

ARRL CW DX Contest 2003 from Fernando de Noronha

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It is hard to believe that I have been doing these radio things for more than 50 years. I was originally licensed in high school in 1952 as WN9VBV, and soon thereafter dropped the “N,” becoming W9VA in April 1977. Although I had competed some in Sweepstakes and in the CD QSO Parties, and used the various DX contests to find new countries, I never thought of myself as a contester. But having opportunities to operate contests from the DX side certainly made contesting more interesting. Here is the story about how W9VA became a contester.

Setting the Stage

My first job out of college was with Kemper Insurance in Chicago. At first thinking that this would be a temporary job before being drafted into the armed services, over 20 years later I was still there. I was aware that Kemper had some operations in South America, and in 1980 my business career took an international flavour with a series of trips to Kemper’s operations in Brazil. Our main office in Brazil was in Rio de Janeiro, and the first ham I met in Rio was Hal Harris, PY1ZAE. Hal took me down to LABRE, the Brazilian Amateur Radio organization and, to my amazement, I ended up with a Brazilian license a few days later—PY1ZF0.

On a quarterly visit to Brazil in July 1981, I had my first contesting opportunity from the DX side in the IARU Championship. Hal had a friend (Paulo PY1MAG, now a Silent Key) with a shack out in the countryside with decent antennas and a big amp, and I was able to use this station for the contest. I had no significant DX contest experience at this point, and was inclined to just look around and call the stations I could hear. Well, Hal put a stop to that right away, pointing out that I should be CQing. When nobody came back he said, “CQ again, and again, and again.” Finally I got the hang of it, and learned to “run.” It never occurred to me at the time, but did this coaching put me in the Multi-Op category? Anyway, PY1ZF0 had quite a decent score in this contest, and my interest in contests from the DX side was born.

Through Hal I met Rolf Rasp, PY1RO. Rolf was one of the local DXers who would stop by Paulo’s shack in the country on weekends. Hal mentioned that Rolf had a 60-meter tower and was a big gun on 160. Well, I thought maybe there was some confusion here between meters and feet. I didn’t know then that anyone could have a 60-meter tower, especially in Brazil. A subsequent visit



The 7-over-7 10-meter array used in the contest.

to Rolf’s home confirmed that. Yes indeed, it was a 60-meter tower and it supported probably the largest 160-meter antenna in the world at that time.

Much later, Rolf and I had made plans to go on a little DXpedition to Fernando De Noronha Island in March 1988. The island is slightly south of the equator where Brazil bulges out towards Africa, about 215 miles east of the mainland. Still very unspoiled with less than 2500 inhabitants, it is an ideal and unusual vacation destination.

An Island with a History

Noronha appeared on maps of the South Atlantic as early as 1500, and was first visited in 1503. Before becoming Brazilian territory as a result of Brazil’s independence from Portugal in 1822, Noronha had been occupied by the French, English, Dutch, and, of course, the Portuguese. Brazil used it as a penal colony for a while. After that the United States built bases during World War II, primarily for missile tracking on the South Atlantic range. Some of the Quonset huts remain today and are used for assorted purposes.

Surfing is good enough to warrant a stop on the “Hang Loose” Surfboarding World Tour. The symbol of Noronha is the dolphin, and there are opportunities to go swimming with these and the many other tropical water creatures in the warm sea. But best of all are the quiet beautiful beaches, particularly for a Chicago guy in February.

Getting to the island would be relatively easy because Noronha now had its first resident ham, Andre Sampaio, PYØFF. Andre had moved from Recife to Noronha only a few months before, having a position with the government, and Rolf had coaxed an invitation to the island from Andre. Rolf had to back out because of business, but I plunged ahead.

The date that we picked happened to

include the SSB weekend of the ARRL International DX contest. I remember this as being a coincidence, but knowing in advance about the contest, I brought along the necessary forms. This all went well, but remember that in 1988 Fernando de Noronha was still a rare DXCC entity. To have it appear in a contest was truly an event, and the pile-ups were awesome. Yes, I was reduced to going by call areas at times to be able to sort things out. I had chosen the Single-Band 20 category—almost 2000 QSOs later I emerged in third place in the world and first in South America. I should mention that this was when Andre’s station consisted of a Drake C-Line and a hand-turned Brazilian tribander at about 8 meters.

Back to the Island in 2003

Let’s fast-forward to February 2003. This would be my tenth visit to Fernando de Noronha. Many years ago, Andre had left the government position and turned his original home on the island into a *posada*, equivalent in most respects to a “Bed and Breakfast.” The *posada* has expanded over the years, and recently a restaurant has been added to the facilities. Andre’s *Posada da Morena* is listed in guidebooks as one of the top places to stay on the island.

The PYØFF hamshack has also expanded and improved over the years, now being one of the top contest sites in South America. Many of the improvements resulted from interest in Noronha by Atilano Oms, PY5EG, the founder of Brazil’s Araucaria DX Group and a member of the CQ Contest Hall of Fame. Atilano already had a very serious contest station at his home in Curitiba, in the south of Brazil, but saw the potential in an island contest station much closer to the major ham population centers. As a result, towers sprouted on the island, and antennas and other equipment quickly followed. ZXØF was born, and quickly began a long string of Multi-Single contest successes, particularly in CQ WW and CQ WPX phone contests. Sometimes other call signs are used, but the source of a loud signal with the “ØF” suffix is very likely to be at the *Posada da Morena*.

The Journey

My starting point for Brazil 2003 was Rio de Janeiro. Rolf met me at the airport and I spent 24 hours at his new home in Niteroi, across Guanabara Bay from Rio. Rolf had been inactive for many years, but has recently become interested in 6 meters. If Rolf does anything at all, he does it big, so I was not surprised to see a 7-over-7 6-meter



PY0 beach—the volcanic peak is just behind PY0FF's house.



Andre, PY0FF, (l) and Bill, W9VA, (r).

stack in place and a huge 6-meter amplifier under construction.

After Rio I travelled to Recife, the jumping off city for Noronha. There I enjoyed a great dinner with Jim PY7XC, Fred PY7ZZ, and Ciro, PY7ZY. These three (and others) had been with me on the PW0T DXpedition to Trindade Island in 2002, so it was a great reunion opportunity. The next day Jim drove me out to the airport for flight to Noronha.

Each time the airplane on this flight gets bigger and faster. In 1988 it was a nine-passenger twice-weekly prop plane. Now we are up to a twice-daily Boeing 737. Virtually unheard of outside of Brazil, ordinary (nonham) people go to the island for surfing, diving, fishing and just laying around on beautiful uncrowded beaches. Much of the island is classified as a national park where commercial activity is not allowed, and with still a limited infrastructure, the tourist arrivals are closely controlled.

Jumping into the Fire

I arrived on Wednesday and spent some time exploring the bands as PY0ZFO, my permanent Brazilian license. I had not decided on what category to enter in the ARRL CW contest, but had looked at the propagation programs and was thinking about single band 10 meters. Even in the decline of the sunspot cycle it appeared that there would be strong daytime openings from PY0 to W/VE, and looking at the 2002 scores there were no South Americans in the top ten for this category. Well, certainly in 2003 the Europeans would have shorter and weaker openings to W/VE than the previous year, and it looked like a great opportunity for a first place finish. I also liked the idea of daytime operating.

Checking 10 meters at 0000Z (10 PM local) on Thursday and Friday revealed only South Americans, no signals from W/VE, not even beacons. It looked like for me the contest would not even begin until Saturday morning, so Friday evening I had a leisurely dinner at Andre's wonderful restaurant and returned to the shack a couple minutes after 10.

Oh-oh! The band was open with lots of signals from the southern tier of the US. The rig was ready to go, but I had lost a few minutes of operating time. The

next two hours produced a surprising 106 contacts, with the band finally dying at 0200Z, six hours after local sunset.

Saturday morning was typical Noronha, warm and sunny. At 1100Z the band was full of Europeans calling, but they were not getting replies, and no W/VE was heard until 1130Z. The pace started slowly, but picked up throughout the day, with 650 Qs in the log at 1630Z. I took a short lunch break that somehow stretched out to 30 minutes.

Back in the chair at 1700Z, I picked up where I had left off with the band continuing hot until 2200Z and dead by 2300Z—much earlier than the previous night. I still heard other South Americans calling CQ Test, so I knew that there would be serious competition in the SB10 category from SA this year. I would not know until later just how serious. But at the halfway point I had 1227 QSOs and 59 mults, missing only the ones that I would never get—VY02, VY1, VE8 and VY0. Time for a great late dinner with Andre and his wife Morena, and a good night's sleep for the finale on Sunday.

Sunday morning the band opened at 1200Z, a little later than Saturday. The rate was down quite a bit because I had already worked the serious competitors and the casual guys were still in bed. I made the wise decision to skip lunch, but it still took until 1730Z to reach 1500 QSOs, which was EI4BZ's category winning total in 2002. I was well ahead of last year's winner in points since I had an additional two mults as well. The rate held up at 100 per hour until 2100Z, slowing considerably until 2200Z, when the band collapsed.

At this point I had 1860 QSOs and it was tempting to break out the beer and the final "savelog." But the other South Americans were relentlessly calling CQ Test—I had to stick with it. Another 70 stations called me in those final two hours. Those contacts to be the margin of an apparent victory. My claimed score was 341,000 consisting of 1930 QSOs and 59 mults. I was surprised to learn well after the contest that this would be a new continental record, well above the 306K achieved at HC2G in 1989.

Post Contest

Five South American stations exceeded by a wide margin the 2002 win-

ning score in the SB 10 meters category. In addition to PY0FF, PT5T at the big Araucaria station in Curitiba claimed 1914 Qs and 58 mults, with PY3DX at the other big Araucaria station in Santa Catarina (ZX5J) close behind with 1,847 Qs and 59 mults. Two LUs completed the top five. One of the LUs mentioned being called by VY1JA in the closing minutes of the contest, but I was not so lucky, or more likely had lost propagation to VY1 before the stations to my south and west. The LU also had 59 mults so that made me wonder which one I had picked up that he and others had missed.

Both of the south Brazil stations have more aluminium in the air on 10 meters than PY0FF, but I am sure it was helpful to be a unique multiplier. It was probably a good decision to use the well-known PY0FF call in the contest. It avoided most, but not all, of the "QTH?" inquiries. On the other hand, it was probably *not* a good decision to use 5NN7TT as my exchange in the contest. My thinking was that it would make my signal distinctive from all of the 5NNK guys, making it easier for the searchers and pouncers. But the anticipated 5NNK may have been better—not too many, but a few requested repeats on my power. Of course I actually was running 700 W, but perhaps I was too much of a purist!

Just a couple comments on operating practice. While trying to pull a weak one out of the noise there would be the inevitable "QRL?" on my frequency followed a nanosecond later by a long string of CQ Test. When informed that the frequency is indeed "QRL," most of these were resolved quickly. Having a big signal helps in these situations!

Not so easily resolved was the call from one of the big US multi-multi operations Sunday afternoon requesting that I go to 15 meters for a QSO, never mind that I was in the middle of a run and obviously operating single band. He wouldn't take no for an answer and, of course, he was too strong to ignore. Eventually he went away, but my run had gone away too, so it was back to CQ Test. It would have taken less time to actually QSY and work him, but in my opinion that would have been rewarding rudeness.

Another amusing incident on Sunday afternoon was when an orderly run of stations suddenly became a huge pile-up. Well-known stations that I had worked early Saturday morning were frantically calling me. There must have been five or six "QSO B4" exchanges before the pileup subsided. Later I learned that A35RK had inaccurately been spotted on my run frequency, and many who should know better were calling without bothering to listen for my call sign. I would like to think that contesting is a gentlemen's pastime, but these incidents have to make one wonder.

After the contest, I had the pleasure of a couple more days on Noronha, help-

ing the deserving DXers with PY0F contacts on 12, 17 and 30 meters. Then I went up to Fortaleza for a couple days with Eli, PT7BZ, another member of the PW0T team. Eli and other members of the Fortaleza DX Club are putting together a serious contest station in that city, so together with the contest stations in the south, Brazil will be well represented in future contesting.

ARRL International DX Contest note: This contest has never been particularly interesting to many DX participants because they can only work W/VE stations. In addition, since club competition is limited to ARRL affiliated clubs, there is no incentive for foreign DX club members to submit their scores as a club and have interesting competition against other non-W/VE clubs. The initiation of club compe-



Eli, PT7BZ, (left) and Bill, W9VA, (right) at Eli's shack in Fortaleza.

tition for foreign DX groups clubs would certainly generate more interest abroad. I have suggested this to the honchos in Newington; a few more voices expressing this idea would be appreciated.

Equipment note: The rig used at PY0FF for the contest was an ICOM IC756 PRO II driving an Alpha 89 amplifier into a 7/7 array. The PRO II was one of three that had been loaned by ICOM to the PW0T Trindade DXpedition in February 2002, subsequently purchased, and now residing in Brazil. I am a nontechnical person who has very little idea what is going on inside the ICOM box, but I was impressed at how well I was able to reject adjacent channel interference. Very strong stations could and did move in very close to me and begin running, but the bandpass filters did a great job with minimum slop over, considerably reducing what I call "contest stress."

Noronha note: For more information about Fernando de Noronha check out the Web site at www.noronha.com.br.

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