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55 ARTICLES



DXpedition: Memories for a Lifetime

- - reflections of HK1TL

To those of you who have never been a part of a "FIRST," I must tell you that the feeling is one beyond description.

Maybe you could compare it with the thrill of your first amateur contact. Do you remember it? Do you remember the adrenalin flow? If you made the first contact on CW as a Novice, did your mind go blank when it was your turn to transmit?

Well, that is an inadequate description, but it is the best that I can do. HK1TL was the callsign of the Pack Rat Colombian Moonbounce Expedition, an expedition designed to accomplish the first 432 MHz EME contact from the continent of South America. It was, as you no doubt have already read in the press releases, a complete success.

Who are we? How did we get there? Why did we do it? Would we do it again? What did we learn? What were the people like? How long did it take to plan?

It is now two months since the history-making event. I have been asked to put together reflections of the expedition.

Well, let us start with basic definitions that may help you understand what the Pack Rats are and what motivates them.

The Pack Rats are offi-

cially the Mount Airy VHF Radio Club. We are now 20 years old. Our main purpose is to promote interest and activity on the VHF bands, and improvement in operation and equipment. All club members are expected to participate in the club-sponsored activities: club nets, meetings, January VHF sweepstakes, June VHF QSO party, and our annual flea market "Hamarama."

We are not what one would call a "DXpedition Club." As a matter of fact, prior to HK1TL, there were only two other expeditions that I know of. An attempt to break the 1296 MHz record over water from Rodantha, N.C., in the summer of 1970 failed. A 1296 MHz expedition to the state of Delaware was a success.

HK1TL, our third expedition-type operation, entered the planning stages in January, 1976. We discovered a potential new member who was originally from Colombia. He made contacts with his friends in Barranquilla, Colombia, and we started through the red tape necessary to get all the approvals. My correspondence file is more than 2 inches thick but that is the nature of dealing with governments.

Why did we do it?

Because it needed doing, because we had the opportu-

nity, because we had the expertise to do it, and because we were assured of complete cooperation from the Colombians.

Would we do it again?

Well, obviously if something was a success, you have no reservations about doing it again. However, knowing what we know now, we would have been better prepared for power outages. We would have insisted on a 4 kW generator with adequate regulation.

We learned that you can always count on amateur radio cooperation: from the equipment handling of Russ Wicker W4ZXXI through the Miami Airport, the Area 2 Radio Club in Barranquilla, the 20 meter liaison work of W3KKN and W3TNP Ernie and Bertha Kenas, as well as the operation of the Pack Rat Moonbounce station W3CCX/3 by Dave Mascara WA3JUF. Everybody wanted it to work.

We also learned quite a bit about the effect of Faraday shift. That is to be the subject of a separate article.

We learned that the pressure of six months of intense preparation ran us to the breaking point, that at times we would have petty arguments among ourselves. Fortunately, there was always someone wise enough to sit back and analyze the situa-

tion. Tempers were getting short; pressure was building. "Hey, you guys, let's not let the situation get out of control."

Finally, what were the people like?

"Super" is the best description I can offer. They couldn't do enough to help us. Not only the Colombian hams, but the farm people and the civil defense organization. I would not have thought it possible in two short weeks to establish such deep personal relationships, but we did.

What kind of problems did we have?

In addition to sporadic, if any, line voltage, we discovered on unpacking that a filter capacitor in the power supply had broken loose from its mounting. That is not so bad, but it rubbed against a chassis corner and tore a hole in it. We requested another from the states and in the meantime set about to effect repairs.

Some solder closed up the hole and we were lucky it worked. We were also unfortunate enough to blow our 2 meter transistorized converter during the second OSCAR run. More field repairs required.

Any idea how you solder with the electricity off? Use a mini-torch (we brought one with us).

Since this was only to be an article on reflections, I'll not go into the technical decisions that were made as we prepared for the project. That will be the subject of a separate article.

Suffice it to say that if you ever have the chance to become part of a "DXpedition," do it.

Don't worry about the fact that (a) you can't afford it, (b) your XYL might go to divorce court, (c) the expedition might not be successful, or (d) that there will be a lot of work that must be done before you leave.

Do it; do it because it is a once in a lifetime experience that you will never forget. ■