

## American Scene

# In the Caribbean: Hams and Goats

*The only possible landing at the island is not a landing in the usual sense of the word but a place where a boat can be held long enough for men to jump on a wire rope ladder that dangles about 40 ft. from a cantilever catwalk. There is constant danger of the boat being broached by the incoming swell, being smashed against the cliff, being caught and crushed under the cliff or being engulfed by the receding backwash.*

—U.S. Coast Guard Warning

That hint of danger had not dissuaded the nine Americans, most of them normally sedentary landlubbers, from boarding the sturdy 48-ft. fishing trawler *Gabriella* in Kingston, Jamaica, and heading into the windswept Caribbean on a stomach-churning 124-mile, 15-hour voyage to U.S.-owned Navassa Island, 30 miles west of Haiti. Unaccountably cheerful through the stormy night, the five-man Jamaican crew and the boat's Kingston owner, Gilbert Thompson ("I couldn't trust the responsibility of this trip to just the crew"), kept the craft on course toward its tiny target: a flat-topped limestone rock merely one mile wide and two miles long, with sheer cliffs plunging to the sea. And as the deck of the *Gabriella* heaved in the 10-ft. waves, so too did many of the Americans.

Why were they spending precious vacation time to live for a week on a hot, deserted pile of boulders and brush? All were amateur radio operators, and each was pursuing the arcane joys of one of that burgeoning hobby's most popular specialties. It is called DXing, meaning long-distance communications. The obsessive goal of diehard DXers is to make at least one contact with each of the 318 "countries" recognized by hams around the world. Under criteria established by the American Radio Relay League, the largest ham organization, Navassa qualifies as one such country because it is more than 225 miles from its governing mainland. But no ham can talk to Navassa unless other amateurs go there to put it on the air. That was the aim of this "DXpedition."

Approaching the island after dawn, the intrepid hams quickly discovered that the Coast Guard's warning had been apt. The wire ladder was there, all right, but the backwash was violent. Transporting gear, including 50 boxes of electronic equipment, three rotatable-beam antennas, two gasoline-powered generators weighing about 150 lbs. each, plus assorted 20-ft.-long steel pipes, bamboo poles, 250-lb. gasoline drums, kegs of drinking water and a week's food supply, looked impossible. Just getting to the

swaying ladder seemed daunting enough.

But the expedition's gruff leader was unfazed. John Ackley (call sign: KP2A) had made a fortune by selling his New Jersey computer firm in 1976, then founded the tax-exempt International DX Foundation to promote worldwide good will by sponsoring such DXpeditions. His foundation had supplied all of the radio gear, while the trip's cost (more than \$10,000) was split among the nine operators. Ackley set off with two crewmen in a 12-ft. dinghy, powered by a 25-h.p. outboard motor. One crewman skillfully maneuvered the tiny craft through the heavy seas to put Ackley at the ladder on the crest of a wave. He scrambled up the

from Peekskill, N.Y., managed to bargain in fractured French. The visitors were from Haiti and would help unload the boat for \$20. The tenderfoot hams were amazed at how their helpers could toss a 75-lb. equipment box on one shoulder and stride barefoot over the sharp rocks to help set up the stations.

By nightfall the hams were on the air, and the strange ritual of DXing began. "This is KP2A-portable KP1," one of the operators said quietly into a microphone. That call signaled the DXpedition's presence on Navassa. Almost immediately occurred what hams call a pile-up. The whole ham world, it seemed, was shouting at Navassa on the same frequency, each



Bob Denniston operating from one of four ham radio sites on Navassa Island

16 suspended steps—and the ladder held.

For the next eight hours, the precarious unloading of the *Gabriella* by slow trips in the pitching dinghy continued, with one wholly unexpected assist. As the hams began setting up the first of four operating sites on a plateau some 100 ft. above the water (but 200 ft. beneath the island's flat top), they heard a warning horn blast from the *Gabriella*, then a shout on the short-range radio: "Two men are climbing the ladder."

Two frail-looking wooden fishing boats had rounded a rocky point, and their seven occupants were coming ashore. Were they Haitians determined to assert their nation's unsupported 124-year-old claim to the island? Perhaps an advance party of pirates known to seize foreign small craft in the area? No. They pointed to the gear, then to the block and tackle hoisting it and finally to themselves. Stu Greene (W2MOE), a lawyer

foreign operator yelling his call letters phonetically. Apart from the roar of the numerous U.S. hams, the voices of Japanese amateurs were particularly prevalent, mingling in a hummingbird cacophony strange to the Western ear.

Each contact lasted fewer than ten seconds. Each was then logged by the hams on Navassa; when they returned to the mainland, they would send a QSL ("I acknowledge your transmission") card to each operator confirming the contact. The goal is to collect as many of these cards as possible. Some 200 enthusiasts have cards from all 318 "countries."

For six days, 24 hours a day, the rapid-fire transmissions continued. The island's plentiful goats, graceful V-winged birds and night-prowling rats must have been startled by the strange sounds breaking their normal silence: generators that putt-putted like suburban lawnmowers; American voices repeating over and over,

"You are five-nine on Navassa"; the clean, clear whistle of skilled code operators giving similar signal reports to the multitude of distant stations. The men worked in shifts up to six hours long, hunched over logs, struggling to get each plaintive call down accurately.

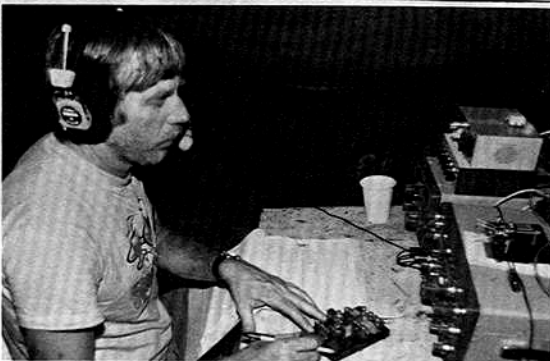
There were moments of giddy camaraderie in the island's intense heat. When the Jamaican crew captured a goat, Ackley stuck a microphone in its face and elicited an obliging *baaa*. A ham in England laughed back.

By week's end 33,552 hams from as far as Australia and from as unlikely a place as Tristan da Cunha, a South Atlantic island, had radioed Navassa. The repeated shouts of "Thanks for the new country" were satisfying. But each operator had a more personal reason for coming to that Godforsaken rock. "It's the only adventure left to me in this hobby," explained Bob Schenck (N200), a telephone-switching specialist from Tuckerton, N.J. Two years ago, Schenck and Ackley went on a DXpedition to Spratly Island, in the South China Sea, and got more adventure than they sought. Their boat was fired on by Vietnamese artillery. "It's an ego thing—a whole lot of people get to know your call," said Jim Dionne (K1MEM), a computer expert from Westwood, Mass. "My life was in a rut," added Terry Baxter (N6CW), an avionics technician from La Mesa, Calif., who has made contact with all but two of the countries. "I told my wife, this is something I've got to do."

**T**he most savvy operator on Navassa was Bob Denniston, 63. A former president of national and international ham organizations, he owns a small hotel on Tortola in the British Virgin Islands and a home in Iowa, and has apt call letters, W0DX. A bearded gent in a pith helmet, Denniston organized two DXpeditions to Clipperton Island, a forbidding rock in the Pacific, 1,800 miles west of the Panama Canal, putting it on the air for the first time in 1954. He went twice in the 1960s to Malpelo Island, 310 miles west of Colombia, initiating the first ham operations there. The mountainside radio sites on Malpelo were pitched at a 45° angle, and one ham survived a fall into the sea only because his life jacket kept his unconscious body afloat. To Denniston, there is nothing like taking charge of a frequency and controlling all those frantic callers. "I love working a pile-up," he says.

Throughout the hams' stay on Navassa, the sea remained surprisingly calm. But when they broke camp and boarded the *Gabriella* once again, the winds howled anew and stomachs turned queasy. "I keep asking myself, why do I do this?" muttered Al Fischer (K8CW) of Mansfield, Ohio. But for the one novice DXer aboard, the trip proved fatal. The goat whose *baaa* was heard round the world was served up as mutton stew.

—By Ed Magnuson (W2UB)



And far into the night ... Operators Terry Baxter, N6CW (above) and John Ackley, KP2A (below) rolling up the contacts at KP1. Other members of the Navassa team responsible for another great IDXF DXpedition included K1MEM, W21JB, WA2MOE, N200, K8CW, W0DX, K800.

