

ALF
6/05/22

Tuesday, May 24- Weds., May 25, 2022. American was back with the typical redeye to MIA, leaving SFO at 2230, then a five-hour layover in Miami before the 1230 departure for AUA. I had looked at other airlines, particularly because at this time coming out of Covid, the tickets for First/Business class were roughly 3 times more expensive than in past years, and I wanted to fly the premium class mainly to have more space for covid safety. A cheaper alternative would have been JetBlue, but their connection was in Ft. Myers, and on the way back was actually only 56 minutes. That didn't seem to give enough margin of safety, particularly these days with frequent delays [but see below for what actually happened with a three-hour connection time!].

No covid test was needed to get into Aruba, but as a year ago, one must buy covid insurance (for a reduced flat fee now of only \$15), and you have to get an online "ED Card" for boarding that signifies they have on-line approved your travel. This was all pretty easy.

On the way to the airport, I stopped at co-owner John Fore's (W6LD) house to pick up some remoting gear, plus a spool of 3/16th inch Dacron rope that I stuck in my suitcase. I was checking one large suitcase and carrying a small one on board along with my small green backpack (suitable since I wasn't bringing down a radio). As usual I parked at Anza Parking and took the shuttle bus – it worked fine and I hope it's easily available when I get in after midnight a week from now.

I had almost two hours to kill. Last year the new B gate area had been a virtual commercial desert and the Admiral's Club that had relocated there wasn't even open in the evening. This year things have changed. Shops are open and so was the AC. My membership had lapsed earlier this year (I had not renewed due to covid), but they had a deal whereby if you were flying first or business class internationally, including the Caribbean, entry was free, so I didn't have to re-up my membership to get in.

After an uneventful flight, during most of which I slept, I arrived in MIA a little before 7 a.m. and camped out at the Admirals Club at Gate D30, enjoying their variety of free breakfast food. The Customs line was about 20 minutes, as the automatic machines weren't working and there were several planes arriving, but they had a number of agents, so it moved well. No luggage checking at all.

A very strange experience at Hertz: the agent, Carolina, welcomed me back. She then asked if I had a radio station and when I confirmed that I did, she asked me to come behind the counter, where she opened a cabinet and there on the inside were my two QSL cards for AE6Y and P49Y taped to the door. I had given them to her last year in a casual chat when renting a car. How surprising to see them again!

The car is a small orange Chevy Sonic that seems to work fine. This turns out to be one of the best rentals I have had and it ended up with over 300 kms on the odometer before the trip was done. Unlike the usually nutty European half-height radios with inscrutable controls, this one had a built-in radio with a legible and usable touch screen. Of course, that didn't improve the programming, but as always it was fun to listen to Spanish and Papiamento on the radio, particularly the religious channel 93.1 (also 96.5 for some English music).

At the house the new paint that Cris, P43C, had added is more subdued than the previous version, with salmon-colored accents. The driveway gate and the back gate are only painted with primer (Jean-Pierre, P43A, said it was too windy, and thus too dusty, for final painting). The front gate, however, is still on its last legs. Later JP promised to get it rebuilt, possibly by himself. That will take some serious welding.

As usual, the first order of business was to unpack and start to sort out the radios. Unfortunately, I hadn't brought a serial cable for the K3, as I normally do. There was a strange cable going from the radio to the P3 with a Y adaptor on it that was plugged into the serial port on the P3 that normally goes to a computer (this is appropriate for the modified K3S back panel which now has the kind of USB receptacle that the Winkeyer has (the small square one) to connect to the computer). After quite a bit of looking, I found a short cable in the box in the closet labeled K3 parts, and it worked fine. [See later in this writeup – we also have a whole bin on top of the closet in the second BR full of DB9 cables.]

I hooked up the DX Doubler, although since I was probably going to use only one radio, it was not really needed. The IC-756 Pro2, by the way, is in a bad way, with the display faint and partially obscured by what looks like rub marks on the surface (they aren't actually rub marks, nor on the surface, but that is the appearance they give). By then it was almost 6:30 and I had agreed to meet John Crovelli, W2GD, at 7:30, so I went out for a run starting at the local roundabout and then to the north and back. We had a pleasant dinner at the Kibaima Grill (ex-B55), sitting outside in high wind, to avoid loud music inside. [By the way, it stayed windy all week, and apparently had been so for several weeks already. The temp in the day was typically 32-33 degrees Celsius (i.e., about 90 F.), but without high humidity, so with the wind actually pretty comfortable]. Back home at 9:20 or so, called Sandy, did some work emails and played a bit in the 0300 CWT just sending by hand. 20 and 40 were wide open, and I also worked John on 15 and 80. Then went to bed at around midnight. The beverages all seemed to work well.

Thursday, May 26, 2022. A great night's sleep till about 8 a.m. I got on 15 briefly and ran a few EUs, plus one JA and two BA's!! Very unusual. Then to the supermarket Ling and Sons where I way overbought because I was hungry. Also invested \$72 in a new bottle of Frangelico, as the old one had been used up. Fortunately, Lings was open, though it is a national holiday, Ascension Day, in Aruba. I drove over to check that the testing center at Palm Beach Plaza (the same one John and I had used last year) was open. Their sign says they now are open starting at 7 a.m., seven days a week, and that they give antigen tests for \$35 with results in 3-4 hours, accepted by CDC. I got on 15 for a bit and ran some EUs at around noon.

I drove over to Lisandro's (P43L) and Lissette's house and checked out their fine astronomical observatory, of which they are justifiably proud. They have mounted a 10-inch reflector anchored to a pier in the ground with a building with a sliding roof over it. Attached is a complex control center with four monitor screens. Lisandro showed me some very lovely galaxy pictures he had made that took hours of compute processing to develop. Very impressive. I brought over some materials they had ordered for Lissette and digital SDR stuff for Lisandro.

Then home, had lunch, and JP came over. He's working on the elevated guy anchor across from the north tower. As mentioned, we also discussed the two gates, which are not painted due to the wind, and the front gate which probably needs complete replacement.

I turned on the 91B and found that it made a reliable 1kw plus on 20 and 15. Ran some EUs on 15. I've decided I will probably do a single band 15 or 20 just to have fun DX'ing and make it not so cutthroat as the Classic category or a full single op endeavor.

In the late afternoon I went over to Cris's and gave her cash duly counted by Cindy. Cindy then came out and talked with us, which was pleasant. On the way out, I stopped in at their new house (two houses up the street), where JP was setting up a model train layout. He had purchased an elaborate set of model train materials from an estate for a very low price, as he says there were no other takers on the Island. They are finishing the house as time and finances allow. Took a 46-minute run from the Santa Cruz intersection of the main road north and back, then met John for dinner at Urataka Pizza.

Friday, May 27, 2022. Woke up feeling kind of logy. Drove up to the Hyatt for my traditional breakfast, but they are not upholding their end of the tradition. Breakfast is no longer served by the carp pool; now it's at the patio restaurant nearer the beach. That's ok, but it is now only a buffet, and not a very interesting one at that. I may have to change my routine. On the way back to the house, I stopped in at Unicom, which Cris had recommended. It's on the main road just before the big roundabout where the new highway 8B turns right. Lings is right at that corner. Also stopped in at PriceSmart near the airport, which seemed to be doing a land office business. In both cases I was looking at possible TVs to replace our primitive Vizio flat screen in the house. Back at the house, the Vizio did seem to work OK (my recollection from a year ago is that the remote was inoperative, but not today), though its picture is low res and not very sharp.

I enjoyed another pre-contest ritual, a run along the airport to the Coral Pyramid starting at about 2:30. Only one other mad dog or Englishman in sight. Then to the Ritz for a chocolate milkshake.

Contest notes. I am just using one radio, the shack K3/P3. The Icom 756 Pro2 is also set up, but I don't use it for a single band effort. I'm using my software CQPWIN, ver. 13.1, with no internet.

It still seemed that 15m would be the most interesting band to be on, so I have decided to do a 15 meter single-bander. In previous years there would have been nothing to do Friday night, as the contests starts in Aruba at 2000 local time, and the band would be dead. But tonight, it's chockablock with signals

I start with a pileup that lasts for a solid hour, mostly US/VE, but with quite a few EUs as well, and a few VK/ZLs. What fun! At the end of the first hour, 170 QSOs are in the log. This is my best hour of the contest and I'm pretty sure it's a personal record for WPX CW. I ran at 35 wpm for a few hours, then slowed down to 34 and 33 wpm as weaker sigs required more repeats.

By 0430Z (i.e., 30 minutes past midnight local time!!), things are slowing way down and the P3 doesn't show many signals, so I knock it off for the night a 516 Qs by 264 mults for 390k points. Even though the band has really slowed down, in the last few minutes I was called by 4Z4DX and a YB1! The 4Z4 really surprised me; the YB1 not so much. YB is antipodal to Aruba and as a result, there are often strong signals from there at odd times of day and night.

What is very surprising is that this night the SteppIR has been the best antenna for signal to noise, particularly for NA signals. It's only two elements at 35 feet or so, fixed North-South (and can be reversed at the touch of a button). Most of the US stations, particularly on the East Coast, have been worked on that antenna. The StackMatch is set up to switch between "normal" (in this case, our 5 element JK for 15 meters), the Mid-Tri (4 el on 15) and the SteppIR. I also can reverse it when an SA calls, though later I find that not to be so useful, as the noise level rises by about 10 dB; it's still the best antenna for SA, even pointed north.

I grab a quick English muffin and hit the hay, setting the alarm for about 0410 local. Waking in between, nothing is heard. When the alarm goes off, I really don't want to get up, but there are OH and eastern EU signals on the band. I have a bowl of Miniwheats and slowly start to wake up for a long day.

I start running EUs but not at a high rate. I'm mostly using the 5 el. set at 035. The noise level is about 10 dB better than last night. Instead of powering through at low rates (which would have been a better contest strategy where time isn't really an issue), I take another hour off, waking naturally after about 40 min and brewing some coffee.

The band picks up and the 1100Z hour is 131, my second best of the contest. A milestone at 1232Z with contact 788 (TA2IJ) breaking the one-million-point barrier (with 439 mults). For the rest of the day, I work off and on and noise comes and goes. It's worst from the northwest, and in that direction worse on the big antenna than on the Mid-Tri. The SteppIR is the quietest of the three. The band is not in nearly as good condition as last night, and I I give up finally at 0144Z at 1727 Qs by 758 mults for 3.733M points. The band is closing much earlier than last night, when it was productive all the way to 0430. Not sure what tomorrow will bring.

I noted an annoying off and on sluggish response from my Logitech wireless keyboard, changed batteries (I had brought spares) then replaced it with an oldie PS2 version from the closet. There may be something wrong with the Bluetooth dongle in relation to the keyboard, as later, with the keyboard in front of the computer it seems normally responsive.

I was using the Mid-Tri pointing NW for US Midwest and West Coast. I turned if further west for a few VKs and ZLs but that caused the Green Heron control box to lose sync, and it could not be recovered (i.e., a no motion error would be shown). The Mid-Tri became essentially useless for the rest of the contest.

Sunday morning, I again get up early and find the band in great shape to EU starting at 0825Z. In fact the rates for the 09, 10 and 11Z hours are 94, 79, and 89, which are quite good for this contest, given that I've already worked most of the louder EUs.

The rest of the contest plays out at generally lower rates, and I take lots of time off in small doses (i.e., not enough to count as "off time" under the contest rules that require a minimum of 60 minutes. I have only one bad frequency fight, at about 2026Z when a loud N7 opens up on frequency and simply won't go away, though I know he can hear me clearly -- very poor operating technique; others have QSY'd when asked. I finally give up with one hour to go in the contest as the noise level has gotten so bad to the northwest as to make it almost impossible to work the Midwest and West Coast.

So the claimed result is 2581 QSOs (net of 116 dupes!!) by 979 mults for 7.446k points. Looking at the prefix log afterwards shows about 85 DXCC countries worked. Prefix leaders are US: 423; Germany: 76; Italy: 65. Only 26 JA prefixes (39 last year) due to increased noise levels in their direction. I miss the many Russian prefixes lost; a few did make it into the log, though they will presumably be deleted by the log checkers.

Soapbox As Sent to 3830 Reflector

Well, that was certainly an interesting experience. For various reasons, I didn't want to keep butt in chair for a solid 36 hours, so I thought doing a single band effort would be a good alternative. I had done SB40 before in this contest but thought with the superb 10/15m condx earlier in the week that 15 would probably be the place to be. A single-bander can get boring as rates drop as the band starts to close or you have just about worked everybody, but it's also a fun way to experience a full 24-hour cycle of propagation.

Contest highlights included a very energetic start, featuring a 170-QSO first hour (I think my personal best for this contest). The band was open to EU and NA and kept it up till about 0430Z (that's after midnight local time -- what a change from recent years!). In a similar vein, the early hours on Sunday morning, starting at about 0830Z, featured a long EU run that was an unexpected treat for so early in the morning. On Thursday, at about 1230Z the band had been actually open to JA/BA (an opening I have never experienced before from P4), but none heard at that time during the contest.

The second highlight was how useful our little two-element SteppIR antenna turned out to be. We had put it up in our recent antenna rebuild, and it is just at 30 feet fixed North-South. When we had bad noise, for some reason it was the quietest of the three antennas (5 el JK at 55 feet and JK Mid-Tri at 43 feet being the others). With the 5 el running EU with its very sharp pattern, most of my US Qs were worked on the SteppIR. We also had thought it would be useful for SA callers. It was, but pointing North! Reversing it to South would increase the noise level by 10 dB or so, but pointing north gave the best SA signals. So this one turned out to be a very pleasant surprise.

On the negative side, here are my contest excuses (everyone has to have some, right?)

- 1) My score would certainly be improved with use of internet for multiplier harvesting. Searching for Qs from here isn't normally very productive, while focusing on needed new mults would obviously be a helpful strategy, which I did not use.*
- 2) I took lots of short breaks to get up and walk around, eat, etc. Though the WPX clock says 35 hours, the actual operating time is closer to 27 hours. More BIC time probably would have helped the score.*
- 3) We had some very bad local noise, that also plagued P44W. It was particularly bad to the Northwest, making it difficult to use an antenna aimed to the western US. For that reason, only a few JAs could be heard.*
- 4) Too many dupes: over 100! Why? I sent my call after 99% of my QSOs, but even got duped by the same stations more than once. Very frustrating.*
- 5) The score includes a handful of Russian stations, and even a few Ukrainians. Since these are all new prefixes, there will presumably be a score reduction from the log checkers.*

The social scene here is somewhat muted these days, but John Crovelli, W2GD and P44W, and I broke bread several times together. Jean-Pierre, P43A, and Cris, P43C, continue to take good care of our place and have completed a number of significant upgrades. In fact, great accolades go to co-owner John Fore, W6LD, who spent several weeks here two months ago and accomplished a great deal of deferred maintenance, including a new operating table, new a/c, and new washing machine (though in all honesty, in 20 years I had never had occasion to turn on the old one!). John also did a lot of organizing and shelving of our outside aluminum pile (i.e., old antennas and tower sections), while JP and a friend raised the cinder block wall in the yard to help keep out the neighbor's aggressive (maybe friendly?) dogs.

BTW, Lisandro (P43L) and wife Lissette have completed building a remarkable astronomical observatory in their backyard, complete with a 10" reflecting telescope and a control room that looks like it came from NASA Mission Control. He and his Space and Nature Aruba Foundation were recently featured on local TV!

73, and as always, thanks to the many excellent CW ops that make this contest so enjoyable for us all, Andy, AE6Y, P49Y

Monday, May 30, 2022. As usual, post-contest I slept very soundly, waking at around 8. By email, John C. suggested trying out the Hy-Gain control box on the bad Mid-Tri rotor. I did so and found that it seemed to work fine except that the indicator would get jumpy when pointed west. Then I drove to Linda's Pancake House for a post-contest breakfast with John. We probably would have just gone to Huchada's in Santa Cruz, which is a lot closer, but he had to go to Palm Beach Plaza to get tested first. Upon returning, I stopped in at Cris's to get her accounting, then composed a 3830 posting.

After discussing the rotor issue with John F on the phone, I hook up the T2X box to the Mid-Tri rotor and run it back and forth. It became clear after a while that John F's theory is correct that there was something wrong with the directional potentiometer in the T2X at about 250 degrees. It stuck at that point, then tended to jump suddenly (on the Hy-Gain box it may go all around the SE, while on the Green Heron, it jumped repeatably to read 302 and then froze. The Hy-Gain box can deal with it, but the Green Heron freezes up. So, after talking to John Fore, I put the GH box back on with stickers and a tag warning not to turn CCW past 300 degrees. Checking the 20/40 Yaesu rotor out of curiosity, it seems to work fine.

At 4:30, we started a zoom call with John Fore, Ed (W0YK, P49X), and Bill Fehring, W9KKN. Before that I hooked up the Remote Rig using the cables and Remote Rig box from John and following the instructions in the Elecraft remote control manual on page 17, and also a small LAN box provided by Bill. It's straightforward, but there are a lot of cables, and I have to be careful maneuvering in the radio room.

In the call, Bill, who is an absolute genius at this stuff, spent a lot of time dealing with the software and internet access, etc., Eventually John was able to remote into the rig. They asked about the Green Heron rotors, which have a serial port on the back of the control box. John mentioned that there was a box of DB9 cables in the 2d bedroom, which I had somehow missed earlier when looking for one to hook up the K3, but found now (it was on top of the closet near the ceiling). I hooked up three such cables to my 4-port serial adaptor and in a few minutes, Bill had all three rotors working with the GHE software, displaying on my laptop and theirs both numerical direction and azimuthal indicators.

Bill had commandeered my computer using AnyDesk to do all this wizardry. One issue of concern was latency, and Bill tested ping times to various servers. Ed had shorter ping times to the radio than John did, which Ed attributed to his microwave link that had been installed to speed up access to the K6MTU site. The initial though was to leave us on the public network, even though it may be that SETAR changes the address every day. However, the system is supposed to follow that. Bill will also hook up a private network for us to experiment with.

I have to bring all this stuff back but promised to leave it hooked up tomorrow for Ed and John to play with. Ed had a K3 mini that he had never hooked up but got talked through the process by John and Bill. Meanwhile I had promised to meet GD at Santa Cruz Bar and Grill for dinner at 7:30, so when I left they were still on the phone. John called me when I had returned, saying

that they had just finished the call (i.e., after 5 hours or so!). Anyway, it's really exciting to see the radio come to life remotely. Thanks so much, Bill!

I had a glass of Frangelico, read for a while and got ready for another good night's sleep.

Tuesday, May 31, 2022. After an English muffin and coffee for breakfast, I drove over to the Palm Beach Plaza testing site. I had to wait about 10 minutes, but then the test was very quick, with the attendant swirling a Q-tip in my mouth and nostril. On the way back I drove around a bit, including the California Lighthouse and a trip to Arikok park (turn at the Mondo Nobo just above the Santa Cruz roundabout, continue past Urataka and follow signs). I give the young lady at the visitor center \$20 (admission is \$11) and said the rest was a donation. I told her that when I first started coming to the Park there was no visitor center, and she said "that was a long time ago." Actually, it was 20 years ago, and she was probably a toddler then.

Back home, I went over the log and sent it in to the contest organizers and had lunch. The test results come back at about 2:30 by email and on the Aruba Health app on my phone, fortunately negative.

Around 2 p.m. I was at the computer when the radio suddenly came to life on 10 meters. I couldn't hear it directly, but after turning on the Icom with no antenna, I could hear P49X calling CQ with no takers. He moved to 14015 and started running EUs. On a lark, I hooked up the antenna tuner to the Icom, set it to the dummy load position, and work Ed! Later on I worked John as well by the same mechanism. At various times in the afternoon they both seemed to be having fun running pileups on 20 and 15 CW.

Tradition demands one swim per visit, though I have not been honoring that particular mandate in recent years. However, for old times' sake I took a run at my old stamping grounds from Marina Pirata along Spanns Lagoenweg to La Granja and back, then had a relaxing swim at one of the water entrances near MP. Very delightful. Dinner was with Cris and JP at Red Fish (a restaurant favored by renter W5AJ). Cris drove, and we enjoyed a very pleasant meal.

Wednesday, June 1, 2022. Up a little after six, brewed some coffee, took apart all the remote stuff to bring back, disconnected antennas, etc. Then decided to go for a last run starting at our roundabout (thank heavens for it, as the early morning traffic going north would otherwise make it impossible to get out of our street, as it did in the old days). Then to fill up at the Citgo in Santa Cruz and back home for breakfast and to finish packing. It took an hour and a half to get through the airport check-in, passport control, TSA, US customs, Aruban TSA. The longest line was about 20 min at U.S. Customs, but what was unexpected was standing outside in the sun to get into the American Airlines check-in. Once inside, I did get priority check-in, which probably saved another 20 minutes or so. The only bright spot was a smile from La Bella Carolina at Hertz.

The flight to MIA surprisingly had to divert to West Palm Beach due to a storm in Miami, though the WX in WPB, only 70 miles away, was perfect. This was a classic example of what can go wrong in today's stretched-thin air travel. When we landed in MIA, of course there was no gate available, so we didn't deplane until after 9 p.m., about three hours late and also slightly after the original departure time for my flight to SFO (and here I thought I was being conservative by allowing a three-hour changeover in Miami). I rushed to the gate for the SFO plane, only to learn it was still there, all ready to go but waiting for pilots. We ultimately took off at about 11:40 p.m., and I arrived home (surprisingly, with my luggage) at 4:15 a.m.!