

DX Stories by Paul M. Dunphy, VE1DX

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I REMEMBER DON

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Twenty seven years ago this June 9th the NCDXC held its monthly meeting at the Fork and Cork in San Mateo. Don Miller was the speaker for the evening. It was possibly up to that time the largest attendance at a Northern California DX Club meeting ever. Ninety four true blue DX types came from far and near to meet Don and hear of his adventures.

It was a time of change though this is probably realized more in retrospect than it was at the time. DXing was going through a major change, things never would be the same again. It was Don Miller who brought about the changes, he and no one else. He was a superb operator who brought loads of needed DXing and new countries to the Deserving. Just ask any Old Timer about Don but don't stand close. Some are still mad. And they intend to stay that way so just don't argue with them. They were there and they are the ones who bear the scars from those years. It was terrible. Even today some of the elders have difficulty in talking about it.

We first worked Don Miller as HL9KH in Korea where he was a captain in the U.S. Army medical corp. Don Miller was a physician. He was in every contest and ran up big scores. He would operate a key with his left hand and simultaneously log with his right hand. He was among the best if not the absolutely best operator. Never let anyone tell you anything less about Don Miller.

Back in those days, actually not too long after WWII, DXing was not the 800 pound giant that it is today. It was, as some would often then note, an aberration. The heart and soul of amateur radio was elsewhere. If you really understood, you could find the real meaning of amateur radio in the traffic nets, in the emergency preparedness organizations and all those other good endeavors. DXers were weird. The ARRL DXCC Desk was a minor chord in a minor opus. It was a peripheral operation and seldom recognized or even understood by the real amateurs.

In those days the ultimate praise for an amateur was: "...he's a good traffic man". When the biennial elections for ARRL directors were held the general consensus was that the one who was "...a good traffic man" came with the highest qualifications. In the ARRL itself all the activity was under the control of "The Communications Department". To study the organization setup of the ARRL in those days is to quickly recognize that the ARRL was: 1. The Communications Department: 2. QST and anything else. And DXing was handled by the Communications Departments whose main interest was traffic handling. And don't try to argue on this, this is the way it was. Absolutely. Just don't try to argue with history. You will always lose.

In those days the DXCC desk was primarily interested in the authenticity of QSL cards. Then it was not smart to try to slip any bogus counters past the DXCC Desk. They had their "black light" and any card at all that was suspicious brought a hot warning that any future transgressions would be dealt with by banishment to the outer darkness. And with no avenues of appeal available. Slip--and you were gone. Permanently. There was no argument or opportunity for any explanation.

All amateurs were considered absolutely honest. They had to be or they would not be holders of the amateur

license. Normally if you said you were in a country, that was sufficient. Even in countries where amateur radio was prohibited, good DXCC counters could be had from working surreptitious operations. The DXCC criteria clearly said that cards would be honored from countries where "amateur licenses were not issued in the normal manner". When Benito M. was the Italian tyrant, amateur radio was prohibited. But underground stations were operating from the sacred Italian soil and they were accepted for DXCC. After all, DXers were amateurs and amateurs were honest. If they said they were there, of course they were. They were honest. Perhaps traffic operators were the most honest of all.

In short, DXing was different. Don Miller changed things. It was never the same after Don.

Don got out of the service and took off to make life a bit happier for Dxers. He started showing from new countries. Don did his research and compiled a list of places which should qualify for country counters, a good many never have been previously considered as even wild possibilities. Don knew the rules and he exploited them. He even worked from Okino Tori-Shima long before the JA-jubilee year. His operation there was not accepted.

Don showed from places that had been on the nautical charts for years but which sailors had difficulty in finding a second time. Don showed from places where amateur radio was forbidden. Don showed from places that were practically inaccessible in those days. And Don worked twenty or thirty thousand contacts at every stop. Don was DX personified and no one would dare argue with that premise. There naturally were some malcontents. One has to expect these even in the best of times. Some said that Don was charging for his contacts, that if you were high on the DXCC Honor Roll listing, you were expected to pay accordingly. If you did not help with the great work, Don would have difficulty in hearing your signal.

Some DXers were outraged at this. Here they had this big cloud of aluminum in the sky and all the power the mains could handle and sometimes a bit more and Miller could not hear their signal. But if they used the call of the non-DXing XYL or other members of the family, Don could catch it on the first call. Recognize the fact that working Don using an in-family call did not help with the DXCC counters, it only helped drive up the blood pressure. It was a time when more than one big-gun DXer was driven to the wall. It just was not fair.

Don showed from places like Burma, China, Thailand, Heard Island, Spratly, the Laccadives, Navassa, Serrano Bank, St Peter and Paul Rocks and Chagos and Blenheim Reef. Most of these were either prohibited countries or possibly new ones that Don had discovered. He showed from just about every needed country known and a good many places which had not previously been considered as DXCC possibilities. He proved they were. Don even showed from Minerva Reef, Maria Theresa and Baja Nuevo. He was everywhere. And the fact that was hard to dispute was that he often mailed his QSL cards for operations right from the country where he had been operating. Who could dispute such clear evidence of his authenticity.

Some in the ARRL started to ask questions, possibly this coming with prompting from some knowledgeable Dxers. The easy going, laissez faire days of DXing were nearing an end.

For years you could still trace a record of Miller's activities in the ARRL Country List. These could be recognized in the Deleted Countries List by the notation: "Deleted because of lack of supporting documentation". That happened so long ago that the current DXCC Countries list no longer has such notations. The glow of those happy days and the misery that followed are long gone.

In June 1967 Don was on a grand tour of the states. He worked his way across the country telling of his adventures in foreign lands and the excitement encountered in bringing new countries to the needy Deserving. It was a good show. The NCDXC crowd that heard it that June evening enthusiastically cheered Don at every possible occasion. The opportunities were many.

It was a jammed meeting, far more than the usual dining room could accommodate. The late arrivals had to dine in remote splendor out in the main dining room. From there they could hear the background noise from the good times in the regular meeting room, the voices raised in loud and good cheer. But Don Miller did not forget the DXers in the outer darkness, he came out to greet and shake the hand of every single one of them. Don was the great friend of every DXer. Believe that. A real handshaking DXer!

Then the regular meeting room was jammed as everyone crowded in to hear Don speak. He told of his recent adventures, some of his older and more memorable ones and made only a passing reference to the troubles developing with the ARRL. There in downtown Newington they just did not get it. Possibly they never would.

Don told of some of his recent operation from the Indian Ocean and especially from the needed Laccadives. This was a needed one for DXers because India would not allow amateur operations there. Don had a fine slide show, he show the approach by boat to the Laccadives, coconut palms sticking up out of the sea. Then there was a crowd of natives waiting on the coral strand, Don assuring the meeting that this was the headman and chief in this part of the Laccadives and he was waiting to welcome Don to his domain.

There were pictures of Heard Island. One showed the glacier covered mountain, Big Ben, that towered behind the old cable station and the old and decaying buildings of the station itself. Don noted one of the more habitable buildings that was the base for his activity. He was careful to note the feed-through onnections that brought the old Australian cable service into the building. Heard Island was one the ARRL was moving to disallow.

Don also talked of some of the other stops along the Indian Ocean in East Africa. He told of arriving at one back-water shipping port in a small country to learn that the elder son and heir of the ruler was seriously ill with an arm infection at the inland capital. Don told of immediately gathering his doctor's satchel and traveling through the jungle and across hardly charted mountains all night long, he arrived at the bedside of the sick youngster at dawn. He immediately applied his wide medical knowledge and pulled the youngster through what had promised to be a fatal illness. It was a touching story.

Amateur radio had not been permitted in this backward country but now, as Don told it, the ruler was so grateful for the saving of the favorite son that he was going to allow Don to operate there any time he wished and that there would be steps taken to lift the ban on amateur radio operations in that country.

Unfortunately, because of the delicate nature of the matter, it was neither feasible nor possible to tell the name of the country at the NCDXC meeting. But as soon as the word was received, Don would be on the way to the new one and the NCDXC would certainly be the first among equals to know. Absolutely.

It was a joyful meeting. Don was cheered and the ARRL condemned. Taking firm action in the Don Miller matter the club had previously adopted unanimously, six ayes and no nays, at a regular meeting a formal resolution advising the ARRL that their actions in suspending credit for some of Miller's operations was premature. That resolution has never been rescinded.

At the end of the meeting a basket was passed around for voluntary contributions to the great cause. The basket was enthusiastically filled with currency. Many were ready to put their money where their trust was. In Don Miller.

Don went east from this June meeting. He had filed a law suit against the ARRL asking for damages for their actions. Actually one of the NCDXC club members, a prominent bay area lawyer, was hired by the ARRL in the team to handle their side of the case.

With all the uproar about some of Miller's operations being disallowed, Don announced a Caribbean tour he was

setting forth on. This included a stop at Navassa and some other promised needed ones. The hint was that St Peter and Paul Rocks might be visited.

Navassa was controlled by the U.S. Coast Guard. You needed their permission to land on the island. Don Miller did not get this okay but went to Navassa anyhow. The ARRL said the operation would not be accepted. Then Don moved onto Serrano Bank and Baja Nuevo. He operated from these needed ones. Then he disappeared for some weeks. No word at all.

Suddenly, there he was. Operating from St Peter and Paul Rocks in the Atlantic east of Brazil. This turned out to be the Achilles Heel of the Miller Story.

Things in the lawsuit got to the deposition stage. That was where the whole thing blew up. It blew up so hard and loud that some of the DXers, the more trusting and faithful ones, never recovered fully their hearing nor their faith in the goodness of mankind. If Don Miller was flawed, the whole world was flawed. Even one major amateur magazine was so shaken that the word was given to never mention that name again in the columns of that publication. The Don Miller photo had been turned to their editorial wall. It probably is still there.

In the deposition stage and under oath, Miller's partner on the trip admitted that they had never been on St Peter and Paul Rocks but actually operated on a boat off the coast of Venezuela and some 1800 miles west of the supposed operation. The legal case blew up.

Don Miller had also been giving depositions when his partner spilled the beans. With this development the taking of the sworn statements was put on hold, some signs that a willingness to settle the whole thing started to show. After some discussion between the lawyers involved, an agreement was signed and the matter more or less was ended.

In some aspects the matter has never ended. The DXing you practice today is largely directed and controlled by ARRL actions taken after the ending of the lawsuit. The good old days of believing in the goodness of man and especially the nobleness and honesty of DXers came to an end. The ARRL issued changes which initially were so strict that foreign amateur associations protested them most loudly. Eventually things eased up a bit but the basic rule that came forth is that you must be ready to prove some things in an operation, things such as licenses, permission to operate and proof that you were there.

Years ago I got the definitive word right out of the mouth of Bob White, W1CW, who was then running the ARRL DXCC Desk. An effort was ready to go out and put the Spratlys on the air but there was some nagging question on the call sign. They wanted to sign 1S1A. A phone call came from Hong Kong asking if that point could be clarified and would the call 1S1A be accepted? In turn a phone call was made to Bob White in downtown Newington who phrased his reply so succinctly that there could be no doubt as to his meanings or wishes. "I don't give a damn what call they sign", Bob roared into the telephone, "just as long as they can prove that they were there!"

Who could argue with such clarity?

Inevitably steps were taken to straighten out what obviously had been a misuse of trust. The DX Advisory Committee was the first of several such advisory committees authorized to help the ARRL Board of Directors better understand some of the more exotic practices within amateur radio. Other Advisory Committees followed. The Don Miller matter had found the Board in many instances just unable to comprehend what was going on. Something was but it was not easily understood by a non-DXer. Only a few of the board in those days had any understanding of DXing, most of them were lost when the nuances of the great undertakings were explored. Completely lost. The Advisory Committees were the road to understanding if not to better decision making.

Don Miller persisted for awhile but the bloom was off. There were a number of his operations later disallowed, these because of the lack of supporting evidence. In some respects these were ex post facto demands, the original presentations had been accepted for DXCC credits. Don could not or would not prove the operations had taken place, the ARRL could not prove they were not. Supporting documentation was not forthcoming, the questioned countries were dropped from accreditation.

Some will even yet ask why the Miller caper happened. It happened because of the internal handling within the ARRL of what was then considered a minor activity. In retrospect, many of the more ancient DXers will speak guardedly among themselves of other DX operations which, when carefully reviewed in later years, raised some very strong questions. That time is now long gone but back at the height of the Miller problem there was some talk that the ARRL was concerned that any legal hearings might bring some of the then long gone operations back out into daylight for scrutiny. It appears that the point would be raised that if such operations in the past had been accepted, why were Millers questioned when these others had not been.

In short, it actually was a situation that had developed over the long years. Don Miller brought it to perfection. He had the skills and the willingness to travel. He did his home work. Unfortunately he started cutting corners. One who accompanied Don on some of his later trips even said that he got lazy. Even when a legitimate operation could have been mounted with no great effort, it was felt that the happy DXers back home would never know the difference in that the operation was not from where it was claimed, so why go to all the trouble. Often he did not.

Don Miller should be remembered for the big changes that were wrought within DXing by his activity. He made it what it had never been before and possibly has not been since. It was perhaps an early full time effort. A "World Propagation Study" it was called. It did happen once, it is doubtful if something like this could ever happen again.

Some will still always be ready to denounce Don Miller yet some of the castigators probably have QSLs from him which gave them new DXCC counters and new countries. Others denounced Miller because they felt then, and still do, that their trust in him was betrayed. Even today over a quarter century some cannot find a good word to say about him. Yet others will still remember him as superb operator who could figure out places that would count for new countries. There are plusses and minuses all up and down the line.

But that night at the NCDXC meeting at the Fork and Cork there was little dissent or little disbelief shown. Perhaps the only word whispered aside was: "With all those photos of the Laccadives and Heard Island, how come none of them show Don Miller in the picture?" A good question.

Some time when the times are slow and someone talks about the Miller years, ask what operations actually were nailed by the ARRL as frauds. It may be surprising even yet to some but it does seem that the St Peter and Paul Rocks was the only one. The other Miller efforts that were deleted were on the basis that the requested supporting documentation had not been supplied.

In later years a lot of things went wrong for Don Miller but that in itself is another story. For some years he was the brightest star in the DXing firmament. He blazed out along the way.

After twenty five years it may be well to remember what happened, how one can trust and lose and how one of DXing top operators fell from the pinnacle.

And above all else, remember that DX as you know it today has a lot of it's earmarks and parameters directly traceable to Don Miller and what he did.....and what he claimed he did but did not.

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