

DX Stories by Paul M. Dunphy, VE1DX

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How Did Don Miller Do It--And Why DXers Believe Him?

By Hugh Cassidy, WA6AUD

For a quick and obtuse answer, and if you were born since 1945, take a look at all the TV coverage being given these months to the landing in Normandy and the breakout at St. Lo on the Cotentin Peninsula. If you are a late comer and can understand all of that, the strategies, the battles, the theaters of war activity and possibly even where U.S. troops were all around the world with four or more major wars raging at the same time, if you can understand all of those things that happened just fifty years back, you are well on the way to understanding how Miller deluded DXers. Truthfully, it has always been that way. Only the smart ones who have been burned really understand. Some might want to forget, others never will. It was a complex web that Miller wove and there were enough elements of truth in his assertions to give credence to his claims. DXers grasped what they could comprehend and wanted to accept, they ignored the sometimes troubling questions they did not want to or could not understand. The doubt came with late arriving hindsight. Don drew DXers who believed in him like flowers draw bees. They liked Don and they liked what he was doing. And it might be said, with little chance of dispute, that most anyone who was a DXer back then would have quickly joined the chorus cheering Don. Have no doubt on that point? DXers want to believe. Maybe they still should.

The University of British Columbia a decade back published a book titled: "Lost Islands". It was written by Henry Stommel, an Oceanographer and Senior Scientist at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts. It short, an expert whose words you should listen to when he speaks. Dr Stoemmel lists a number of "islands" still carried on charts many of which would be new countries if just someone could find them. Maybe some day some one will.

We are nearing the end of the Twentieth Century. Most of us will tend to believe that if everything has not already been learned by now, someone will soon undoubtedly be close to announcing the final word, or close to the final word, on most any matter, on any question or any great problem. One's intellect might be hard pressed to believe that there might yet still be undiscovered lands. But are you sure?

Satellites have answered many questions about possible islands lost over the years, some questions but not all. When Don Miller was operating from Maria Theresa Reef, south of Tahiti, that place was listed on the National Geographic maps, possibly it still is. It still was for some years after the Miller affair. Often in presenting an argument for a new country, the National Geographic maps were cited as both a good authority as well as a means to determine if the island met the DXCC criteria for distance. Not too many years back this argument was used in seeking country status for the Pribilof Islands.

A nautical chart of the Pacific Ocean issued by the W. Faden Company, Oceanographers to the King, (George III), in 1817 lists Maria Theresa. About a hundred and fifty years later when Don Miller said he operated there it was still carried on nautical charts. Sometimes with the "Position Doubtful" disclaimer, sometimes without.

Don Miller had a picture of himself setting up to operate on Maria Theresa. He was standing on a coral reef, gear under his arms and with the surf up to his knees. Don said that he used a card table on which to mount his gear and could not leave his chair for fear of it being swept away.

Some time after the Maria Theresa operation, and after it had been accepted for DXCC credit, some quibblers started whispering that the ocean was some thousand fathoms or so deep at the point where Maria Theresa is listed on the charts. Actually this bit of whispering may not have been totally correct.

Mariners over the years have had to cope with navigating in oceans where islands were reported, or in some instances, not reported. Often a listed island would be judged non-existing and taken off the nautical charts. Maria Theresa was erased in 1875 by one oceanographer, others put it back on. The Hydrographic Office chart #2683 issued in 1978 has Maria Theresa listed. It also showing numerous submerged dangers within a semicircle extending two hundred miles north of the island.

In 1983 the Hydrographic Office moved Maria Theresa from 151.13 degrees west to 136.39 degrees west. This some fifteen years after the ARRL disallowed the operation.

On the same Chart 2893 was once listed the Haymet Rocks at approximately 160 degrees West, 26 degrees South. There must have been something there, the original report in 1863 told of two islands, or rocks about a quarter mile apart, and deep water between them. The vessel 'Will Watch' tried to sail between the rocks and found that it was not deep at all. The vessel struck bottom near the northern rock and lost its false keel. No one seems to have seen the rocks since and they are still carried on a number of charts.

In short, if you were to have to pass on the validity of claims for operations from such islands, how could you have any doubt when there are so many long enduring records of their existence, Maria Theresa included. If someone said he operated from Haymet, how could you doubt its existence after a ship ran aground there. And it is still shown on some nautical charts.

On Maria Theresa there are always some side stories to tell. At the time of the depositions on the civil suit that Don Miller had filed against the ARRL, almost as though it was planned and it was not, one national amateur magazine came out with its monthly edition with the cover picture of Don Miller standing awash on what he claimed to be Maria Theresa with his transmitter under his arm. The whole dispute had been blown wide open by the St Peter and Paul Rocks caper and the magazine, which had stoutly defended Miller in its pages, believed, was caught and skewered. Very embarrassing.

In the St Peter and Paul Rocks dispute, Miller submitted a photo to prove that he had been there. It showed Don and the other operator standing in front of a tall rock. Miller said very emphatically that it was the true blue St P&P Rocks and the photo proved it.

The ARRL submitted the photo to a geologist. He studied it and said that the formation shown in the photo did not seem to be typical of the geology of St Peter and Paul Rocks. In short, a bit of doubt existed about the photo. But who was to prove the authenticity of the photo, the ARRL or Don Miller? On whom did the burden of proof lie?

It might be again noted that at the time of the Don Miller matter DXing was going through a change. It did not come easily nor freely, it came solely from trying to cope with Don Millers claims and, possibly, a realization that in other years there had been accepted countries for which inadequate proof of operation had been submitted.

From a willingness to accept what might be a credible story, the ARRL was moving to a position where the DXer bore the burden of proof on his being where he claimed. And his proof had better be good. Down the long years since the Miller matter, DXers seeking credit had best come prepared with solid evidence of they being where they claimed to have operated. Passport, visas, ship log, boat charter, hotel bills, airline or other travel tickets, the more the better.

A few years later when Martti Laine was able to operate briefly in Albania before the local authorities cancelled his permit, their certification photo was taken right in front of the local center of government. There was Martti and friends, there was the plaque with the title and location of the municipal agency on the building. Very good proof it was.

After the collapse of his lawsuit and the sworn testimony from the other operator on the St P&P effort that Don Miller and he had not operated at all from St Peter and Paul Rocks, Don did not seek anonymity by fleeing to the wilderness for solitude and soul searching. Instead he moved to Southern California and returned to his medical profession. He would come to the Fresno gatherings and always drew a crowd.

A local story to end things. John Steventon, W6CLS, long a club silent key but back in the Sixties a supporter of Don Miller both vocally and financially. W6CLS was a hard charging business man, and among other things, he had the Ham Radio Outlet when it was just HRO and a lineal descendant of AMRAD of years back. John was strong both in his opinions and on his air. When John called a station, they heard him. Believe that. Definitely he was strong in opinions and strong in signal.

John told once of the time at the Fresno Meeting when the chairman of the gathering from the rostrum had greeted Don Miller with some not too subtle remarks about Maria Theresa. Don was offended at the implications.

John said that at 6:00 AM the next morning Don Miller was pounding on his hotel room's door wanting to talk to him. Don protested to W6CLS that he had been maligned and that he was one hundred percent honest in his claims, that he had operated from Maria Theresa and was not being treated fairly. W6CLS said that Don Miller was so persistent in his own defense and so convincing that "...I actually started to believe him. Maybe he had been there".

Then Miller blew things again. "I was there, John", he protested, "and I operated there. As we approached the reef it came up out of the ocean and we landed and operated. And after we had finished and were leaving, we looked back and saw the island sinking back into the sea. And that positively was the way it was. Absolutely!"

That did it.

One who has never been far at sea in a small boat may not be able to understand how limited visibility is from close to the water. The horizon is usually only three miles or so off. In recent times and definitely within the memory of a good many club members something to prove this point happened with the first Kingman Reef effort, the one that made it a new country. It is not easy to locate a low lying island and the closer one's vessel deck is to the water, the harder the task.

Looking at a map it would seem that it would be a simple thing to leave Palmyra Island and head for Kingman Reef. All you have to do is to aim in the general direction and you got it. But it might not work out that way. Kingman is a low lying island.

That Saturday when the new country DXpedition left Palmyra and headed for Kingman was a time for the home bodies to sit and listen anxiously at their rigs. The DXpedition could not find Kingman, this even with one of the crew out of an university where he taught navigation. They finally had to run a search pattern. They finally found Kingman, thank goodness. It was not easily done.

There are even today some islands still carried on nautical charts which have not been seen for years. Some are misplaced, Bouvet originally was placed some hundred of miles east of its present position. First discovered in

1739, it was not reported again until 1808. As it was far from the reported position of the first Bouvet discovery, this 1808 sighting was given the name of Lindsay Island. It was not until 1898 that it was determined that Lindsay and Bouvet were the same island, but where was that Thompson Island that had been reported in that area during the years of search for Bouvet?

Thompson Island had been sketched in 1825 from a ship searching the area and the sketch does not match the outline of Bouvet. A tall volcanic cone showed that it definitely was an volcanic island. They are still keeping an eye out for it. Hopefully.

It has been speculated that the island blew up in an eruption around 1893-1896. It was still being shown on the U. S. Defense Agency's chart of Antarctica revised April 19, 1965. Thus there would be implicit support for any assertion that islands do come rise up suddenly out of the sea, there is also good support that islands in some parts of the world can disappear in a volcanic explosion or even seismic happenings.

A South African hydrographic survey reported as not finding any submerged shoal in the reported position of Thompson Island. But a climatologist, H.H.Lamb, stood up to point that the temperature records at Puntas Arenas does show a large dip in temperature about the indicated time of Thompson's departure. Thus Thompson Island was reliably reported, a sketch was made of the island and the island has disappeared. It was not the first such instance. Could Don Miller have really been at Maria Theresa and told things as they then happened? The ARRL finally did not drop Maria Theresa from the DXCC country list because they were able to disprove Miller's claim of operating there, it was deleted because he failed to supply additional documentation requested some time after it had been certified for DXCC credit.

All of this to show that things are not always neat and tidy and easily understood. Maria Theresa is in an area long noted for islands rising out of and dipping back into the sea. The report of submerged dangers north of the Maria Theresa position was put on the 1978 edition of the nautical chart for the area. In short, even the experts are not positive on this one. They do suspect that it is not there, they are definitely not ready to stake the farm to support their guarded beliefs.

Thus, in other times and other places the problem of determining whether some places claimed for DXCC credit even existed was a trying task. With various citations of solid supporting evidence, this including updated Hydrographic Office charts, it was then and still is, to a large extent, a problem. Keep in mind that Don Miller did his research. Also keep in mind that those determining the validity of a claim for a new country had to depend on published authorities, the National Geographic Society, the U.S.Hydrographic Office to name a few. A determination would have to accept such documentation, there was little other available.

Actually it was simpler back in those golden years when all DXers were considered gentlemen and honest beyond question. Why that was ever changed is a hard thing to understand or accept.

Enough. Hindsight is always better at understanding things and getting them right. One should always keep that in mind. And to really understand some of the claims for DX counters made by Don Miller and possibly a few others some decades back, one may need long memories to look back, think things out in the light of latter day knowledge, and, perhaps, to start to wonder. Wonder what really might have been the truth of some of the reported operations back then and if the report and claims given were made up of the whole truth. Was it in some cases actually as claimed, in others maybe not always as claimed, believed or reported. And even then one should not be too sure one way or another. Don Miller had a lot of talents, one obvious one was a strong tone of verisimilitude in telling of his exploits and adventures. He could be convincing. He worked hard at it. Some may think that he was not the first, he definitely was the end of the easy going approach that existed for many years.

One of the Old Timer's sayings of long ago often has been used to neatly cap the DXer's dilemma in placing their

trust and beliefs in a claimed operation. The Old Timer said: "Work 'em now, worry later". Years back it was said that when the Old Timer spoke it was like his words were graved in stone. It is easy to understand why.

DXing is for the strong. Strong and believing. Always be a believer! A strong believer! And remember Don Miller as a top operator who did bring a lot of new and fine DX and new countries. If only things had turned out differently.

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