

DX Determination

In 1954 three teenage hams put Navassa Island on the DX map.

J. Robert Eshleman, W4DR

The 1954 FO8AJ Clipperton Island DXpedition stimulated my desire to make a DXpedition of my own. I contacted my DXing pal, Don, W4VZQ, and found out that he had similar thoughts. Carl Shenk, soon to be WN4HBC, soon joined us. The June 1954 issue of *QST* set us off in a much better direction. It carried a notice that the FCC had allocated KC4AA-KC4AZ for Navassa Island and if someone put it on the air it would be considered for the ARRL® countries list.

A great deal of research revealed the following facts about Navassa. It is a pear shaped island with an area of 2 square miles. It is surrounded by 60 foot cliffs and there is no well-protected landing place. No one has lived on the island since 1930 and there is no safe water source. These facts were discouraging but also challenging.

We thought there would be very little red tape in getting the license and permission from the Coast Guard to visit the island. We were wrong. It took three trips to Washington and 2 months to get everything arranged. Our major stumbling block was our ages. Don and I were 19 and Carl was 17. Most of the officials either looked at us with scorn or were just plain amused. Carl and Don had done quite a bit of deep-sea fishing and I had traveled to Turkey and Israel with the Merchant Marines. We didn't feel as inexperienced as everyone thought we were.

The Pieces Fall Into Place

Finally on July 2 we were issued the call sign KC4AB and Coast Guard permission to visit the island. Don and I had to be back by September for college and with the coming hurricane season we decided we needed to leave no later than July 31. We had less than a month to locate a boat and assemble our gear.

Since Santiago, Cuba is a good-sized city and only 125 miles from Navassa it seemed the best place to start. We wrote a letter to Miguel R. Corral Perez, CO8CC, president of the local radio club and asked him if he could find a boat for us. At the same time we wrote to a well-known DXer, Val Lopez Banus, CO2BL, in Havana asking for help in clearing Cuban customs.



This photo, taken from the loading platform, shows the 60 foot cliffs surrounding Navassa Island.

This photo shows the base of the Navassa Lighthouse. It is about 250 feet ASL and about a mile from the "gas house" where KC4AB was located.

On July 19 we received a letter from Miguel, CO8CC, informing us that his neighbor, Jose Bosch Lamarque, president of the Bacardi Rum Company, would supply us with his 50 foot yacht *Hatuey* and crew free of charge. National Radio agreed to loan us a new NC-183D receiver and we would use Don's Harvey Wells TBS-50D transmitter because it was light weight and simple to operate. For antennas we had a 14 Mc ground plane, for 7 and 21 Mc we had dipoles and for 3.5 Mc we had 500 feet of #18 copperweld wire.

On Saturday, July 31 we began to pack. Thirty-one hours later we arrived in Miami and were met by Buck, W4RBQ. The next

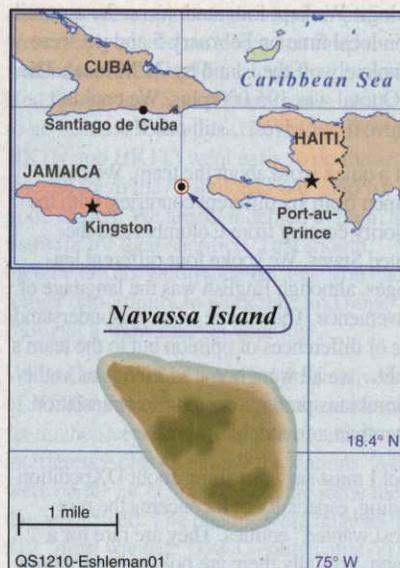
evening we sailed for Havana on the *SS Florida*. The next morning, August 3, we were met at the pier by Val, CO2BL. In spite of Val's planning the customs took our gear and would not release it that day. The next morning Val succeeded in getting our gear out of customs. We drove half way across the island and spent the next night as guests of Conrado Gonzalez Fraile, CO7KK, in Camaguey.

Mounting Delays

On Thursday, August 5 we arrived at Santiago de Cuba expecting to sail within the next day or two. Unfortunately, Senior Bosch wanted his yacht compasses checked and it would be Tuesday until that could be done. We found rooms at a local boarding house.

On Tuesday, August 10 we learned that we could not leave for two more days due to a new law that required the *Hatuey's* crew to have their passports validated. The crew would dock in Haiti while we operated for 4 days. The passports came through late Friday evening and all that remained was to get the Haitian consulate to stamp them, but nothing could persuade the consulate official to stamp the passports until Monday. During these delays, which were now over a week, we kept nightly schedules with our home from Miguel's, CO8CC, station and kept the DX world informed of our setbacks.

By this time we were in trouble. Our money was running out and we all got sick from eating some bad fish. To make matters worse the KC4AA group sent us a message that the ladder used to scale the cliff had been damaged by a storm and until it was repaired no one could get on the island. We correctly



Navassa Island lies south of Cuba between Jamaica and Haiti.

reasoned that this message was false to enable them to beat us to Navassa.

Casting Off

On Monday August 16 (11 days after our planned departure) we were ready to leave. At 6 PM we told our families we were going to sail. Since the sea is calmest at night the plan was to leave at 9 PM and arrive at dawn. The sea was far too rough for us to get any sleep, which we needed badly. In a short time we sighted Navassa. As we drew near the island we could see the waves break against the cliffs sending up spray 30 feet or more. It was a beautiful sight but looked dangerous.

As we sailed around the west end of the island the seas became noticeably calmer. At 7:30 AM we sailed into Lulu Bay. It was just as the Coast Guard had described it, a buoy about 150 feet from the cliffs and a chain ladder hanging from a cantilevered platform in the cliff opposite the buoy. The captain tied up to the buoy and a crewmember rowed the lifeboat to the ladder and fastened a rope from the *Hatuey* to the platform at the top of the ladder. Carl was the first one to reach the platform, followed by me and then Don.

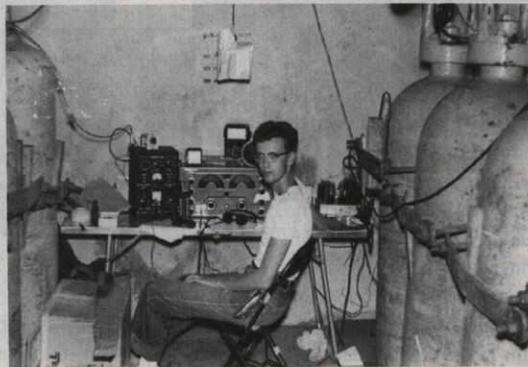
We immediately began to haul our ton of gear and supplies to the platform by hand. Since the captain and crew spoke only Spanish it was difficult for us to communicate and as a result they left the very heaviest item — the generator — till last. By this time our gloveless hands were raw and we were exhausted. As the generator neared the platform it caught in the ladder. While Carl and I held the line with our remaining strength Don crawled down the ladder and freed the generator and we safely landed it on the platform. A close call, since losing the generator would have ended the operation. We started the generator to make sure it would run and then waved to the *Hatuey* as it departed to Haiti.

Getting on the Air

After a quick snack and some warm water we began hauling our gear to a small well shaded cement building about 75 yards from the landing. Our original plan was to go to the top of the island where we would have a clear shot in all directions, but considering the rough terrain, the distance and with only 4 days to operate, we decided to settle on this location near the landing. This meant we would not have a clear shot to the East Coast or Europe.

Here is Bob, W4DR, at the base of the 20 meter ground plane. >

▼ Don, W4VZQ, in the Navassa shack. On the left is the Harvey Wells transmitter next to the National receiver. The bottled gas on the right powers the Navassa light.



This is the KC4AB QSL card that was sent to confirm Navassa Island contacts. Note the Bacardi logo; Jose Bosch Lamarque, president of the Bacardi Rum Company supplied his private yacht for the DXpedition.

At 10:55 EST we were ready to go. Don won the right to make the first contact by a coin flip and he gave a short CQ on 14,100 kc. The first contact was KV4AA followed by KV4BB. W5RX was the first USA. At noon we worked our Cuban friends in Santiago on 40 phone to assure them that we were okay. On 20 meter phone our first contact was with W9NDA followed by W4ANE, KV4BB, W5MKD and CN8MM. We stayed on 20 meters until the band went dead at 22:05 EST. Then we switched to 40, but it was dead as well so we decided to get some much-needed sleep.

I got up at 5:30 Wednesday morning and put the rig on 40 meter CW. VE3DTN was the first and then W2QHH, KP4WD and W4LVV. At 6:30 I switched to 20 and worked my home station, W4QCW. It was a real thrill to hear my own signal. While I operated, Don and Carl put up an 80 meter long wire. During the wee hours Thursday morning we put the rig on 80 meter CW. First in line were KV4AA then W2QHH, W1ZL, W8PQQ and VE1ZZ. Activity was slow all day Thursday but a bright spot was that Carl made his first ever contact with WN4GMR on 40 CW.

While one of us would operate the other two would explore the island. The only wildlife we saw were many goats, hundreds of birds and some land crabs. During the day we made some improvements on our 80 meter antenna for the last night of operation. During a 30 minute period on 80 we worked W0JDV, W4BRB, ZL1BY, W4KWY and W4QDC/4. The next morning we made a contact with Don's station, W4VZQ on 20 phone. Because

conditions were good we had to cut it short.

At 2 PM the *Hatuey* returned and we began to pack. We packed and loaded everything except the essentials to keep the station on the air. At 17:32 I pulled the switch after a contact with W1WK. The first post-war Navassa operation was on the history books and a new DXCC country was born. Four days later we were home to the great relief of six parents. Our final tally was 1357 contacts of which 344 were on AM.

Photos courtesy of J. Robert Eshleman, W4DR.

J. Robert Eshleman, W4DR, an ARRL Life Member, was first licensed as W4QCW in 1950 at age 14. He soon upgraded to Advanced and currently holds an Extra Class license. In 1954 Robert earned DXCC and also participated in the KC4AB DXpedition. In 1969 he received the #1 5BDXCC award and in 2001 the Clinton B. DeSoto Challenge Cup. Robert was elected to the *CQ Magazine* DX Hall of Fame and participated in the YK9A DXpedition to Syria. When not on the air, he is a Professor of General Dentistry at Virginia Commonwealth University. His spouse, Rosalie, N4CFL, and son Curtis, KK4HJ, have both followed in his ham radio footsteps. Robert can be reached at 1818 Manakintown Ferry Rd, Midlothian, VA 23113-9301, w4dr@arrl.net.

