

YASME II to Aves Island

BY DANNY WEIL,* VP2VB, YV6AB

THE suggestion that I go to Aves Island and operate wasn't greeted with very much enthusiasm when I found out a few things about the island.

Even the fact that I would be accompanied by three other hams (Jules, KP4AIO, Julio, YV3BS, and Falke, YV5GO, were my companions and assistants both on the voyage and operations ashore) made little difference in my attitude. It was also brought to my attention, forcibly, that this was the hurricane season (July to October) . . . well!

I went over and visited retired Air Force Colonel Henry, KV4BZ, who lives aboard his converted sub-chaser at Yacht Haven, St. Thomas, and who has sailed extensively in these waters. I listened to his opinions and we looked at the charts. At first he had difficulty finding a chart with Aves on it but finally he found a large one with an inset of Aves. I felt even worse about the deal!

I have had the job of finding tiny islands, but never anything like this. It is 1500 feet long and 150 feet wide, maybe. Its height was a moot point, but somehow I couldn't get the colonel to raise it much more than six feet above sea level.

The colonel had been to Aves the year before. He had been attracted by a column of smoke and, upon going ashore, discovered two natives and a white man who had been there 42 days and who were almost dead. Apparently a fishing schooner had set them ashore for turtle hunting, a gale had come up and the schooner had to get out fast. The schooner either got sunk or just forgot about the men — no one seems to know — but that was the last the men saw of it. The poor blighters were on the last of their water and

must have had a heck of a time with nothing to keep them company other than birds, turtles and crabs. No water is available on Aves nor are there any trees.

Dick, KV4AA, had spent several days constructing a cabinet that would house the IIT-32, IIT-33 and SX-101 so that it was completely self-contained and could be bolted to a prepared spot on *Yasme* and then unbolted and taken ashore. It was built like a battleship, and weighed like one too, but we both knew it would stand all the bashing I could give it without falling apart and so was good protection for the equipment.

Food was another problem. I have only had myself to cater for in the past, and to please three others was a problem. After all, maybe they wouldn't like my homemade bread which needed a hacksaw to cut it, and perhaps canned Spam with a fine rich kerosene flavor wouldn't be to their taste. Anyway, with the aid of Dick's NYI, I finally got a load of chow which should have satisfied anyone.

Stowing it was the next problem. Every cupboard was full of hardware, etc., but as eggs and bread weather none too well on deck, I had to move my ropes and wire to other places. We had found a refrigerator to stick aboard and that helped considerably. At least, we did have fresh meat daily and the butter was in one piece instead of being a gooey mess. A supply of coles filled the refrigerator to capacity.

I was a bit worried about water. My tank only holds 30 gallons, so a general round-up was made here for spare bottles to augment the supply. My main tank also is a little rusty inside and every cup of water is flavored with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of rust. I didn't mind it, but the other guys complained — some people are never satisfied!

KV4BZ had fixed me up with all the charts required for the trip. Many were never used, but I

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thought it might be a good idea to have others in the event of my missing the island altogether which, incidentally, I thought I would.

Seemed to me we had everything except good weather, but I'm getting so used to bad weather now that to have a really fine day for sailing would startle me! The usual customs and immigration formalities being taken care of we shoved off from St. Thomas at 3 P.M. on July 3.

I had a final check on all the gear as we stooged around in St. Thomas harbor. Two Onan generators, two SX-101, two HT-32, HT33, stacks of tubes etc. and countless feet of wire of assorted sizes. Everything seemed to be there and I chased the lads around to make sure they had lashed everything down. They just didn't know what was coming, and neither did I!

Clearing the harbor, I laid course for St. Croix, forty miles to the south. Severe cross seas and a 30-knot beam wind made the trip to St. Croix fast and rough.

Fredericksted, St. Croix, was flat calm and very quiet when we arrived at midnight. A soft glow came from the lights ashore and, apart from the rattle of the anchor chain as we dropped the hook, nothing broke the silence. We just couldn't believe that only 15 minutes ago we had been in ten-foot seas with a howling wind and all their attendant discomforts.

Early the next morning (I guess it must have been around 7 A.M.) I stuck my neck out and looked around. As per the night before, everything was serene and calm and I really thought we should have a pleasant voyage.

The morning dawned dry but windy with seas breaking over the boat and giving us our usual ducking via the leaks in the hatches. Somehow we managed to keep the rigs dry. At 8 A.M. with a fairly clear sky Jules stood by while I took repeated shots of the sun. Further sights taken at 10 A.M. gave me a position 12 miles off course. A final check at noon would finalize my latitude.

Old Sol climbed to his highest perch and then climbed down again but I grabbed his angle before the clouds finally crowded in. I rushed below and within ten minutes had our first set of sights worked out. Not satisfied with this, I worked out another, and yet another. All of them tallied within a half mile and gave us an exact position. I told the lads my new course, set it and then said, with tongue in cheek, "Aves will come up, dead ahead, two hours from now."

The first hour went by with maddening slowness and the log read five miles more. Aves should be visible now, only four miles off, but it wasn't. I lugged out the binoculars and strained my eyes but no Aves. Each of the boys had grouped themselves by the bow and on the cabin roof but still no Aves.

There was nothing to do now but to climb the mast and make absolutely sure. It had to be there!

At first I wasn't sure. I called down to the lads "Either that is Aves dead ahead or I'm crazy." It *was* Aves. All that could be seen was a faint

This is the main operating position aboard the *Yasme II*, showing the equipment cabinet which is unbolted and

With breakfast out of the way, we spent a while picking up assorted bits of gear, clothing, etc. which had fallen in odd spots during our short passage. Never did I realize that so many things could hide in so many obscure places. By 10 A.M. we were underway, out into a half-gale and heavy seas.

Right through the day and night *Yasme* plunged on, the auto pilot holding her to a course which none of us could have maintained for any length of time. Sea sickness had taken its toll from each and everyone of us and, to put it nicely, we all wished the boat would sink and put us out of our misery. Julio and Falke slept through the worst of it. Boy! they must have had cast-iron stomachs!

Another day dawned and we checked the log trailing astern. The sun was hidden by heavy overcast while we listened to our weather net friends, at 7 A.M., telling us the weather was wonderful. 10 A.M. came along, as usual, and with it a hazy sun poked its way through the murk to shine on 20-foot seas. Somehow I wedged myself on the cabin top and took sights. Jules stayed in the shelter of the doghouse, noting down times and angles as I called them out. I guess I must have taken about eight sights before the sun decided to quit again. I knew these sights would only give me a position line but even that would be welcome. I never did get any sights at noon but, with those already taken, I figured Aves was still about 70 miles away.

After a night's close watch on the depth finder

taken ashore at most stops. The operator sits on the diesel engine housing.





Jules, KP4AIO, knocks off the contacts as Danny watches. Canvas shack, Hallicrafters gear in the background, beaucoup sand underfoot.

sandy smudge on the horizon which would appear and disappear as the *Yasmie* rose and fell in the high seas.

With the depth finder flat out we crept in as close as possible to the beach and away went the anchor. Directly the way was off the boat she started to roll. It gradually built up so that the bubble in the inclinometer hit the side of the tube at 45 degrees.

From what we could see of the island it consisted of a low sandy strip with rocks on the lea shore and a steeply sloping sandy beach on the windward. Big breakers crashed over the rocks on the far side, but here on the so-called lea of the island, a cross sea built up as the waves swept around each side of the island and met directly at the point of our anchorage.

There was a native schooner anchored nearby, which had come from St. Lucia on a turtle hunt. It had already been there ten days with little luck, having only nabbed four turtles. The skipper came aboard the *Yasmie* and advised friends in St. Lucia, via VP2LB, of his whereabouts. As it was getting late in the afternoon I decided I would reconnoiter in the morning and prayed for a calm.

moment it is level with the deck and the next second ten feet below it!

The SX-101 and HT-32 were man-handled into the boat but the Onan 1500-watt generator was too much and I decided to use the winch and my dinghy davit to lower it. Directly that thing left the deck and became suspended in mid-air it turned itself from a harmless generator into a 200-pound lethal weapon. Four of us struggled on the heaving deck to control it. With attempts to keep from falling overboard plus trying to avoid being smacked with the swinging generator, or letting it hit the boat, we finally got it into the dinghy. Now came the business of getting it ashore.

Those St. Lucia boys really knew their business though. We waited just outside the line of surf for the opportune moment and then they really bent their oars and went full out for the beach. Within fifteen feet of the shore line two of them jumped out into waist-high water and grabbed the boat, and as the next sea swept in, the rest of the crew jumped out and manhandled the boat up on the beach using each successive surf to assist them.

I helped carry the gear above the water line and we all shoved off back to the boat for the next load. Within three hours we had all the gear ashore except the HT-33 amplifier and I decided that the risk involved was too much to even attempt lowering it over the side let alone getting it ashore. Hovering in the back of my mind was the thought that all this gear eventually would have to be brought back to the *Yasmie* without their help. I was glad of my decision later.

Up to this point I have made little mention of the island other than its general appearance

At 7 A.M. we were all up and put the dinghy over the side. Ignoring the three fenders I had put there, it immediately scored the topside paint and started bashing itself to pieces. I managed to jump into it and shove it clear of *Yasme*. I then rowed over to the schooner and, with the help of three of its crew, managed to get aboard without wrecking the dinghy or drowning myself.

The schooner's skipper was a typical Frenchman and told me of the hazards of the place. I didn't need much convincing. He said that the weather had been bad all the time and it was with great difficulty that he had been able to get his furtles aboard, even with six strong men to haul his boat. It was then that I realized it wasn't going to be an easy matter to get our equipment ashore without losing or damaging it.

I then invited him over to the *Yasme* and after a cold beer (several, in fact) he offered to help us with the gear using his own dinghy and crew.

I won't go into details about the agonies of extracting the equipment from the interior of the *Yasme* and getting it on deck. Nor the trouble of lowering it over the side into his boat. Can anyone imagine loading stuff in a dinghy when at one

of the island other than the general appearance physically. The first thing that struck us were the birds. Never in my life have I seen so many birds in one place. The island was literally blanketed with them and one had to step carefully to avoid either stepping on the grown birds, the chicks or the eggs.

As we moved our equipment to a reasonably clear spot, the birds would scare into the air screaming vengeance, and one would have to wave his arms to prevent them from attacking. We could stand over one of the birds, as it protected its eggs, and it would do nothing but scream and plunge its sharp long beak at us.

Jules set up the couple of pup-tents he had brought along and while they gave good protection from the rain and wind they were hardly suitable for holding all the rigs and still give room to operate. However we were mighty anxious to put YV6AA/YV6AB on the air and very soon we had the HT-32 ready to go.

During the 1958 Aves expedition a new 40-foot metal mast had been erected with a large metal Venezuelan flag mounted at its peak. This was to be our antenna mast. Aboard we had a selec-

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tion of steel poles and plenty of guy wires but as one could stand here with a six foot pole, lean on it, and sink it right down into the guano without any undue effort it looked like a hopeless effort to bring our poles ashore and even attempt to guy them. I brought over my spinnaker pole, which is about 30 feet long, and we stuck that in the ground, as a shack-side antenna support, and hoped for the best.

A good ground presented problems. Our grounding rod was six feet long and by standing it on the ground it would almost sink and disappear under its own weight. Finally, as we were only a short distance from the beach, we got a length none of us checked, and with a ground which might, or might not, be good, the Onan was started up and we loaded up the HT-32. Within a few minutes of firing up we worked Dick, KV4AA, on 7245, followed by KP4WN, with good reports.

Later we swung over to 14 and 21 Mc. and found both bands fairly good. After one day, however, conditions worsened with some of the heaviest sunspot activity of this cycle and sometimes we wondered if the rig was actually working.

I tried to organize some sort of schedule for the lads so that each of us would have a fair go at the rig but weather conditions got so bad that I was forced to spend most of my time aboard *Yasme* taking care of her. We were anchored in 20 feet of water and for safety sake I had let out the entire 60 fathoms of anchor chain. To augment this I also put out another anchor with 3 inch rope but the coral soon cut through this rope and left us swinging to a single anchor. Several times I had the engine running to ease the strain on the anchor. On the Sunday evening, prior to our departure, the anchor chain snapped. Luckily, I was aboard at the time.

Our stay was now drawing to a close. Conditions had hardly been 100% but we had covered two week ends and I thought it high time to pull out in case the weather worsened and we were forced to leave the gear ashore. I told Dick that we would get QRT at midnight, Sunday (July 13) and load the gear on board at daybreak Monday morning. At around 9 P.M. Sunday we worked W4SRT, after which, the band packed up completely. Repeated CQs went unanswered and as we were all a little anxious about the weather, which seemed to be closing in fast, we decided to pull the big switch.

The HT-32 and SX-101 each took a separate trip out and we managed to get them aboard. Finally came the Onan which was another kettle of fish, being so heavy. It took all four of us to get that dinghy into deep water with Jules and Julio swimming alongside to keep it steady! Once in the clear, they managed to get it aboard. By this time the seas were building up again but, to make it brief, with a combination of

split timing and lassoing, we got it on the *Yasme's* deck with only slight damage to the paintwork. We all breathed a little easier then and I was grateful for my decision *not* to take the HT-33 ashore earlier.

I then took the dinghy ashore for its last trip, to pick up Falke. As I came in to land a huge roller capsized the whole thing on the beach breaking an oar and the seat. Fortunately the outboard motor escaped damage except for a lifting clip which was snapped off. With Falke aboard, and with one oar, I was lucky to clear the beach and our last and final trip back to *Yasme* was completed without further bother. Once more we set sail. The day passed fitfully and gradually a very unwelcome night fell on us. At least we could not see the threatening clouds and it gave us a false sense of security.

First, out of the black sky, came the lightning. This was no ordinary flash. It struck the water no more than 100 yards from the boat. The discharge gave off an explosion which no half dozen jet bombers, breaking the sound barrier, could imitate. The pungent smell of the charge permeated the boat and I sat there, trembling with fear. How lucky we had been I shall never know. My whip antenna, sticking up over 80 feet from sea level and the long wire, strung between the two masts, were not grounded and, at that time, Jules was in QSO with KV4AA. I shot below and yelled to Jules to shut down the rig pronto . . . maybe next time, if there was a next time, we might not be so lucky. With a full drum of gas, lashed near the base of the mast, a direct hit of lightning could have been quite messy!

Directly after this a rain squall blotted out everything and it became as black as the insides of a whale. The squall died and for a few moments a deathly calm settled around us. The seas had gone mad, peaking up and falling all over themselves. *Yasme* bounced and fell in to the troughs, her two tiny sails useless. The heat became more oppressive and I sat there with Jules sweating with the anticipation of what would come.

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Then it came. First the wind gradually built up and with it the rain. No actual drops were discernible as it came down solid. The wind increased in fury and I scrambled onto the after deck to let the mizzen sail drop. I sent Jules below and had him close the hatch astern. He was too late. The wind had come around to the stern and solid water poured into the after cabin. Finally he got the hatch closed and I threw the auto-pilot out of gear and tried to get *Yasme* around to head into the wind. I didn't dare let her run before this hurricane wind with St. Croix, and its dangerous reefs, only a few miles off.

I had the depth indicator running and I tried hard to keep the boat clear of the shallows never bothering to even look at the compass. The indicator's tiny flash of light wandered around the dial sometimes reading 70 feet and at others only 30 feet.

As quickly as the wind had come, so it left us.

The loom of lights from St. Croix blinked through the slight drizzle of rain and became clearer as the rain stopped. I put *Yasme* back on course and we both looked around for the lighthouse which, only a short time ago, was dead ahead. It had vanished and I suggested to Jules that it might have been put out of commission by the force of the wind. The lights ashore were no guide but the depth indicator showed depths varying from 20 to 40 feet and I knew we were in too close. The soundings on the chart gave me little help until Jules called down to me that he had sighted a white and GREEN flashing light, dead ahead.

I shot up into the cockpit and swung *Yasme* out to sea immediately. We were heading directly into a large fringe of reefs immediately in front of the air beacon light. Somehow we had been blown to the center part of St. Croix and had managed to avoid disaster only by using the depth finder. Checking the chart I found that present sounding tallied with the ones on the chart and that we had been blown 12 miles east of the lighthouse we had been aiming for originally!

I headed *Yasme* due south until we got "no bottom" on the depth recorder. Then, heading west for an hour we again picked up the lighthouse on the SW tip of St. Croix. Hauling up the mizzen sail again, to steady the boat in the rough seas, we slowly plugged around the point into Fredericksted roadstead.

It was then 3:30 A.M. Tuesday morning and I was pooped. I brewed up some coffee and Jules and I sat on the cockpit enjoying a well-earned rest. Julio and Falke had slept through the lot and were completely unaware of our previous troubles!

At 4 A.M., I managed to make rough repair to a broken jib sheet and we hauled up anchor, started the engine and departed on the last leg of our journey, 40 miles to St. Thomas. The 40-mile crossing was uneventful.

To sum up, we worked 2346 stations in 84 countries. All the equipment survived that trip as proved by subsequent activity at VP2VB and VP2KF and is still going strong. Seems as though the gear will outlast me the way I feel now!