

AE6Y Aruba Trip Notes March 2023 ARRL DX SSB Contest at P49Y

ALF

3/18/23

Tuesday Feb. 28 – Wednesday, March 1, 2023. For reasons reflecting the capricious nature of airline scheduling and fares, I'm flying to Aruba on American through CLT and returning on Delta through ATL. I'm starting these notes in the Admiral's Club at Terminal 1 Gates B at SFO. I had let my membership lapse during Covid, but just renewed it on miles since I expect to be doing more traveling in the future as hopefully life returns to normal.

John and Ed have been at the place for several weeks, Ed operating in ARRL RTTY RU and WPX RTTY and then a week and a half ago Ed and John combined with Denny, KX7M, to do a M/S in ARRL DX CW. They finished second in claimed scores only to ZF1A, the entire difference in scores appearing to be accounted for by the latter station's use of an in-band second station. They've done a lot of repair and refurbishment work, but have also run into some odd interference problems, particularly involving rf coming back in on the 15m feedline when transmitting on 10.

I am taking my green backpack with normal supplies and a carry-on suitcase with my new K4D padded with towels. It's stuffed in sideways with the bottom of the radio down and the top up, and I'm hoping it survives the journey. Flying first and business class to get a little more separation from other passengers on the plane, I should have adequate overhead space on both flights.

I have spent many hours reprogramming CQPWIN, now version 14.0, to accommodate the voice keyer on the K4. Like the K3, it has 2 banks of four messages each, but unlike the K3 each message can be accessed separately from software without needing to switch banks manually. I generalized the radio identification and display routines in the program; this was a lot of work, as I had to relearn how the program worked and get over a lot of clever but unstructured coding that I had done 10-15 years ago. I think I got it all worked out.

I'm planning to run low power, as John and Ed had been having some trouble with RFI affecting the amps. This will simplify switching and tuning and should work well on the high bands, though I expect difficulties on 80 and, especially, 160. The K4 has a new kind of compression called CESSB which appears to increase the average power significantly without causing the kind of distortion that can result from high levels of traditional compression. We'll see...

I got a few hours of sleep on the plane to CLT, which left SFO 15 min late but arrived a half hour early. Breakfast at the huge Admiral's club there, awaiting the flight to Aruba.

It was about a 4-hr flight from CLT, arriving in Aruba a little after 3 local time (one hour advanced from Charlotte on standard time). There was no customs check, possibly because several flights all arrive at about the same time in the afternoon, and it would cause significant

delays to check people out. Also, it seems that these are all tourist flights from the US, so they are less likely to find locals bringing in contraband. Passport control was by the automatic readers, so that a very quick also. I was at the cottage by about 4, after having stopped to pick up a Hertz rental. My friend La Bella Carolina was at the desk, and we chatted a bit. She gave me a brand-new Kia Rio (a pretty basic economy car that worked fine) with only 27km on the clock. I unpacked at the cottage. The K4 looks fine and everything seems to have survived. The shack a/c isn't working, as John reported but I turned on the others and set up the fan that he had bought in the hallway. He also had stacked the toolboxes on the square card table that used to be a fixture in the shack and for which we had had a new top made a few years ago. It doesn't fit into a multi setup, but I set it back up in the usual place to the left of the SO operating position.

The car said the temp was about 29 C (i.e., 84 F or so). Carolina said the weather was hot, though John had reported highs in the 70s last week. It was quite breezy. [The weather was the same all week: not too hot at all but very windy.]

I was feeling pretty tired, but thought I should go out for a run, and pick up some takeout dinner, before setting up the K4 and checking out the antennas. It was a great afternoon for a run from our roundabout up the path past the new bridge to the next intersection. On the way back, I went through the Taco Bell drive thru to bring back some food. Then worked for a while setting up the K4 using the shack DXDoublor and cables, and same for John's K3. There I changed to the cables to use a regular serial port cable from the P3 to the computer. He had it set up with a special cable connecting the two ports on the P3 together and then going to the Cat 5 connector on the K3, with the idea that you would then use a USB connection to the computer. I reviewed some work documents, sent emails, and hit the hay at about 10:30.

Thursday, March 2, 2023. Slept very well till a little after 8 a.m. then off to Ling's for a shopping trip using the new freeway that starts at the airport roundabout and ends right at Ling's. Back at the house for a breakfast of my secret Aruban pleasure, frosted flakes, then back to finishing the hookup of the K4 and K3. They work fine with CQPWIN. I got on 10 for a while running guys in the states and Canada. I used both radios and asked for comparisons, which revealed that the TX equalizer is flat on the K3. I reset it to reduce lows and increase highs and get better reports. In general, the K4 seems to be preferred on the other end.

I left the antennas the way John had them set up, with the normal SixPak, the mid-tri and the SteppIR on the StackMatch for the left radio only, and the right radio (K3) just feeding the SixPak. At various times, I ran some QSOs on 10m phone. I'm not trying CW at all, but I have my little switchbox hooked up to the Key input on the DXD to use for tuning up and SWR checks.

I went for a run at about 3 from the roundabout at the Santa Cruz road north to the next one. This run is nice when the path finally diverges from the road and goes inland after about a km. Temp was about 80 with a strong breeze – very pleasant. Then a quick shower and to Cris's for a chat with her and Cindy, and to give Cindy the phone I had brought for her plus some things she had asked Ed to bring, along with some spare parts for JP. Dinner from the Wendy's drive

thru. Then more radio work experimenting with the beverages and with diversity reception. I set up a K-Pod switch to turn on and off diversity. Then spend the evening reading and radio experimenting till midnight. I found that diversity wasn't very helpful. The idea is to use separate antennas on the Main and Sub RX's while keeping both tuned to the same frequency and listening to one in each ear. The effect is interesting, but in general, the beverages were quieter than the normal TX antennas, so adding the two together wasn't better than just using the beverages.

Friday, March 3, 2023. Another very sound night's sleep then up and made some coffee. I ran some EUs on 10 with a big pileup, using the 6 el aimed NE with very nice signal reports. Then at about 10:30 headed out to the Dutch pancake restaurant in the Seaport Center. As usually, there was a waiting line there, so I went next door to the café for coffee and a Dutch pancake, which they also serve. Then for a drive around the north end of the island, to the CA lighthouse and back by about 1:30. I was tired so I took a brief nap. I went for a run from the Airport up to the Coral Pyramid in Oranjestad then whiled away some time and again got takeout from Wendy's. Also made some contest sandwiches of pbj and cream cheese and jelly.

Contest notes. I had dutifully brought my old microcassette recorder even though it wasn't in good shape – but that shape got worse during the contest, leading to its being chucked in the trash. So I'll have to reconstruct some of the contest experience from memory and the log.

I was debating where to start. In the past I've pretty much always started on 20, but tonight it seems that 10 and 15 are also open as 8 p.m. (0000Z) approaches. 15 seems more full of EUs so I elect to start on 10. After 20 minutes I have about 80 qs and 31 mults, but things are slightly slowing down. I check 15 but it seems full of EU QRM so I decide to hit 20 like the old days. I reel off 169 qs on 14241 in the rest of the hour. I stay on that freq till about 0330, at which time I have about 760 by 55 on that band.

Then to 40 where I run on 7229 for an hour or so. Then back and forth on 40 and 80. 80 is much less productive with more QRM and noise and a generally slower rate. At the end of the first five hours I have 1147 Qs and 154 mults.

In the 0700 hour I try dual CQing on 40 and 80, which actually does work. My first 160 q is a move of K2QVY in NJ from 80 and two Qs later I move K1LZ in ME similarly. Both contacts are made easily, which does give me some hope. Earlier, I had called K9RS in DE, whom I heard clearly, but he CQed in my face, and no one had answered CQs (note this is where self-spotting probably would have been helpful).

In the 0800 hour I try CQing on 1839 and do work some of the big mults like K3LR and W3LPL. Later W9RE calls in on 40 and moves to 160 (he told me later on a higher band that I was pretty faint, but we made the contact.) I'm getting tired and frustrated so I take off a half hour circa 0836 and an hour and a quarter circa 0952. Back on 40 then and at about 1115 start on 20 again. After about 10 Qs there I try 15 at 1310.

I have mediocre rates on 15 then try 10 for more such. By the way, the 10m SteppIR useful. In particular, I was just not able to dig out a VE2 in Quebec on the 6 el. or the tribander, but he was easily copied on the SteppIR. I could also work CA on it. It seems there are times when its broad pattern is helpful.

Things finally pick up at 2018 when I go back to 15 and have the only exciting afternoon runs of the contest: 297 and 255 in the 21 and 22 Zulu hours. The 01 and 02 hours are very good on 40: 156 and 213. I decide to try 160 again at 0300, having asked a number of guys during the day to look for me on 160 at night. CQing yields 20 Qs and a bunch of new mults.

At the halfway point, I'm at 3627 by 294 for 3,179,610 points. By bands (10-160): 728/56, 1200/60, 924/60, 527/55, 229/46 19/17.

Back on 80 and 40 and a few more on 160 at about 0400. At 0448 I give up for the night. This is 12:48 local time and about two hours before I usually take off for the night, but it's just too frustrating. Also listening on 20 it's wide open between the US and EU. So I decide it's just no place for a low power Caribbean station. I don't get back on the air for another 5 ½ hours.

Sunday is spent mostly on 10, with not exciting but steady rates, then another flurry on 15 near the end, but not as good as yesterday. I had made a sked for 7055 at 2350Z with VE5ZX and VO1TH. The VO1 shows up and we get the mult on 40, I ask him to move to 80 and the Q is marginal, but I logged it.

Here's a description from my March 2023 JUG column about the contest.

Related to my QLF with VY2GF [see 3830 report below], when to ask a station to move is always an interesting call. I went through the log, and here in order are the stations that moved for me (there are probably another six or seven or so where the moves were unsuccessful):

N2QVY 80-160 NJ
K1LZ 80-160 ME
W9RE 40-160 IN
AC5XK 20-15 DC
VY2DS 20-15 PE
WD0T 15-10 SD
K5UA 10-15 LA
VO2AC 10-15 LB
VO1TX 15-20 NF
KR4NO 40-160 SC
W1XX 80-160 RI
VO1TH sked 40/80

As you can see, I had 11 successful moves, plus a sked at the end of the contest with the VO1. These moves are in three categories. The first is moves to 160. I was having so little luck on 160

with the tough conditions there and being low power, that I started asking stations with loud signals or that I knew to be big guns like W9RE and K1LZ to move, even if they were common mults. These successful moves were very helpful, as in general they ended up being uniques on 160.

The second category was moving rare-ish mults, like VY2 and DC, which also were quick and probably worth doing. The third category turned out to be unnecessary, e.g., WDOT and K5UA, as later in the contest I worked several more of each mult. I think for those, I was deceived by thinking of Sprint and NAQP, where, for example, WDOT is often the only SD station in the contest. I probably should have had more patience and just assumed that with conditions so good, there would be more.

Of course, you never know what you'll miss in a contest. This time, for example, DC and DE were plentiful. And I worked scores of SC stations, though in my mind I still think of Sprints where a Q with W4OC was always unique. Usually in past years VY2 has been easy with both VY2TT and VY2ZM active. This year I never heard TT (though he made over 3k contacts), while ZM has closed his station. This does illustrate one difference between phone and CW. On CW, I can recall tuning around on the second radio while running on the first radio, and thus finding a few loud mults like those VY2s. On phone, although I had my second radio set up and did use it for various purposes, I find it much harder to actually listen to it while talking and running a phone pileup, so successfully finding mults on it is almost impossible.

Monday, March 6, 2023. Woke up at about 8 feeling very logy, but some coffee and activity did help. Composed the 3830 report, sent it in. Talked to John Fore on the phone. Made a reservation for tonight at PF Chang's and called Cris about it. Went to Mundo Nobo in Santa Cruz for a new dish rack, sponges and garbage bags. They take cash and debit cards only, no credit cards. Suggested to John that I leave my K4 for him to use in WPX SSB and he can leave it for me to take back after WPX CW.

Went for a run at 2, all the way from the SC roundabout to where the path comes back to the road, 50 min. Then a strawberry shake at the place 3.2 km below our roundabout on the right. Driving around I found an interesting beach, deserted at the time, for further exploration: 1.5km further south from the milkshake place is a road with an actual sign: Pieter Boerstraat (the first turnoff after the road to the Naval Station). I took that towards the ocean then left and right to Batista Beach, with many thatched structures, no people and a bar and restaurant closed on Mondays. This was a new spot for me. There was no surf, but an interesting location and arrangement. Walked around Mangel Halto for a bit, our very pleasant local beach.

At John's request I've been doing some cleaning, including throwing away old toiletries on the shelf in the bathroom, and going through the snorkeling supplies in the second BR. The only such equipment worth saving was one snorkel and one pair of fins. Also threw out about three dozen airport books that are clogging our bookshelf and, when I got back, cleaned out the plastic container and the shelf for the kitchen garbage. All put in the Serlimar bin, outside for our normal Tuesday morning pickup.

I talked finances with Cris, then she drove us to P.F. Chang's where we had a very good dinner. Cris and JP aren't used to this kind of food, nor to chopsticks (though JP said it was coming back to him), but we all really enjoyed the food, and they may become addicted to edamame, which I ordered for the table. They went home with enough leftovers for at least another meal, to boot. It's located in a new shopping center on the divided highway a bit past Red Fish and on the ocean side. You can't miss the big signs. Best to continue slightly past to a rotary for access.

When I got home, I did some more cleaning, then worked on these notes. Lisandro called to chat – unfortunately we couldn't get together in person this trip but will plan to do it when I come back for a longer stay in May for WPX CW.

Report as sent to 3830 reflector

Call: P49Y
Operator(s): AE6Y
Station: P49Y

Class: **SOAB LP**
QTH: Aruba
Operating Time (hrs): 37.5
Location: South America
OpMode: SO2R

Summary:

Band QSOs Mults

160: 42 25

80: 284 48

40: 1135 59

20: 1019 60

15: 1598 60

10: 1680 59

Total: **5758 311** Total Score **5,372,214**

Club: Northern California Contest Club

Soapbox:

As an opening line in literature, this one from Charles Dickens remains ever appropriate: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." That certainly described this weekend. When conditions are so good as this, that can disadvantage the Caribbean, as we have to battle to get noticed when the US/VE's are having so much fun working EU. In fact there were times in this contest when I temporarily gave up, such as Saturday night a little after 0400Z (midnight in

Aruba) when I could get nothing going on the low bands and 20 was still full of loud EU QRM. So I took a larger than normal sleep break of 5 1/2 hours. In fact, my total on the air time (measured by excluding any breaks greater than 10 minutes in the log) was only 37 1/2 hours, instead of the usual 42 or so.

With the expected conditions, I decided to try low power, though all my previous entries in this contest had all been high power. There is quite a difference (duh!). For one thing, you don't get instant respect when you QSY to a new band and pick a frequency that is pretty clear but not perfect. With high power and the usual instant pileup you can normally blow a hole in the band, but it's not so easy with low power. This is particularly true on the low bands.

I did not self-spot, which I disapprove of on principle, but the influence of spots was immediately apparent when someone did spot me, so in the future if they continue to be allowed every serious competitor will have to use them.

I was using my new K4 along with W6LD's K3S which John had left for me in between his stints in the recent ARRL DX CW and upcoming WPX SSB contests. I must say, as a satisfied K3 owner since 2007, the older radio looks positively dowdy next to a flashy new K4! The K4 performed very well, and I think Elecraft has a real winner with the new CESSB compression algorithm. I received many unsolicited "big signal" and "great audio" reports. Before the contest I had determined that with my Heil headset mike about 2 inches from my mouth, the TX EQ set to emphasize treble, and compression set at about 25, that combination produced very clear, strong audio without distortion. Several tests beforehand seemed to indicate that the K3 sounded well also, but did not have quite the "punch" of the K4.

Thanks to many guys for moving bands (and to VO1TH for keeping a sked at the end of the contest for new mults on 40 and 80). In fact, probably one third of my very meager 160 mult total is from direct moves there. Also thanks to those who tried unsuccessfully. And a big apology for my worst QLF moment of the weekend. Near the end of the contest, I was on 15 running a small pileup when VY2GF called in. I asked him to move to 10, as PEI was my last unworked "normal" mult (i.e., excluding YT, NT, and NU). He did so but I didn't hear anything on 10 and couldn't make the move. He came back and said to try again, but in my tired, befuddled, semi-hallucinatory, near-the-end-of-the-contest state, I blew him off and went back to the pileup which I could handle mechanically without any thought. Sorry! -- that was not only foolish of me, but disrespectful as well. After thinking about it, I realized that I had used the K4 subRX for the move and inadvertently been listening on the beverages, with the logical negative result on 10. Of course, this was entirely human error on my part, not the K4's fault. What I should have done was just shift focus to the K3, type in 28800 or so into the entry box, and done an instant QSY on that radio, but at the time that was too complicated for my limited brain power to envision. I brooded on this for the rest of the contest, and am still bothered by it, hi.

As always, thanks to co-owner John (W6LD, P40L) and supporter Ed (W0YK, P49X). By operating this contest I get the direct benefit of all sorts of house, shack, and antenna maintenance that they have carried out in the past two months, without, for example, the need to put on my hiking boots and tussle with the beverages in the cunucu (public land, full of thorny

cactus and scrub vegetation) behind our house. And thanks to Cris (P43C) and Jean-Pierre (P43A) for their efforts to keep the place shipshape.

73, and thanks to everyone for the QSOs and the supportive comments during the contest, Andy, AE6Y,

P49Y Station: K4D, K3S

Software: CQPWIN ver. 14.0

Tower 1: 65' with 2-element JK shorty-forty, 4-el 20m Yagi, 80m Inverted-V, 2-el SteppIR at 35' due north and double-L vertical for 160m

Tower 2: 55' with single boom interlaced JK 5-el 15m and 6-el 10m Yagi

Tower 3: 45' with JK Mid-Tri tribander

Beverages: West US, East US, Europe, East-West