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PJ7E – St. Maarten 2010

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Like most avid DXers, I'd always had a desire to "put on a new one". When I was at the Orlando Hamfest a few years ago, Peter, PJ4NX, gave a presentation about the possibility of Bonaire becoming a new country. That caught my interest. Not long after that, I met Kelly, NØVD, who was planning to build a contest station on Bonaire. I kept in contact with these two friends to keep abreast of the situation as it developed.

More than once Joe Blackwell, AA4NN (Joe4), and I had discussed this "new country" possibility and our desire to be the first to put it on the air. When there was chatter about St. Maarten, Bonaire, Curacao, and Saba/St. Eustatius breaking away for their independence, we started doing research on going to St. Eustatius. I even went so far as to make a public announcement of my intentions. However, as time went on, it became apparent that "Stasia," as it's called, was not going to change it's status. In the end, that was good for us, as getting the crew and equipment there would have been quite a challenge. Therefore, we decided to go to St. Maarten, as it seemed more certain it would be granted independence.

As the independence of the islands became more of a possibility, unfortunately Joe4 had to drop from the planning stages due to health issues. I had met and worked with Craig Thompson, K9CT, on the K4M DXpedition, so when we met again at Visalia in 2010, we discussed the possibility of going to St. Maarten. Craig was very enthusiastic about being my co-leader. He brought a lot of experience and expertise to the team.

St. Maarten: The Planning Stage

The date of 10/10/10 had been rumored to be the independence date, so we decided that we should make a visit to the island. Craig and I arrived on July 12, and departed on July 15. Prior to our visit I had been corresponding with Mort, PJ7UQ, who has lived there for many years. Mort provided many contacts and ideas, and was a huge help in our planning. Bill, W8EB, had suggested that we contact Marco, PJ7MF, one of the most

active hams on the island. It turned out that Marco, like Mort, was very helpful.

We were there only a short time, but certainly accomplished a lot. Knowing that CW and SSB on one site would present its challenges, we wanted to find two separate locations. The island is politically half French and half Dutch, so we had to be sure we were not located on French territory. We settled on the plan for the CW site to be located at the Rainbow Beach Club on the west side of the island, and the SSB/RTTY site would be in a private home on the other side of the island.

While we were there, we met with a shipping company and made arrangements for them to accept and hold our equipment. We pretty much had everything covered except the most important thing—the license.

Just before departing the island, I went to the Telecommunications office, completed an application for a license, paid the fee and requested the callsign of PJ7E. Previously we had been given verbal approval for the call, but were told the signed paperwork had to come from Curacao and they would be "slow" to respond. After I returned home, I had many emails with Sidney DeWeever, the Communications Officer on SXM. He repeatedly told me not to worry and that the call would be ours, but obviously I wanted it in writing before making the callsign public.

Now that the preliminary plans were in place, we just needed to be sure that this was going to happen. Back home, we stayed abreast of the political progress through the online newspaper. There were a lot of issues over which we had no control. Just one thing could go wrong at any time to change everything, but we kept on planning.

Curacao issued licenses for five islands. Who would issue the new license for the new countries? Breaking up one government and creating another meant a lot of work and coordination. Would it really happen? If so, would the ARRL recognize it as a new country? What about the IARU? What about DXCC? We felt very strongly that these new countries would count, and were happy and relieved when the DXCC desk finally did report

that they would be accepted effective January 1, 2011.

We soon realized that this rare occurrence had created a lot of interest in the ham community and there were several other groups planning DXpeditions to celebrate the new DXCC entities. How would this affect us? Would we all be on the same frequency at the same time and/or would our split frequencies overlap? This would be unprecedented in ham radio, so we decided there had to be some type of frequency operating plan or it would be a mess. A group was formed with one representative from each DXpedition team on the various islands and they quickly came up with a fair, workable plan. It was distributed throughout the DX community in advance so that everyone would know who was on what frequency. It worked perfectly, and we are grateful to every DXer and each team for their effort.

The Crew

While we were on the island for the pre-trip planning, we discussed our goals. We wanted two stations on CW and two on SSB. We would have a spare station at each location for RTTY/digital, if there was an operator available. This meant we needed 12 operators. In the end, we were able to have six stations running at all times. We had a great lineup for our team: Bill, N2WB; Charlie, NF4A; Kevin, K6TD; Charlie, W6KK; Dave, K4SV; Franz, DJ9ZB; Ralph, K9ZO; Max, I8NHJ; Bruce, W6OSP; John, K6MM; Craig, K9CT; and myself. After the team had been established, we had to make a few changes. First, Ralph, K9ZO, found he needed to leave early, so Don, N6JRL, joined the CW crew for week two after Ralph left. Kevin, K6TD, had to drop from the SSB team completely because of work obligations, and he was replaced by Jim, KØRH, during the second week. Janet, W8CAA, who was only planning to be a guest operator, ended up getting in more operating time than originally planned.

While the team was being formed, we were in the process of contacting various manufacturers about equipment. We wanted to put out some big signals, and thanks to ICOM and the six IC-7600 transceivers they loaned us, and the Alpha 8410 amps provided by RF Concepts, we did just that. We were limited by space, especially at the CW site, so the antennas we used were two-element SteppIRs for CW, and Hex-Beams from Traffic Engineering for SSB. DX Engineering provided 40- and 30-meter verticals for each site. A TW 2010 vertical dipole from TransWorld Antennas completed the SSB setup, and ACER provided

seven laptops. We had great equipment that provided us with outstanding signals thanks to these fine sponsors.

Job Assignments

Bill, N2WB, agreed to accept and test all of the radios and prepare them for shipment along with the rest of the equipment. I'm not sure he realized what a job he was taking on! It ended up being seven skids of equipment. His garage was no doubt full. After we returned, all of the equipment was again sent to Bill, who had to sort all the boxes, re-label them, and return them to the sponsors or team members. I'll bet Bill and Dawn were glad to get their garage space back!

John, K6MM, agreed to be the web master, and what a fine job he did, both during and post trip. Like Bill, I doubt he realized what a big job he was taking on. He uploaded the logs twice daily from the island, kept the web page updated, and posted pictures and statistics after we returned.

Tom, N4XP, had to drop from the crew early on, but graciously agreed to be the treasurer and Janet, W8CAA, set us up on FaceBook and tracked some of the team information, while Craig, K9CT, set up a Twitter account. We were able to keep these accounts updated daily.

In the meantime, Max, I8NHJ, loaded N1MM logging software, CW and RTTY on all of the Acer laptops. They were ready to go upon arrival.

Back home, Don, N1DG, helped with shipping, setting up the OQSL logging system and the QSL paper logging for the QSL manager.

(Note: for those who may not be familiar with the OQSL term, here is how it is described....

OQSL=Online QSL request system. It is a direct way to submit your QSL request. It's similar to LoTW, but goes directly to a specific DXpedition, and results in a paper QSL card coming back to the requester. It saves the requester preparing and sending/mailling a card. It saves the QSL Manager for the DXpedition from manually processing incoming cards. Database software at oQRS matches the incoming request directly with the DXpedition log. It is more efficient for all involved in this modern day of computers and on-line systems, and provides quicker turnaround of QSL cards.

Charlie, W6KK, set up the four DX Engineering verticals at his home in California, made four radials for each, tested and then re-boxed, and shipped them to Bill in Florida.

We originally planned to use four Tennadyne antennas. Craig, K9CT, and Ralph, K9ZO, assembled one and then decided there was just not

enough room for these in the small space we had. This was a very hard decision, as Roger at Tennadyne had been so gracious to loan us these antennas. We appreciated his offer and that he understood our space limitations.

Kevin Rowett, K6TD, made two 80-meter and one 160-meter dipoles and volunteered to be OQSL manager. We appreciated his help and were sorry he could not make the trip with us.

Charlie, NF4A, assembled a large number of tools and connectors that would be needed for the operation. He prepared the 220-volt service for both sites.

Dave, K4SV, designed the QSL card, and thankfully brought an IC-7000 that really helped us out in the crunch when our equipment was delayed.

Bruce, W6OSP, was the coordinator between the team and NCDXF. To commemorate this momentous occasion for St. Maarten, Bruce and John, K6MM, developed a signed photo certificate that will be sent to all of those who include \$5.00 or more with their QSL.

Everyone had been working hard and all of the equipment had been delivered to Bill. He had it sorted, marked for each site, and ready to go. After delays for various reasons, the equipment was finally picked up from Bill's house and sent to the shipping warehouse. For some reason, our cargo was not loaded on the ship that left on September 24, as planned. Since they only sail once a week, our equipment didn't leave Florida until the following week, with scheduled arrival on October 6. Part of the team was arriving on October 6. This was a tighter schedule than we wanted, but we thought it would work OK. We would still have time to get set up before the kickoff on 10-10-10.

We also realized during all of this planning that we were supposed to be there during "hurricane season," which wouldn't end until the end of October. OK, what were the chances of a hurricane, or even a tropical depression coming while we were there? Weather reports at home had not mentioned any bad weather happening in the Caribbean, so we were quite surprised to arrive in the middle of heavy wind and rain, and then find it had been raining for several days. Apparently they had had about 20 inches of rain within the last week. Later this tropical storm was updated to Hurricane Otto. Tropical Storm Otto

When we rented the car, they advised us to stay in the middle of the road to avoid the pot holes on the sides. When we actually got on the road, we found everything flooded and traffic practically at a standstill. You couldn't see the road much less the potholes; you just followed the car in front of you.

The CW crew was located near the airport, so even though they passed cars stalled in high water, they didn't have any trouble getting to their condos. The home for the SSB site was across the island...a 45-minute drive on a good day with no traffic. It took us 3-1/2 hours to get to the SSB site. It was located high on a mountain near the French border in a gated community. To get there, we had to cross a mountain and go through a low area near Salt Pond. Salt Pond was so full from the rain all week that it had flooded all of the streets. At one point, we were stopped by a police officer standing out in pouring rain with high winds questioning all drivers. The officer asked where we were going. When we said Oyster Pond, she said we'd never make it there. Then she asked if our vehicle had four-wheel drive. We said yes (but we didn't), so she told us to put it in low gear and go on, and Good Luck. HUH? It was getting dark, streets were flooded, traffic was at a standstill, and she wished us good luck! We had to go on, as there were no hotels. We did a quick stop at a small grocery store for enough food and drinks for a snack when we arrived and for breakfast in the morning. I keep saying, "I think this is the right road, but nothing looks familiar with the flooded streets in the dark and pouring rain, and I HOPE I remember how to get to the house." Needless to say, we all were a bit nervous.

We finally got to the community where the guard asked if we knew how to get to the house. I said yes; I thought I did. However, the roads were very curvy and very steep, and of course there were no street signs. I had the wipers on high, the wind was blowing hard, and it was dark and pouring rain—very nerve racking. There was one place that had a sharp and steep hairpin turn. We had to go slowly for the turn, and then the water was coming down the hill with such force that it pushed our car backwards as if we were on ice. It was quite scary! There were no street lights and very few lights on in the houses. I did make one wrong turn and the road narrowed to one lane. Turning around in the dark on a one-lane road in pouring rain presented its challenges. Bill, N2WB; Janet, W8CAA, and I were very happy to finally arrive at the villa, and boy was I ready for a beer, HI!

We later found out that Craig, K9CT; Ralph, K9ZO and Dave, K4SV, from the CW site, had come over to see us. However, with it raining so hard, we didn't know they were there and we didn't hear them outside. Too bad, as that was quite a journey they made.

The next morning Bill, Janet and I headed "to town." There were so many turns to get to our house, that we put ribbons on the trees at every turn so we could find our way back "home." At the

shipping company, they told us that the boat had been rerouted because of the tropical storm and they didn't know when our supplies would arrive. Then they took us to the port to see the water. The waves were 15 ft. high and it was way too dangerous for the boat to attempt to dock, plus it was still raining. They had no idea when we'd get our equipment.

We left there and went to the Communications Office and met Sidney DeWeever. We had received our license before we left home, but just wanted to meet the gentleman with whom we'd been working. What a fine fellow who did everything he could to help us.

We left and it was still raining and the streets were still flooded. That day we learned that the government told businesses to close by 1:00 PM so that everyone could be off the streets by 3:00 PM. There was one low-lying area by Salt Pond where the fire department was pumping water from the flooded pond to the ocean. They were there for a week pumping water. Rain so devastated the island that they had to cancel the celebration scheduled for 10-10-10.

We were not sure if the storm had any effect on our electric power, but there were numerous times during our stay when we lost power. Luckily for the SSB site, we had a portable generator that provided power for the whole house. It did not affect our operation in any way. Over at the CW site, at one point they lost power and just had to take a break until the power was restored.

The Operation

By now, most of the crew members had arrived, so we got together for a team dinner. Originally we had thought the team members would be able to switch sides to operate other modes, but because the sites were so far apart and with the high water and heavy traffic, this just wasn't feasible. Most of the team members didn't see each other again until we wrapped up and it was time to go home.

Dave, K4SV, had the foresight to bring his ICOM 7000 radio and Screwdriver antenna, so the CW site was able to get on and make a few contacts before the new country designation. They kept running with this setup until all of our equipment arrived.

We received an offer from Bob, K4UEE, leader of the PJ6A team, to loan us a radio until our equipment arrived, but getting it from Saba would have been difficult so we declined. However, we certainly did appreciate his offer.

Marco, PJ7MF, joined us for dinner and offered to loan us his IC-706. We picked it up the next day and then went to RadioShack and purchased 75 ft. of coax and wire so that we could make a dipole for 20 and 40 meters. This way we had a two-band antenna for day-time and night-time bands. To get it "up in the air" we attached it to the top of a broom handle that was perched on a lawn chair.

Only having a hand mic, we decided to Y into the speaker jack so two people could hear. Then one of us would talk while the other logged. This certainly was not the ideal situation, but it worked and that was all that counted! We worked around the world on this little wire. We continued this for the next 48 hours until we got our cargo. Then we put some "fire in the wires" with six ICOM 7600s and six Alpha 8410 amps. Each station running 1 KW was a huge advantage in pileup control. The SSB site scheduled three-hour shifts, working three hours on and six off, which worked out very well. Over at the CW site, they were operating on one hour shifts until the equipment arrived. This schedule worked well for them.

Finally on Monday we received a call that our equipment was at the warehouse. Bill, Janet and I went there to be sure things were sent to the correct operating site. Our friend Sidney had borrowed a truck, and he was there to move our stuff for us. It was late afternoon and we had to rush to unload our equipment at the SSB site so that he could get back and load up the CW stuff before closing time. He made it in time. What a friend. I don't know of anyone from the FCC who would have helped us like that!

Once the cargo arrived, we kept two operators on the 706 while the rest of us started to unpack. Janet and I started building a HexBeam and got it up just before dark. Then after dark we went inside and started assembling the stations. At daybreak the next morning we stopped operating and everyone worked on erecting the antenna farm. We built the second HexBeam, installed a 30- and 40-meter monoband vertical, and put up an 80-meter inverted Vee. Then the second station went on the air. Now that we had two stations running, I set up the TW 2010 vertical dipole to give us three stations on the higher bands. The TW antenna was also used on RTTY.

In order to have a link between the two sites, we installed a three-element 2-meter beam on 15 ft. of TV mast pipe and connected it to a 12-volt power supply, all donated by the The DX Store. Between the island repeater and cell phones, Craig and I could now better coordinate our activities.

The pileups were huge and loud. It certainly took concentration. That was part of the fun and enjoyment in operating under such unusual and exciting conditions. The pileups helped distract us from the mosquitoes. Boy were they biting!

Over on the other side of the island at the CW site, they had their challenges because of space limitations. One of their condo units had roof access, and they had hoped to use rooftops from the adjoining units for antennas. However, this plan failed, and they were limited to 48 ft. x 28 ft.; not much room for two SteppIRs and two verticals, but they persevered. The wires intended for 80 and 160 meters were removed after a complaint to the management company by a neighbor. It turned out that we probably would have been OK with our antennas, but the condo owners were unhappy with the management company and we were caught in the crossfire. We ended up with a very effective "antenna farm" on top of the condo. The CW team made a coil to load up 80 meters on one DXE vertical, and on another DXE vertical they added a top hat to 160 meters and a loading coil for resonance and matching. Thankfully they got 160 meters working and made about 1100 QSOs in the last two days of operation.

Propagation for the high bands was outstanding, with huge pileups. We were able to work all continents and were very pleased with the JA openings. We got a lot of them in the log. Both locations had S9 noise levels on the lower bands. We know we missed a lot of Q's, but we just didn't have space for any receive antennas. The CW site did set up a BOG along the fence. However, it was discovered and they had to remove it. They tried to use other wires and antennas, but without much success.

At the SSB site we had frequent visitors. On October 16 we had two groups of Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts visit to commemorate Scouting Jamboree on the Air. They enjoyed watching us operate, and some even got in a little "air time." We definitely saw an interest to become hams in some of these young people.

Sam Allen, PJ7SA, a local newspaper reporter, also visited and guest-operated for about 30 minutes. Sam wrote an article about PJ7E, which was published online while we were still on the island.

When Marco, PJ7MF, had a day off from work, he stopped by for a visit and also guest-operated. We so much appreciated his loaning us his radio before our equipment arrived and were glad he was able to join us and work our station. We appreciated the opportunity to promote good will through Amateur Radio.

Because I am such an advocate of the 60-meter band, I asked Sidney if he would grant permission for 60-meter operation. He did, and was I one happy ham! I started operating, and then Bill and Franz both took a turn at operating this frequency. Franz from Germany, where they have no 60-meter operating permission, was very pleased to work this band for his first time. We worked 78 stations, but heard many more in the S9 noise level. It was too bad we didn't have room to build a receiving antenna.

Wrap-Up

Our goal had been to work as many stations as possible on CW, SSB, and RTTY. We were very pleased with over 74,400 in the log. The last day, when the CW ops were visiting the SSB site, Max, I8NHJ, ran some PSK for another mode. Max had a nice pileup, but we were running late and he had to go QRT in order for us to pack up. Too bad we ran out of time.

On the airplane heading home, a lady sitting in front of me asked if I was a ham (I was wearing an ICOM T-shirt with my callsign), and then she identified herself as Marilyn, K1ECW, wife of Michael Barrett, N4ECW. They own TransWorld Antennas and were happy to hear how pleased we were with the performance of the TW 2010 we'd been using. They had been on the French side operating as FS. Small world!

This was a great experience with an outstanding crew and everyone chipped in and worked hard. We were on a beautiful island, but this certainly was not a vacation.

There is a lot of work involved in a DXpedition. The team leaders have a lot of coordinating and planning between the crew and sponsors, plus the infrastructure. It took an immense amount of time; luckily both Craig and I had the flexibility to work on the DXpedition nearly full time. Then upon arrival everyone shared the workload of setting up the stations, erecting antennas, fighting with the bushes to get just the right signal, and then running on little sleep for two weeks. After I got home, I found I'd been walking up and down the hills and in the bushes with a broken bone in my foot. Luckily it was just a stress fracture and I didn't miss a thing.

We loved every minute of our trip and are most grateful to our equipment sponsors, foundations, and individual donors. Without everyone's help, these trips are just not possible.

We found the people of St. Maarten to be so friendly and helpful, and wish them the best with their new independence. We were happy to

celebrate this occasion with them. Thanks to my co-leader, Craig, and an outstanding team! We hope all the DXers enjoyed our PJ7E operation. We thank you for being there and the hundreds of nice comments through email, the website, FaceBook, and Twitter.

We would like to give special recognition to all of our gracious sponsors, including: Acer, Alpha/R.F. Concepts, DX Engineering, ICOM, Hex-Beam, MFJ, SteppIR, The DX Store and W2ENY. Financial sponsors included: DDXG, Dominion DX Group, GDXF, INDEXA, NCDXF, Nippon DX Assn., and W4DXCC – SEDCO. And a special thanks to AA4NN, W5DNT, and all the other financial supporters.