

The VP6R DXpedition

From a Rookie's Point of View

by Mike Cizek W0VTT

Most DXers probably dream about going on a DXpedition some day. I know I did, but never thought I'd get the chance to actually do it. For me, the next best thing was going to Dayton and the DX conventions where I could rub elbows with the "Big Boys" who go to all of these strange far away places. I enjoyed getting to know a number of the guys who went to top ten countries, and really enjoyed the rare occasion when one would call me by name in a big pile up. After chasing DX for 30 years, I was content with my place in the DX game and had stopped thinking about ever operating from someplace rare or exotic.

Receiving an email from Ralph Fedor KOIR in September of 2018 inviting me to the VP6R team was quite a shock. Ralph explained that he wanted to do a trip to someplace fun with a team that combined some seasoned DXpeditioners with some new folks like me. I emailed back immediately expressing my thanks, but also expressing my doubt that the plan would be approved by the family comptroller. The shock from receiving Ralph's email was nothing compared to my wife giving her blessing to the trip: "I think you should go." After a few emails and phone calls, I was added to the team. Learning who the other team members were impressed me to no end. These were the guys I had worked from all over the world; the guys I looked up to and respected. Now I was going to go out to play radio with them. The experienced team members were mainly from the previous year's 3Y0Z operation and they wanted to go some place a little nicer than Bouvet. Almost every email Ralph sent out ended with "...let's have some fun", and that became the motto of our DXpedition. Our team email reflector was named "No-Ice Island". The wheels were turning...

We were soon trading planning messages on our team email reflector. I always knew there was a lot of preparation required, but for the first time was getting an inside look at the details. I had little or no experience in most of the requisite subject areas, but found one place where I felt able to contribute: fund raising. I know how to type and send emails so with a little direction from Ralph, I took on this task. If you are reading this in your DX club newsletter, your club was one of our contributors. Thank you!

Other team members contributed in their areas of expertise. KOIR kept contact with the folks on Pitcairn, Nigel Jolly of the RV Braveheart, the licensing authorities in New Zealand, and kept tabs on the rest of us. Craig K9CT took care of assembling, testing, and networking the radios, computers, and amplifiers. He was also our treasurer and Q SL manager. George N4GRN runs a construction company and knows about international shipping and customs. He handled this area and calculated that we would need to have all of our gear ready and packed in a sea container by 1 June. We all had plenty to do, and it was still over a year before we would leave. I kept typing emails and sending them to every DX club I could find.

Most of our equipment was from the 3Y0Z operation. It was still packed in the sea container from Bouvet and was sitting in K9CT's company parking lot in Peoria IL. Some of the team gathered there in December 2018 to do a quick inventory and a few of us went in March 2019 to assemble and test the EME antennas. The weekend before Dayton most of the US team members assembled in Peoria to load the container. Our task was to unload the 40' container from the Bouvet trip, do a complete inventory and assessment of everything, decide what we needed to take to Pitcairn, and pack it properly in a 20' container. We also needed a comprehensive itemized listing of what equipment was in each box in the container. Two days later we were finished. George almost wore out his

laptop typing in every item as we packed and loaded it. The container was sealed and would be picked up in a few days to begin its journey. More than a few cold 807s were hoisted in celebration that evening. I was getting my first taste of DXpedition team fellowship. This is going to be a fun trip.



Container Loading

All of our equipment was on its way, but we still had plenty to do in preparation. Ralph was still finalizing details of our stay on the island and trying to get permission to operate 60 meters; a first from VP6. He found amazing accommodations for us; one of the islanders agreed to house and feed us for a very reasonable fee. Check out Pitcairn on Google maps, look for Andy's Pizzeria, and you can see where we stayed. Look at the terrain view and you can see our take off angle to NA, EU (both NE) and JA (NNW). It was an amazing site. We also received permission to operate from the old commercial radio station ZBP, just a short walk from Andy's house. We would be operating from what were probably the best two locations on the island. Glenn W0GJ was coordinating our travel and lodgings en route. We were getting close to departure.

There were a few changes to the team during the year from initial planning to departure due to work, family, or medical issues. Real life has a nasty habit of interfering with our ham radio plans. The real shock came just a few days before our departure when our team leader KOIR told us he had a medical issue and would not be able to go with us. Ralph immediately named Glenn W0GJ our new team leader. Glenn picked up the reins, kept us moving ahead, and we hardly missed a beat. Our final team was now EA3HSO, EY8MM, JR4OZR, KOPC, K9CT, K9NW, N4GRN, N6HC, SM5AQD, W0GJ, W0VTT, W6IZT, AND W8HC. It was time to go.

Did I mention that this was my first DXpedition? I'm not a seasoned traveler, and was more than a little nervous about the trip. Fortunately, I had company every step of the way. On Saturday afternoon 12 October, WOG J and I met in Rochester MN to take the shuttle bus to the Minneapolis airport. There we met K0PC and K9CT; the four of us would all be on the same flight to Los Angeles. In LA, we met most of the rest of the team and were all on the same flight to Tahiti. We landed early Sunday morning and walked across the street to the Tahiti Airport Motel where we met the remaining two team members. JR4OZR and SM5AQD were waiting for us in the motel lobby. Since there is only one flight a week from Tahiti to the Gambier Islands where we meet the Braveheart, we allowed an extra day, just in case there were any delays. We now had an extra day to play tourist in Tahiti and everyone headed in to town for the day



Tahiti Airport Motel

Glenn called a team meeting for Monday morning at the motel so we could discuss our arrival and set up plans. He stressed the need to get set up quickly since we were arriving on Thursday morning and there was a large rain storm forecast for the weekend. Tuesday morning we left Tahiti on the four hour flight to Totegegie in the Gambier Islands. After landing at the VERY small airport (one gate, one plane), we took a short ferry boat ride to Mangareva Island where we boarded the Braveheart.



RV Braveheart

The legendary RV Braveheart! This ship had been there and done that, all over the southern hemisphere. I had seen the pictures and read & heard the stories, and now I was finally getting a chance to board her. Matthew Jolly, the captain, welcomed us aboard. He knew many of the team members from their earlier voyages with him; the greetings were warm and heartfelt. Matt introduced us to the crew, and to his wife Rachel and their son Finn, who were along for the ride. Three year - old Finn wasn't quite sure about these crazy ham operators at first, but he finally decided we were OK. I asked him if he was going to be the next captain of the Braveheart, and he very confidently said no, he was going to be four. After a quick safety briefing, plates of sandwiches from the galley appeared and we had a nice mid - afternoon snack. A short time later, we cast off and were underway. I spent a while exploring the ship, then settled down on one of the upper decks to enjoy the view and the fresh sea air.



Underway

We arrived off of Pitcairn Island early Thursday morning and sat off shore waiting for the islanders to come out in one of their longboats to bring us to shore. We were all pretty excited now and eager to get ashore and get started. We were very fortunate that because of the Braveheart's schedule with other charters, our equipment had been placed on to the island a month earlier. ALL of our radio gear was there waiting for us. After a short welcome at the dock on Bounty Bay, some of the islanders loaded us on to their ATVs and we headed up the "Hill of Difficulty" to Andy's house.



Bounty Bay



Longboat

Once we all arrived at Andy's house, station setup started directly. We had our plan, formulated in our Monday morning meeting, and everyone got right to work. Once again, I was impressed at how quickly things happened. Everybody seemed to know what they were doing and by supper time, we had set up five Yagis for 10 - 20m, two verticals for 30 and 40m, and four complete, networked stations. K9CT made our first QSO on 30m CW with N7XM at 0200z (6pm local time). VP6R was on the air.



On the Air

The next day we set up our low band antennas at ZBP, the old commercial radio station site. Our main project was erecting a 90' (27m) tall vertical for 160 meters; 70' of aluminum tower with 20' of mast tubing and top loading wires. This required the entire team working together. The antenna is mounted on a hinged base and we used a 40' falling derrick to raise it. The biggest folks handled the pull up ropes and pushed up the tower; the rest of us held the guy ropes to guide it up straight; W0GJ directed everyone, telling us when to pull or when to let up. The antenna went up in just a few minutes.



160 meter Vertical

We also installed verticals for 30, 40 & 80 meters and a second 20m Yagi. That first night on 160 meters Nodir EY8MM made over 700 contacts. He came back to Andy's house shortly after sunrise with a big smile on his face, and promptly went to sleep. A number of people had told me "you won't believe the pileups" on the DXpedition. I've been a DXer for 30 years and have been in plenty of big pileups, but never from the DX side. I had been practicing from home mostly by listening in the big

pileups on other DX stations and picking out callsigns, and thought I was ready. I wasn't! I like to think I'm a pretty good CW operator, but the pileups on the first few days were just too much for me. I retreated to FT8 and let the more experienced ops handle CW. After a few days, things slowed down a bit and I was able to do better. I now have an even greater respect for the ops who have the ability to pick out callsigns quickly and consistently in these huge pileups.

Once I got going, operating from the DX side was a real blast. It was nice to get a good rhythm of steady QSOs going and especially rewarding to work friends from around the world and call them by name in the pileups. It was fascinating to experience propagation from another part of the world. Naturally, we had propagation predictions and most of the team had operated from the south Pacific before, but there were still plenty of surprises. 30 meters was open all over the world most of the night. We would often work all continents within a five-minute period. We had a regular path on 10 and 12 meters to CT, CN, D4, EA, and EA8 for a few hours almost every day. Sometimes these signals were surprisingly loud.

The most interesting opening I experienced was on 12 meters one morning. I was calling CQ on what appeared to be an empty band. Around 1730z (0930 local) I heard a very weak and watery SM2 station. I worked him and was called by a second SM2. The opening spread into OH and southern SM, but not into LA or UA. A little later some North Americans appeared, then some stations from southern EU, then more and more USA until at 1800z the Europeans had disappeared completely. This one wasn't on our propagation prediction charts!

Remember the storm that was forecast for the weekend? It rained sideways for four whole days with wind gusts up to 50 mph. We were pleasantly surprised that our 160m vertical survived, but we lost both 20m beams and an element off of the 15m beam. Fortunately, only a few pieces of tubing were bent and we had spares. Once the storm had passed we had everything repaired and back in the air in short order. Once again, it was amazing how quickly and efficiently the team worked together.

VP6R was a multi-multi entrant in the CQWW SSB contest. We shut down our N1MM DXpedition mode logs a few hours before the contest and were ready to start in contest mode right at 0000z. Since I'm mainly a CW DXer, I asked to do 10 meters during the contest. I thought it would be interesting just to see what propagation we would have over the course of the contest. The contest started at 1600 local time and 10m was pretty slow at first. After only three QSOs in the first hour, the band finally opened up with a nice JA run that lasted almost two hours. I was up bright and early Saturday morning calling CQ, but the band didn't open until 1600z (0800 local). We had a strong opening into Zone 33 and I got a good start on my "Worked All EA8" award. I had no idea there were so many stations in the Canary Islands! After a handful of Zone 33, it was all North & South America, all day long, until around 0000z when the opening shifted to JA. It was almost like someone throwing a switch; propagation changed that quickly. By the end of the contest, we had 1050 QSOs on ten meters. I never had so much fun operating sideband before! The final numbers haven't been published yet, but I'm pretty sure we took first place for multi - multi in VP6.

All too soon it was time to put our toys away and go home. We took down the low band site on Thursday 31 Oct. Our last QSO was with Jerry WB9Z our chief pilot station on 17m SSB at 1800z on Friday 1 Nov, after which we took down the antennas at Andy's house. Everything was packed up and ready to go by lunch time that day. Once again, we had allowed extra time, just in case, but everything went very quickly.

We now had some time to play tourist and do a few good deeds for some of the local hams.

We helped Meralda VP6MW and Mike VP6AZ get back on the air by providing antenna parts, supplies, and some technical assistance. Meralda was already active before we left the island, and

let's hope that Mike is on soon. I was especially happy to help Meralda because she was my very first Pitcairn Island QSO back in 1989.



Meralda VP6MW

This trip would not have been possible without a lot of help from a lot of people. First and foremost, thanks to ACOM, DX Engineering, and Flex Radio. These three companies were VERY generous with their support. We also had other corporate sponsors, 38 different DX clubs and, hundreds of individual DXers who helped us out. Thanks to all of you on behalf of the entire VP6R team.

No DXpedition report would be complete without some numbers. We made over 82,000 QSOs on all bands 160 through 6 meters. We were pleased to have 21% of our QSOs come from Europe, a very difficult path from the South Pacific. We were also happy to make nearly 900 QSOs on 60 meters and 36 EME QSOs on 6 meters; both were firsts from Pitcairn. For a complete analysis of our operation please see the statistics page on our Club Log DXpedition Chart.

The trip back home was remarkably similar to the trip out to Pitcairn, but with greatly different feelings. Going out was filled with anticipation, excitement, and more than a little trepidation; I really didn't know what to expect. Going home was mostly gratitude for having such a wonderful experience. There was also a bit of regret at having to leave such a beautiful place, but it was mixed with the desire to return home and resume my "normal" life. This was truly a once in a lifetime experience for me. It was wonderful to visit a strange far away corner of the world, to meet new people, and to finally experience the radio conditions on the "other" side of the pileups.

The travel and radio experiences were wonderful, but for me the most rewarding aspect of the trip was experiencing the wonderful fellowship among our team members. Being a part of this team was an honor and a pleasure I will remember for the rest of my days. From the very beginning of planning, KOIR kept saying "let's have some fun", and that's exactly what we did. We hope you had fun, too.



JR4OZR Teaching EA3HSO the Ninja Dance