we did have electrical tape and wire strippers. So, as the station equipment continued to come together, I set about splicing the 40 or 50 wires. An hour later the 40 meter rotator came back to life along with our Internet connection, control switching for the six pack and the Beverages. We had dodged a major bullet.

Some six-pack switching issues, like slow relays and SWR problems, remained but replacing a bad coax switch and another piece of cable resolved these problems. It was then time to run Beverage wires through the back field of the property. This



Robert, KG4NEP/V26RW, running 15 meters as the WriteLog rate meter topped 400/hour.

job was completed with relative ease. We found that the EU beverage was tangled up in the driveway and the US beverage had been cut, so we fixed the EU wire and Robert reinstalled about 400 feet of wire that Ed had left for us. The hardest part of this job was climbing through eight to ten-foot high brush and chasing the beef cattle away.

At that point, Robert got on the air; we made some tests. After we determined that all was okay, it was time for dinner. A local with whom I'd sat on the flight from San Juan had recommended Home Restaurant, which is located in a house far away from anything. We dined on local seafood and fruits and enjoyed some of the tastiest rum cocktails. It was a marvelous meal in a most relaxing setting — a turn-of-the-century farmhouse. We enjoyed every minute of it as we both knew this was about as good as it would get during our visit. For the next couple of days we'd have to be satisfied with quick meals prepared in the radio room.

Arriving back at the shack around 9 PM we decided to get on 80 meters and see how our signal was to the States. Lots of our friends were awaiting us — among them Jim, WX3B, Gene, WB4MSG, and Ed, KU4BP. Also on hand were hundreds of US and DX stations that wanted to put V2 into their logs. It was becoming very clear that if this was any indication of what was to come, we were going to have some *real* fun. After a barrage of QSOs and good wishes from our hometown friends, it was lights out around 1 AM.

We Are Ready!

Friday morning meant a quick trip into town with Sammy to see some more of the island. This is the one thing we both wished we had planned more time for. Sammy showed us the northwest side of the island where the Sandals hotel was expanding by another 200 rooms or so. A brief trip through the more expansive private neighborhoods rounded out our mini-tour. We also managed a quick spin past

the newly erected cricket stadium located just east of V26B. We were there just two weeks prior to the 2007 Cricket World Cup. The stadium was almost done, and the locals were very busy painting, fixing and sprucing up their homes and properties. It was nice to take in a bit of such a beautiful island, albeit briefly. I've already promised my wife that we'll return together to see more of it (in between operating shifts?). Then it was time for a quick nap before the contest started at 8 PM AST.

The concept of napping on a Caribbean island just hours before a major DX contest didn't sit well with either of us. We lay down for a bit, but with the impending slam of QSOs just a few short hours away, Robert fired the station up on 15 and 20 meters and logged a long list of pre-contest contacts while making sure the setup was all working (see sidebar, "The V26H Antigua Arsenal").

The station laptops were networked through a four-port hub with Internet access via the neighbor's DSL connection. Our thought with the networking was that we could use *PacketCluster* from the online connection at both stations through *WriteLog*, and the mult station could pick up needed mults three times each hour. While not a lot of time spent, we figured those QSOs would add up across 48 hours. This was hardly realistic, however, as we were to learn.

Getting a Grip

Robert and I have been contesting together for about six years. Whether it's Robert running and I multing or working split-run shifts (he runs, I sleep and vice versa), we know how to max out our points from Robert's place. However, this station was completely different. We had no knowledge of band openings and propagation or of what it sounds like to have a couple of thousand US hams calling you at the same time. This was a trial by fire, and the fire was about to start burning.

We've found that we work well on four to six-hour shifts. While Robert can burn late into the night and likes sleeping at dawn, I can start hard and wake up early to take over. So we decided I would start the contest, while Robert searched for mults on the IC-706 and get some rest till around 1AM before taking over. I would then sleep and take over around 6 AM.

I tuned around and found a nice spot on 20, which seemed to be the band to start on. Fifteen was squirrely, and there was nothing on 10. As the contest started, I logged the first call sign. Immediately afterward, a wall of white noise slammed into the Heil Pro-Set. My first reaction was to laugh. *It was crazy!*

After getting a grip — with Robert yelling for me to dive in and don't stop — I began logging the Qs. It was exhilarating: One

The V26H Antigua Arsenal

Here's a list of the small, but effective, arsenal we took to Antigua:

Run Station

- ◆ Yaesu FT-1000MP/Heath SB-221
- ◆ Heil Pro-Set
- ◆ MFJ voice keyer
- ◆ Lenovo laptop running *WinXP* and *WriteLog v 10.47*

Multiplier Station

- ◆ ICOM IC-706MKIIG
- ◆ Heil Pro-Set
- ◆ Dell laptop running *WinXP* and *WriteLog v 10.47*
- ◆ E.F. Johnson wattmeter, c 1955, which belonged to my grandfather, Henry G. Sr, W2DZO(SK).

station after another, with different layers of call signs coming in. I never worked the RF gain control so much in all my life.

Once the initial rush cleared, I settled into a 278 first hour, one of the best runs in my 15 years of contesting. We had more than 1000 Qs in the first six hours, with WAS wrapped up in two (that would be nice in Sweeps!). My shift took me though 20, 40 and 80, and I handed off a solid 160-meter run which Robert exploited for another hour. After 12 hours on the air, we'd logged some 1350 Qs and 190 mults.

On Saturday Robert and I split three to four-hour shifts with one of us trying to find mults on the '706. That worked great until we lost the network connection between the rigs, essentially killing efficient use of the second radio. Then the frequency-control cable got detached from the laptop, fouling up our logs for a couple of minutes. For all these little problems, however, we continued to put great numbers into the log.

Once we got to 15 meters (while continuing to check 10 for any sign of life), Robert went into overdrive. For several hours he kept the rate clock jumping close to 420 at times, and he logged the best two hours of our trip at a two-hour rate of 478! Then it was back to 20 (still no 10!) and 40 to finish out our first 24 hours with 3511 Qs and 255 mults.

The second 24 hours, though a bit slower according to the rate clock, was filled with passing mults, digging out weak ones and trying to be polite to the thousands of JA and EU hams who wanted a QSO but didn't understand that we weren't making casual contacts during the contest. We did manage to log lots of call signs before and after the contest, however, and the next time I take a trip like this I'll make time for all those QSOs. I had some great chats after the contest.

The second overnight is always a tough run. Everyone is tired, and conditions were changing, but we managed several good 40 meter hours and some nice 80 meter

runs. By the time dawn rolled around on Sunday morning we were at 4473 Qs and 275 mults. We would only log two more mults the rest of contest.

Our goal Sunday was to keep up the rate, schedule as many band passes as we could and try to get the cluster running on the spare laptop so we could watch for some hint of propagation on 10 meters. Being at one of the top 10 meter stations in the world, we were hoping for 50 or 60 additional mults that day.

But it never happened. Robert and I tried everything: Turning beams, looking for skew, backscatter, sidescatter — *any* scatter that would net us a 10 meter contact with the US or Canada. Yes, we heard many Caribbean powerhouses calling CQ and running 5s and 6s, but we never heard a peep out of stateside. So by 1800 UTC we were sitting at 5000 Qs and 276 mults. Constant checks of 10 meters were in vain. With four hours left, we decided that one of us needed to pour on the rate on that hornet's nest of a band, 20 meters, while the other combed 10 meters for *anything*.

While Robert searched 10 meters, I got several cold drinks and snacks next to the operating position, reset the pillow in the chair and sat down for the three remaining hours of our dream operation. Our goal was to make up for the possibility of no contacts on 10 — a huge disadvantage that our competition on the other islands didn't have to deal with. In the last three hours, we logged close to 600 Qs at a time when rate usually suffers. Yet even with 5 over 5 over 5 on 10 meters, we logged zero contacts.

The last QSO went into the log with about four seconds to go. Robert counted the time down from the other radio tuned to WWV, and it was over. We had made slightly more than 6100 contacts for a claimed score just short of 5.1 million points. I popped open a cold bottle of Wadadli and shook Robert's hand.

But the fun wasn't over. We spoke with Gene, WB4MSG, back home who said we were still loud. PVRC President Jim,

WX3B, congratulated us on a great effort. Then Robert got on and worked station after station on 80 meters. It was short lived, though, because our flight back to North Carolina left early the next morning, and we had to break down all the gear, pack it in the travel cases and get some much-needed sleep.

Our trip back to the States was uneventful, and, ironically, the only problem we encountered was traffic between Charlotte and Winston-Salem on I-77. Everything

got back in one piece, although the travel cases got beaten up pretty bad, and we even chatted about going back someday and what we would do differently. Those ideas included spending more time enjoying the island and all its beauty, eating at more of the local restaurants and swimming at one of Antigua's 365 beaches.

We're Number One!

How did we do? Shortly before this article went to press, we learned that we

had, in fact, finished number one in the world, edging out the class ops at VP2E by only 14,000 points! It all came down to log checking. Robert and I were thrilled with the results, especially since it was our first time on the other side of the pileup.

We highly recommend this type of trip to anyone who wants to try it. Just plan ahead, talk with others who have operated at the place you're going to about some of the pitfalls of the operation and buy your airline tickets well in advance to take advantage of lower airfares.

In addition, know your DXpedition country's licensing procedures, and use sturdy, well-labeled travel cases. Make definite plans to spend time *seeing* the place you visit. Don't shortchange yourself of the opportunity to experience all there is to offer in another country.

We hope to work you from the other side of the pileup again soon. Or maybe *you'll* be the on that side? Give it a try! **NCJ**