



Northern California DX Foundation



www.ncdxf.org

Summer 2010

YI9PSE DXpedition to Kurdistan

Paul S. Ewing, N6PSE

ARE YOU CRAZY?

That is the reaction that most of the YI9PSE team members received from our friends and families when we announced that we were planning to do a DXpedition to Iraq. Here is how our story unfolds.

Iraq is a unique entity. It is not rare at all in Europe or on the East Coast of the U.S.; however, west of the Rockies, YI is much less common in our logs. This has a lot to do with distance and propagation as well as the limitations in the equipment/RF power output of the stations in Iraq. In the last decade, the primary activity from Iraq has been from U.S. and coalition forces soldiers, who can operate with a YI9 license in their spare time. Most of these stations are operating with 100 watts or less and



a wire dipole antenna at low levels, but these stations just do not reach the West Coast.

In talking to U.S. military and Middle East experts, it is believed that Iraq's future is very uncertain after the coalition forces pull out in 2011/2012. Most experts feel that the average Iraqi will have to focus on survival and safety and that Amateur Radio will fade into the background. It is for these reasons that I decided to mount an effort to conduct a DXpedition to Iraq. I was also familiar with Kurdistan, which is essentially a country within a country. Kurdistan has its own government and aspires to become its own country; its neighbors, primarily Turkey, oppose this. I had hoped that one aspect of this DXpedition would be to

lay the groundwork for a return visit if Kurdistan becomes its own country and a separate and unique Amateur Radio entity.

As with any DXpedition, location is an important criterion. We briefly considered operating from the "Green Zone" in Baghdad. It didn't take us long to figure out that this location

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Paul Ewing, N6PSE, asking for directions.

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From the President's Desk

FIRST, AN APOLOGY TO JOHN GALLI, W6JZH.

We missed acknowledging John on our 2009 Heavy Hitter list as a Silver donor (\$500 to \$1,000). Another contribution we received that I would like to mention is a rather large check from the widow of W6ZH, Herbert Hoover III. Herbert "Pete" Hoover was the grandson of our 31st President and the son of former IARU and ARRL President Herbert Hoover, Jr. Pete always wanted his contributions to NCDXF treated anonymously, but his widow agreed to our recognizing this one. Finally, I want to recognize the passing of another long time NCDXF supporter and personal friend, Wayne Gingrich, W6EUF.



This newsletter is devoted entirely to the YI9PSE DXpedition to Iraq, recently completed by Paul Ewing, N6PSE, and his team of quality, talented operators. It is very interesting reading and speaks to many of the issues with Amateur Radio in Iraq.

If you have not seen the K4M DVD, I would suggest you purchase one. James Brooks has outdone himself with the coverage of the Midway DXpedition.

NCDXF has been busy with a number of grants since the last newsletter. Visit our newly redesigned website at www.ncdxf.org to see the listing. Also, let us know how you like the looks of the website.

We had a board meeting in Visalia and I am pleased to announce that we have two new directors, bringing our total back up to eleven: John Miller, K6MM, and Kip Edwards, W6SZN. John has taken over as Webmaster and is the architect of our newly redesigned website. Kip will become our Treasurer. Both of these gentlemen's pictures and bios are on our website. Doug Bender, WW6D, who has been our Webmaster, will now be responsible for Member Services. Doug has played a major role in the record keeping and website for NCDXF and our board appreciates greatly what he has done.

NCDXF granted two \$1,000 scholarships through ARRL for 2010. We will have pictures and bios of these recipients in the fall issue.

I hope everyone has an enjoyable summer and that cycle 24 continues to move up the Sunspot ladder.

— Bruce Butler, W6OSP

In with the new...

PLEASE TAKE THE TIME TO check out NCDXF's newly redesigned website at www.ncdxf.org.

In addition to being more user friendly, here's a brief listing of the changes that have taken place:

- DXpeditions now shown in ascending date sequence,
- Added links for Facebook and Twitter, as well as a generic "AddThis" set of links to popular social network websites, and
- Added a new link to Beacon Project on the home page.

We welcome John Miller, K6MM, aboard as the new webmaster and look forward to more exciting changes.





From left: Hrane Milosovec, YI1AD; Bill Beyer, N2WB; Paul Ewing, N6PSE; Jun Tanaka, JH4RHF; Al Hernandez, K3VN; Bob Grimmick, N6OX; Jack Ritter, WØUCE; Wayne Rogers, W5KDJ; David Flack, AH6HY; David Collingham, K3LP; Krassy Petkov, K1LZ; Michel Brunell, FM5CD, and Heathem Sabah, YI1UNH.

carried extra complexity and cost. I then began to investigate northern Iraq and a picture soon emerged that Erbil and Dohuk appeared to be safe and friendly places. Many U.S. military members enjoy R&R visits in those areas and I soon found very positive blogs from “backpack” visitors, primarily to Erbil, which has an airport with international flights to and from Europe.

In addition to finding a safe venue for a DXpedition, I also needed to obtain a license. For several years, Iraq had suspended issuing Amateur Radio licenses and prohibited any Amateur Radio activity. This was due to its suspicion that Amateur Radio might be used by insurgents. As soon as Iraq lifted the ban on new licenses, I applied for the license through the Iraqi Amateur Radio Society. The process was fairly simple and straightforward — the Iraqi ARS blesses your license application and forwards its approval to the Ministry of Communications in Baghdad.

Challenges

The first of what would become

many challenges arose when I informed the Ministry of Communications that I intended to operate from the northern Iraqi region of Kurdistan. The Ministry of Communications wanted me to come to Baghdad

to apply for my license, but I had not planned to go to Baghdad at all, instead traveling directly to Kurdistan from Europe. Fortunately, after much negotiation and discussion, the Ministry of Communications ap-



Aerial view of Erbil, Kurdistan, in northern Iraq.



Our equipment arrives and thankfully the truck is equipped with a crane for easy unloading. Bob, N6OX, is on the bed of the truck and Heathem, Y11UNH, is talking to the driver.

proved my application and submitted it to the Iraqi ARS, and I received the license by email. I later learned that the Ministry of Communications and the Iraqi ARS members are primarily Shiite, whereas in Kurdistan everyone is Sunni; only Sunnis are allowed to visit or come to Kurdistan. This creates an interesting dynamic and division between the various Sunni and Shiite groups. I also learned that only two U.S.-based Arabic-speaking travel companies are authorized to book visits to Kurdistan for Americans. I contacted the first agent who responded to my email. His Arabic speaking capabilities would prove invaluable in the planning and execution of the DXpedition.

I was initially told by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) representatives that only Americans and UK citizens were allowed to visit Kurdistan; other Europeans, Japanese, etc. were not. Some months later, however, the KRG relaxed this prohibition and we could add European members to our team.

With the Iraqi Amateur Radio license in hand, the next step was to assemble a team of operators and select a venue from which to operate. I wanted to keep the team fairly small and focus on operating, rather than tending to generators and cooking meals. I set about to identify and locate a hotel that could provide food and shelter and would have backup generator power; there were only two

hotels that met that requirement. The first, located in downtown Erbil near the complex of government buildings, rejected our request to place antennas on their roof. We ultimately selected a remote hotel located on a hilltop, higher than any of the adjacent terrain. We had spectacular take-off angles in all directions and the hotel had backup diesel generators, as well as restaurants; there was even a helipad.

In addition to securing a venue and obtaining the license, I also needed permission from the KRG to import

our equipment and operate within Kurdistan. I contacted members of the KRG in Washington, DC, and in Erbil and solicited the help of the Kurdish-American Association to make the proper contacts and introductions and to begin a dialog. Using Google translator, I converted many email messages into Arabic; given the strange replies, I sensed that some of my messages were not perfect, but they ultimately got the job done.

Once a dialog with the Kurds was initiated, I needed to educate them about Amateur Radio as they were not at all familiar with the concept. They initially thought I wanted to set up a one-way English speaking broadcast station, but once I clarified that communications were two-way, they were concerned that our equipment could fall into the hands of some anti-Kurd militant factions within Kurdistan.

Another obstacle was that U.S. citizens (non-military or NGO) were not allowed to ship any type of radio equipment to Kurdistan; it looked like our DXpedition was doomed. I asked if my company could ship the equipment to Kurdistan and after some checking, the positive reply was, "This could happen."



Paul, N6PSE; QSL Manager George Williams, N6NKT, and Bob, N6OX, set up and test all of the antennas in California, before shipping them to Iraq.

I then started learning how negotiations are done in Kurdistan.

For example, when you are told, "This could happen," it really means, "It will cost a lot." When you are told, "That is not possible," that just means that it will cost more than you had planned. If you are told "Insha'Allah" that means, "If it's God's will," which means that something might happen, or it might not, but no one has control of it.

I asked Heathem Sabah, Y11UNH, our Iraqi team member, when do you get a "Yes" to a request in your country, and his reply was that you only receive the true meaning of "Yes" when you sit down and have tea in his country. I learned how true his answer was, as we had a lot of tea to make this DXpedition happen.

Forming the team

The original plan was to have six to eight team members and travel "light," essentially carrying our gear to Iraq. Initially we were going to bring small radios, amps and our own antennas. We envisioned having three stations; that quickly grew to five. Icom provided five new IC-7600 radios in protective Pelican cases; Acom lent us the very robust Acom 1000 and Acom 1010 amplifiers; SteppIR loaned us two two-element Yagi antennas and a pair of 40/80 Meter BigIR vertical antennas. As you can imagine, we quickly lost the capability to carry our own equipment, becoming a much larger (and heavier) DXpedition. In the end we had at 13 members and 3,500 pounds of equipment!

Very early on, I sought to build a team of both experienced and inexperienced, but enthusiastic, DXpeditioners. There was never any shortage of DXers willing to go to Iraq; however, there was a significant shortage of wives who were willing to let their married DXers go! Time after time prospective members declined due to the perceived danger. One particularly famous DXpeditioner told his wife that he was going to Kurdistan; his family was agreeable until they Googled Kurdistan and learned it was



Heathem, Y11UNH; David, K3LP, and Bob, N6OX, shopping in downtown Erbil for power adapters.

in northern Iraq! Needless to say, he was unable to go. Ultimately, we assembled quite an impressive team of 13 operators, including a number of world class operators/contesters and notable DXpeditioners.

The KRG Ministry of Interior provided us with 10-day visitor visas, issued at the airport upon our arrival, that could be extended during our stay if needed. To maximize our operating time, we decided to have a three-man advance team arrive in Erbil several days before the main team. The advance team would receive our equipment and begin the process of setting up the antennas and various stations. Bob Grimmick, N6OX; Bill Beyer, Jr., N2WB, and Heathem, Y11UNH made up our advance team, while the remaining members met in Vienna on 2 April for the flight to Erbil.

Complications arise

I'll never forget the rather anxious call from Bob, N6OX, as I made my way to the airport. Bob told me that our equipment was being held by Iraq Customs and to "bring a lot of money." It seems that the advance preparations made with the high officials within the Ministry of Interior were in vain, as the Ministry

of Security was holding our equipment and preventing the team from receiving it. They were seeking a large cash deposit to guarantee that we would not leave any of our equipment in Kurdistan. We reminded them that our equipment was insured for nearly \$50,000 but that did not sway them.

Contributions

The NORTHERN CALIFORNIA DX FOUNDATION relies heavily upon the generosity of its members to fund various projects. We urge each member to consider making an annual contribution of US\$50 or its equivalent in foreign currency. However, we do not wish to exclude anyone from the FOUNDATION for financial reasons. If \$50 is not within your budget, then please give what other amount you can. Naturally, we welcome contributions in excess of \$50! The NCDXF is an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and all contributions are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law for U.S. taxpayers. Send your contribution to: NORTHERN CALIFORNIA DX FOUNDATION, P.O. Box 2012, Cupertino, CA 95015-2012, USA. You may also contribute and order supplies online via our secure server, visit www.ncdxf.org/donate.

Flying to Kurdistan is no trivial journey. Operators from the West Coast had to fly from San Francisco, CA, to Washington Dulles, VA, then Vienna, Austria, and, after a layover, Erbil in Kurdistan. All told, this was a 30 hour venture.

Upon our arrival, Heathem, YI1UNH, who we had already gotten to know during the months of planning, met us. Larger than life, gregarious and extremely friendly, Heathem is well educated and speaks fluent Arabic and English in addition to being able to converse in Russian and Italian. He was just the man we needed! Heathem, who hails from Baghdad, played a key role in every aspect of this DXpedition and his participation certainly elevated our level of success.

Arriving in Erbil, we met up as an entire team for the first time. It was nice to meet and put a face to the names of the people that we had spoken to numerous times over the phone.

Negotiations and tea

Since we were meeting with the Ministry of Security the following morning, the team discussed a strategy and the next day, Heathem, David, K3LP; Bob, N6OX, and I went to the warehouse at the airport to inspect our equipment. Iraqi Customs had opened our crate and inventoried everything, but we were dismayed to see that only one of our radios was in the shipment. How are we going to have a DXpedition with only one radio?

We proceeded to the Ministry of Security office, also at the airport and Heathem translated the negotiations. During the long discussion, we learned that the Ministry of Security had not been informed of our visit and was greatly concerned about our equipment, fearing that it could fall into the hands of insurgents.

We assured the Ministry that our gear would only travel from the airport to the hotel and back, remaining in our possession the entire time. The Ministry asked for \$2,000 in cash to secure an agreement that we would



Representatives from the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government) visit our SSB shack to learn about Amateur Radio and see it in operation. This is the first time that Amateur Radio operations were conducted from Kurdistan.

not leave anything behind. (We had planned to donate a complete station to Heathem, but we left that part out of the discussion.)

During the course of our negotiations with the Ministry of Security, Mr. Zero, the hotel's general manager, with whom we had discussed our situation, called Heathem's cell phone. Mr. Zero then spoke to the Ministry of Security representatives and I could tell by the facial expressions that a spirited discussion was taking place. At the conclusion of that conversation, the Ministry official announced that we could now pay an "import tax" instead of providing the cash deposit. When we asked how much the tax would be, we were quite relieved when we learned that it was only \$100.

Ah, "But first, you must have tea," the Ministry official announced.

We all joined in a tea drinking ritual that seems to be part of how negotiations are done in Kurdistan.

While we were drinking our tea, the Ministry official announced that because we were Americans, our tax would be reduced to \$54! We finished our tea and went back to the warehouse to retrieve our equipment.

Our gear had been held for four days over a \$54 tax.

Back at the warehouse, the shipper informed us that our other equipment was on a flight from Dubai that had just landed, so we waited. We were very excited and relieved to find our other four ICOM radios in this shipment.

We arranged for everything to be delivered to our hotel within the next several hours. While we waited for the delivery, we went to Erbil's "money street" to exchange our U.S. currency for Iraqi dinars. Banks, credit cards and ATM machines are not part of Kurd culture; instead there is the money street with various tables, and vendors who exchange currency. We exchanged our currency, and had more tea with one of the money brokers, then took some pictures and shook hands. We were impressed by the warm and welcoming Kurds.

When our equipment finally reached the hotel, we were very glad to see that the delivery truck had a large crane that could lower our crates to the ground. We quickly divided up into antenna and shack set-up teams. The CW and RTTY shacks were set

DXCC BY BAND/MODE BREAKDOWN				
Band	PH	CW	RTTY	Total
160	37	63	0	63
80	72	79	1	92
40	101	94	38	116
30		86	55	93
20	110	100	61	122
17	110	86	58	118
15	88	83	24	102
12	30	12	1	33
10	6	15	0	19
Totals	145	133	74	165

up on opposite ends of the hotel, while the SSB shack was set up hundreds of yards away in a small outbuilding that belonged to a restaurant that shared the hilltop with our hotel.

On the air

Within several hours, we were on the air. The first contacts were with European stations and we were amazed at their signal strength. It felt so good to have everything come together. We were now on the air! We initially had planned to operate in the General Class portions of the bands during the last days of the DXpedition; however, upon our arrival, we found that EU was participating in a SP-Polish Contest and much of the spectrum was taken during our first weekend, forcing us to operate anywhere we could. I know that in the first days of my operating, I found that I could only find clear frequencies for listening in the General Class portion of the band, making for some very excited QSOs and many "Thanks for the New One!"

Bill Beyer, N2WB, had prepared the SSB operator schedules and managed all aspects of the SSB operation. Over in the CW shack, David Collingham, K3LP, set the schedules and managed the CW operations. Jun Tanaka, JA4RHF, set up the RTTY station at the far end of the hotel and

did all of the RTTY operation in addition to some CW and SSB activity.

Our hotel turned out to be a very nice venue for this operation. The hotel staff was receptive to any requests or needs that we had and we were even able to borrow ladders, tools and extension power cables. The noise level on our hilltop was rather low.

We knew that the reliability of Kurdistan's power grid would be an issue and, indeed, it was! Sometimes we lost power as many as five to six times per day, but the hotel's diesel generators came on after 30 to 40 seconds and proved to be reliable. That explains why all our stations suddenly

BAND/MODE BREAKDOWN				
Band	PH	CW	RTTY	Total
160	270	1,713	0	1,983
80	1,605	2,193	1	3,799
40	4,004	3,690	260	7,954
30		3,256	891	4,147
20	8,244	8,004	1,079	17,327
17	5,478	2,896	1,015	9,389
15	3,007	2,387	210	5,604
12	143	15	1	159
10	12	27	0	39
Totals	22,763	24,181	3,457	50,401

"disappeared" from the bands, only to return with a greatly reduced signal until our amplifiers were warmed up and ready to go.

The team quickly fell into a routine. Bob, N6OX; Al, K3VN; Bill, N2WB, and David, K3LP, liked to work on antennas during the day and operate most of the evening.

David, AH6HY; Michel, FM5CD, and I liked to operate during our sunrise and sunset. This grey line operation was able to reach the U.S. West Coast on most days and we had a lot of fun giving out "new ones."

Jack, WØUCE, and Wayne, K5KDJ, operated CW during the days over in the CW shack.

Krassy, K1LZ, and Hrane, YT1AD, arrived during the second part of the DXpedition and were a welcome relief. They operated almost

continuously in the CW shacks.

In addition to his RTTY efforts, Jun, JH4RHF, also took care of capturing the log files each day and uploading them to Club Log.

In addition to my operating, I was in touch with the Pilot stations and monitoring conditions on *spaceweather.com*.

One afternoon, several KRG representatives came out and visited the SSB shack, asking about our operation and taking interest in what we were doing. They were surprised to learn that this activity was allowed in almost every country and that we were able to talk to others over the entire world.

Where did the propagation go?

On 5 April, a geomagnetic storm caused quite an impact to our propagation. Working North America became quite difficult, but we were still able to work EU stations with some ease. Fortunately, we enjoyed very good propagation on both our weekends. On 9 April, a B-class solar flare and a Coronal Mass Ejection (CME) occurred which really impacted

BREAKDOWN BY CONTINENT	
Continent	Total
Europe	35,773
Asia	6,801
N. America	6,706
S. America	515
Africa	396
Oceania	210
Totals	50,401

propagation just as we were about to cease our operation. We considered adding extra days to our operation but once we became aware of the CME and the impact to our propagation, we decided against the extra days.

Our plan was to operate continuously through to the early evening of Sunday, 11 April, stopping only briefly to take some team pictures.

We had also planned to enjoy a team dinner upon our shut-down, before packing up our equipment in preparation for our flights home. At that point, we were at 48,000 QSOs in our logs and the team decided to forgo the dinner and libations and, instead, operate through the night. Missing sleep, the team shut down just a few hours before our gear was to be picked up. The team really wanted to hit 50,000 QSOs and by golly, we made 50,401!

Summing up

Kurdistan is very safe, friendly and warm; the Kurds genuinely like and appreciate what America has done for them. The YI9PSE team was never in any danger and we were many miles from the “hot spots” of Mosul, Kirkuk and Baghdad.

Demand for YI was significant. We knew that many Amateurs “West of the Rockies” needed YI, but the demand from Europe and Asia was significant as well.

All the sponsor-provided equip-

ment worked very well and we are very pleased that we were able to donate two HF rigs, headsets, coax cables and antennas that may be used to keep Iraq on the air long after we are gone.

The Kurdistan Regional Government told us that we are welcome to return and operate again. We have laid the foundation and we hope to do so at such time that it becomes a separate country.

Before we left, Mr. Zero met with most of us individually, asking us about our stay and what improvements could be made with his hotel. He was interested in our ideas and wants to bring commerce and tourists to Kurdistan. At the conclusion of my meeting with Mr. Zero, I asked him if there was a message he would like our group to convey to America. Thinking for a moment, Mr. Zero said, “Please tell America that Kurdistan really needs a Home Depot.”

We all really enjoyed our Kurdish adventure and many of us plan to return someday.

DXPEDITION LENDING LIBRARY

The **NORTHERN CALIFORNIA DX FOUNDATION** has a number of VHS/DVD videos and Microsoft® PowerPoint presentations on CD-ROM available for loan to organizations



wishing to show them at their meetings.

There is no charge to use the programs in the **FOUNDATION’S** library, but clubs borrowing materials are responsible for postage in both directions. To view the complete listing of programs available for your club’s use, please visit our website, www.ncdxf.org, and click on “Videos.”

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NCDXF offers several ways for you to show your love for DXing! Impress your friends with a gold lapel pin (\$7), show up at your next hamfest sporting the NCDXF hat (\$12) or don a NCDXF T-shirt (\$15) to set up your Yagi on Field Day. Send out your QSLs with an NCDXF label (roll of 500, \$7). Mail in the attached form or visit www.ncdxf.org to order today.



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