

NCJ Profiles: George Wagner, K5KG

Celebrating his 58th year in ham radio, George Wagner, K5KG, first became interested in contesting while working as a field engineer for Collins Radio in Ethiopia. Since then, he has participated in many multiop contests from Florida and from such desirable locations as J7, KP2, PJ4, VK2, and E51. In addition to his many achievements in radiosport, George has also found time to serve as an officer in the Florida Contest Group and on the Contest Advisory Committee for ARRL. But, it all started with his Eagle Scout training and a man named Clingenpeel. Here is George's personal Amateur Radio story.

The Early Years

The radio bug bit me at an early age. A neighbor down the street repaired radios. He also had the first television that I had ever seen, and I remember asking him why the birds on the "aerial" outside did not show up on the picture. He gave me an explanation that I probably didn't understand, and I most likely responded with, "Oh, okay," and went about my business.

My hometown was rife with hams, and many of them were radio engineers at Delco Radio. These folks designed radios, mass-produced radios, repaired radios, and, of course, operated them as hams. This was Kokomo, Indiana, in the mid 1950s. There was no shortage of Elmers. Ones that have admired places in my memory are Les, W9IU, a predominant DXer; Jerry, W9DKR, a neighbor; Noble, W9WE, owner of the CQ Motel; George, W9TTA, who sold me a reconditioned RME receiver; and Pete, W9HUF, owner of the most immaculate shack in town.

Deserving special recognition was Ray Snyder, whose W9 call sign escapes me. He gave Kent (KN9JFB), Billy (KN9JRE) and me (KN9KBW) our Novice exams and built my first transmitter in exchange for cutting his grass. Also there was Waldo (not a ham), owner of George's Electronics, a place jam packed with all kinds of parts, that was our after-school hangout. Last, but not least, was Mr Rex Clingenpeel, my high school radio teacher and a former ham who, for 4 years, taught me all the important stuff. With this exposure to "the miracle of radio," as I refer to it even today, how could I not pursue something to do with radio as a career? After high school, I was off to engineering school at Rose Poly,



Figure 1 — George relaxes in his Siesta Key shack.



Figure 2 — KN9KBW's nicely appointed shack in 1957 in Kokomo, Indiana.

now Rose Hulman Institute of Technology, in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Following the usual struggles with thermodynamics, fluid mechanics, and, worst of all, electromagnetic theory, I was turned loose with a BSEE and an ROTC commission in the US Army Signal Corps. Why the Signal Corps? Radio, of course! By the luck of the draw, I bypassed Vietnam and was assigned as a second lieutenant to teach electronics at the US Army's Guided Missile School at Redstone Arse-

nal, in Huntsville, Alabama. In that 2 year stint, my very understanding wife Kay, our young daughter, and I lived in post housing, where I had small triband Yagi on a TV mast. DXing was a dream from that QTH. My boss and neighbor was Capt John Brannon, WA4RBO (now W4RBO). We became good friends, and I think this was the only time that my boss was a ham! While in Huntsville, I was active with the local Northern Alabama DX Club (NADXC) and friends with Hess, WA4GCS (SK), and Brenda Garlough, WA4HOM. They were very active DXers and the parents of a young son, Trey, who later would follow in his parents' footsteps to become a very influential and active ham.

Ethiopia

Once Uncle Sam was finished with me, I was back on the street again and searching for a good place to work. With DXing firmly implanted in my brain (I had not yet discovered contesting) my idea of a good place to work would be some exotic, remote location where I could be DX. My wife's idea of a good place also was overseas, but not necessarily exotic, and certainly not remote. A fanciful town somewhere in the heart of Europe would have suited her quite nicely. With all of this

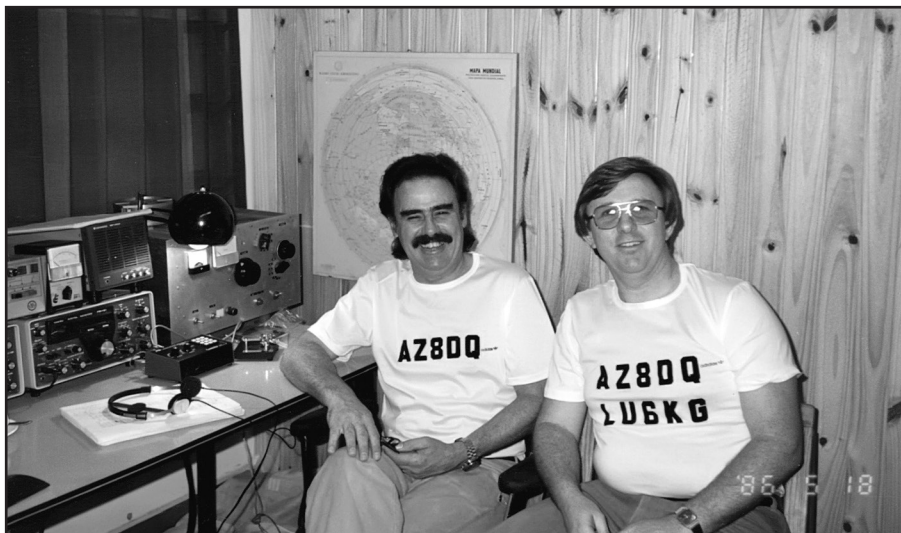


Figure 3 — What a Southern Hemisphere team! Seated beside the legendary CW contester Jorge, LU8DQ (left), George takes a break from the AZ5DQ operation in 1986.

in mind, I landed a job as a field engineer with Collins Radio, and we moved to Asmara, Ethiopia, a location both exotic *and* remote. Our family life in Asmara was excellent — safe, brilliant sunshine at 7000 feet ASL, wonderful Ethiopian neighbors, and many military and ex-pat friends. My wife taught in the post-elementary school, our daughter Jeanie attended a local Montessori School, and our son Brian, later N2IFF, was born in the US Army hospital.

My Collins work involved building and maintaining a large HF station for the Army Signal Corps in Asmara at Kagnew Station, a US military base established by the British as a communication station during World War II. The station's mission was to maintain communication with Andrews AFB VIP aircraft, mostly Air Force One, and to support the *Apollo* missions taking place at the time.

It was at Kagnew Station where I became seriously involved with contesting. Our club station ET3USA was located in the post housing area, and our building offered many options for antennas and lots of room for multiple stations. I had a Drake C-Line, and an Army captain loaned us a Collins 30L-1 amp. One of our club members had a full Heathkit station. For antennas, the guys built a 2 element quad and strung a 2 element 40 meter wire beam across two wings of our building. The 40 meter antenna was directed to the northwest, a perfect direction for Europe and the States. In addition, there was a very tall tower near our building, and on one dark, moonless night, and out of sight of the post security guards, we climbed the tower and strung an 80 meter sloper. It also conveniently pointed to the northwest.

During my years at Kagnew Station

(1967 until 1970), we ran endless DX pile-ups, and worked every contest imaginable. These were the days of Gus Browning, W4BPD (SK), and his worldwide DXpeditions. I remember chatting with him several times when the bands were dead, and he would take time to talk, although now I have no recollection of where he was during those times. In addition to signing ET3USA, we were permitted to use 9E3USA and 9F3USA, so we would reserve those call signs for certain contests, especially WPX and WAE. The ET3USA club at the time probably had 15 or 20 active members, so almost any time of the day or night, someone was at the station. Ops whom I can recall were Charlie, W6UM; Jim, ET3JBP; Dick, ET3REL (now W5ZHI), and Don, ET3FMA (now W4WJ). There were others whose call signs I can no longer remember — Bill, Jerry and Dina, and Phil, the Army Captain with the 30L-1. I also remember Joe, W2KQ, and his wife Fran, WB2SZB/F5ZB. Fran was French, and she joined us many times for phone contests to put rare multipliers in the log with French-speaking ops that would otherwise not be in a contest. We were blessed by being “YL-assisted.”

In the ET3USA shack were many filing cabinets filled with QSL cards dating back to the 1940s. To the best of my knowledge, those cards were never preserved, and were no doubt demolished when the entire station was machine gunned away (as I was told) during the Eritrean uprising in the 1970s.

A Pipeline in Alaska

The few years following my Ethiopian experience were devoid of ham radio. I was off to grad school, then to Houston for

a job with Exxon and the birth of our second son, Craig. In 1973, the oil shortage created those long lines at the gas pumps, and the long-awaited Trans-Alaska Pipeline System was finally approved. Exxon was one of the members of the consortium to build the pipeline and, of course, I volunteered to take our growing family to Alaska. I hastily exchanged my Texas call sign, W5QHD, for KL7IDH, put up 70 feet of tower and tribander, and was on the air again. Work on the pipeline project was extremely demanding, with 12 hour days and lots of travel, but I managed to do as much DXing and contesting as possible. In those years, KL7 and KH6 were not permitted to work SSB below 7100 kHz. I recall one ARRL DX Phone contest when KL7FBI in Shemya, KH6BZF, and I chatted among ourselves, because we could not raise any Lower 48 stations to work us up in the “American phone band.” That band restriction was later lifted, and KL7, KH6, and other US territory stations now can operate phone between 7075 kHz and 7100 kHz.

Houston

As my work on the pipeline project was coming to an end, Exxon moved us back to Houston. I dropped by Madison Electronics one day and met Don, K5AAD. He put me in touch with Tom, WA5LES (now K5RC), who had a large contest station south of town. Tom soon put me to work as an op in the multi-multi contests he was running at the time. This was my first exposure to serious multi-multi operating, and it opened my eyes to a whole new world of HF contesting. Tom's mantra was “keep CQing.”

My relationship with Tom has been long-standing, and he has been a friend and mentor for many years. Today Tom and Midge, K7AFO, live outside Reno, Nevada, where he has built the W7RN superstation. My years in Houston would not be complete without mentioning the Texas DX Society (TDXS), and the many friendships developed within this wonderful group of hams. In addition, it was during those TDXS years and with the help of Bob, W5SJS, that we built a large contest station at Bob's lumberyard. It was from this station that we did many contests with countless ops. Three of our young ops were Dave, K5GN; Randy, K5ZD, and Trey, N5KO. All have gone on to become outstanding contributors to contesting and to ham radio in general. Perhaps this was due in part to some of that good lumberyard training!

Saudi Arabia

The time in Houston came to an end early in 1981, when I volunteered for and accepted a transfer with Exxon Chemical to Saudi Arabia. This assignment lasted

5 years, during which “generous vacation leaves” offered opportunities for DXing and contesting from several foreign locations. In addition, I was able to operate occasionally from HZ1AB, which was about an hour’s drive from our home in Al Jubail. Participating in weekend contests from HZ1AB, however, required taking leave from work (weekends in a Muslim country are Thursday and Friday, and Saturday and Sunday are work days).

Side trips that I was able to make during my years in Saudi included four operations from the Hong Kong station of Paul, VS6DO (SK), four operations from OHØNA and OH2BH QTHs in OHØ, and one from OJØ. I was usually able to schedule these trips to include a contest, but sometimes they were just DX operations to meet new ham friends and “run the piles.” I had one operation from the JY6ZZ club station in Amman, Jordan, where I went to operate the All Asian CW Contest. The All Asian is a JA-dominated contest, but I was able to score a 1st place finish by operating essentially from Europe’s back door. My call sign was JY8GW. I had requested JY8KG, but Lloyd, W6KG (SK), and Iris, W6QL (SK), had been there prior to my visit, and Lloyd had been issued JY8KG. I met two interesting gentlemen at JY6ZZ — Mohammed Balbisi, JYMB (SK), who was JY1’s Minister of Telecommunications and issuer of my license, and Alan Kaul, W6RCL (SK), a very well-known news reporter and NBC’s Middle East Bureau Chief in Amman.

Argentina

From Saudi Arabia, I accepted an Exxon transfer to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1986. Upon arrival, I was welcomed by Oscar, LU1BEA (SK); Ron, LU2AH, and Jorge, LU8DQ (SK). Their hospitality was beyond belief. Ron and Jorge saw to it that I was issued the call sign I’d wished for, LU6KG. Oscar, who knew nothing about contesting but wanted to help me get on the air for an upcoming contest, hired an electrician to string antennas on his apartment building. I no longer remember which CW contest it was, but I do know that I spent the weekend working it from their lovely downtown home. Ron arranged for a 12 meter tower to be erected on a 30-story apartment building where my wife and I lived in the penthouse. A TH7 that I had shipped to Buenos Aires was installed on the tower, and, by my calculations, the antenna was some 380 feet about ground! I reckoned that it must have been the highest HF Yagi in South America — you could see forever from up there!

Jorge, LU8DQ, was a phenomenal CW operator. CW contesters from the 1980s will recall his presence on the bands and



Figure 4 — How many of you have run — and won — an All Asian Contest from a place like Jordan? Here’s a winning smile from K5KG, at the helm of the pre-computer era JY6ZZ station.

his uncanny operating skills. I had the privilege of working a WPX CW contest with Jorge as AZ8DQ, and it was incredible to see him in action.

There was an IARU Region 2 meeting in Buenos Aires while we were there, so Ron, LU2AH, and I hosted dinners for the dignitaries. I don’t remember everyone who attended, but they included Frank, W4RH; Larry, W4RA; Dave, K1ZZ; Tod, KØTO; Richard, W1RH (SK); Hugh, W3ABC (SK); Chod, VP2ML (SK); Lou, PAØLOU (SK), and Shozo, JA1AN.

Hamming With FRC

In 1987, I left Exxon to join Merrill Lynch’s IT organization in New York. This ended our days of living abroad. After living a few months in New York City, we moved into a home in Morristown, New Jersey, that was situated on a ridge with line of sight to the World Trade Center. With the help of a well-known contesteer at that time — Ed, WA2SRQ (now K2SQ) — we put up a 70 foot tower, a triband Yagi, and various wires, and I resumed DXing and contesting. I became a member of the Frankford Radio Club (FRC) and benefited greatly from knowing some of their accomplished members, including Chas, K3WW; Alex, W2OX; Steve, W3BGN; Sig, N3RS; John, W8FJ; Gerry, W6TER, and Tony, K2SG. It was through these friendships that I was exposed to computerized logging, packet spotting and, believe it or not, the finer points of running versus searching and pouncing.

St Brandon Adventure

In 1989, I joined a multinational team of operators for the 3B7RF DXpedition to St Brandon. At the time, 3B7 was high on the DXCC most-wanted list. St Brandon is an archipelago in the south Indian Ocean, 350 km distant from and belonging to Mauritius, 3B8. Karl, HB9JAI/4X1DF, was the team leader, and our ops were HB9AJW, HB9ABO, HB9ADP, HB9AFH, HB9AFI, HB9AHL, HB9BXE, HB9BQI, 3B8CF, JA3IG, W7SE, and I. (Walt, W7SE, and I had become acquainted years earlier in Houston, and later we contested together at HZ1AB. In 2014, Walt and I were volunteers at WRTC.) It was a 3 day sail from 3B8 to 3B7, and once we arrived at the particular island permitted for our landing, we set up three stations (SSB, CW, WARC) and ran the pileups continuously for the next 3 weeks. We netted more than 53,000 QSOs.

The operation was a definite success, but it had a somewhat scary ending. We departed the archipelago after dark, and once we passed into open sea, our ship, the *Umbrina*, a 96 foot motor vessel, was hit with a double-crested wave, and we nearly capsized. With that, our captain quickly turned back to safety on the leeward side of the southern island, where we sat for the next 3 days. Once the brisk easterly trade winds subsided, we had an uneventful journey back to Port Louis. Our expedition was a big event for Mauritius. We were welcomed with a celebration of local dignitaries, speeches, and TV cameras!

This story would not be complete without mentioning that I spent several days with Jacky, 3B8CF, and his family prior to sailing to 3B7. They were wonderful hosts, and provided an opportunity for me to get my fix of running pileups as 3B8/K5KG. To this day, Jacky and I have occasional but brief CW QSOs. Jacky is a beacon from the south Indian Ocean, frequently heard in the evening on the low end of 40 meters, calling CQ.

Retirement, The FCG, and Offshore Contesting

In 2000, having retired and grown tired of the cold, gray winter days of New Jersey, my wife and I moved to Siesta Key (Sarasota), Florida. This was the 18th move of our marriage. With the help of a new bunch of friends from the Florida Contest Group (FCG) — Dan, K1TO; Bob, W1CW (SK); Ellen, W1YL; Jim, K4OJ (SK); Fred, K4LQ; Ron, WD4AHZ, and Ed, K8DSS — up went a 60 foot tower with a C31 and 2 element 40 meter Yagis and various wires for the low bands. Our home is on a salt-water canal, and about 1 km from the Gulf beach. Propagation is excellent from this location, and fortunately there is little or no noise. My affiliation with the FCG, as with NADXC, FRC and TDXS, has been most rewarding. The FCG has a strong and growing membership, and the skills, talents and camaraderie of our members continue to amaze me. I find myself constantly learning new tips and techniques from my friends in the club, not only for contesting, but also for technology in general.

For many years now, Jim, VE7ZO, and I have operated mobile in the Florida QSO Party. We tow a U-Haul trailer carrying a F12 Sigma antenna, and HamSticks on the roof of the SUV. Our multiop, mobile entries have covered as many as 53 Florida counties in a weekend, and have won us 1st place finishes each time.

Our latest foray as a club is to plan for an expanded FCG Banquet and a first-time contest forum at the 2016 ARRL National Convention at the Orlando Hamcation®. I'm involved in the initial planning for FCG at the 2016 National along with Dan, K1TO, Chris, WF3C, Fred, K4LQ, and Blake, N4GI.

Having been partially retired since 1998 has given me the flexibility to operate contests from a number of locations — J7, KP2, PJ4, VK2, E51, and the ARRL November Sweepstakes CW from North Dakota and Newfoundland. Numerous J7 and PJ4 contest operations have been with a variety of operators.

A KP2 operation in 2006 for CQWW Phone was at the QTH of John, NP2B,

and Jeannette, NP2C, with ops NP2B, N4BP, WD4R, and W4DTA. A second KP2 operation was for the CQ World Wide CW in 2014 at the station of Fred, NP2X/K9VV, and Lisa, W4LIS, and the ops were NP2X, K1XX, KK9K and NE9U. The VK2GC operation was CQ WW CW in 2005 from a club station near Sydney and made possible with support from David, VK2CZ, and Dom, VK2JNA. In 2007 Ron, KK9K, and I did CQ WW CW and ARRL 160 as E51A from the South Cooks. Victor, E51CG, and Jim, E51JD, befriended Ron and me, and made this operation pleasurable in spite of horrible weather during the contests. The 2010 SS CW North Dakota operation was from the QTH of Mark, KØUD, and the 2012 SS CW Newfoundland operation was from the QTH of Gus, VO1MP.

Other Amateur Radio activities in recent years have included contesting with Rick, NQ4I, and his multi-multi crew, supporting the K2BSA operation at the 2010 Boy Scout National Jamboree in Virginia, volunteering at the 2014 WRTC in New England, and serving on the ARRL Contest Advisory Committee. In recent years, I have participated with Ron, WD4AHZ; Ed, K8DSS; Bill, K4FLV, and the Suncoast Amateur Radio Society in the ARRL Field Day. Sarasota County's Emergency Management staff provides support for our FD operations which are viewed as a readiness exercises for tropical storms and hurricanes.

Personal Reflections

As I mentioned, I was first exposed to computerized logging by my friends in the FRC. At the time, the loggers I used were *MS DOS* programs: *CT* by K1EA and *NA* by K8CC. These programs offered ways to communicate with transceivers, but not all radios had communication interfaces back then, but these early programs did provide logging to a database and automatic dupe checking that were godsend to contesting. In recent years, I have used *WriteLog* and *Win-Test*. I have just begun using *N1MM+*, as it has a richer collection of contest modules, and, so far, it looks quite promising, although I do prefer some of the features of *Win-Test* as well as its *CT*-like look and feel.

My contests of interest today are mainly the ARRL DX CW, Sweepstakes CW, the ARRL 10 Meter Contest, CQ World Wide CW and WPX, IARU HF Championship, WAE DX, NAQP, and the Florida QSO Party. I am especially fond of the WAE CW because of the QTCs. Whenever I can, I work the state QSO parties, CWops, and DX contests, such as the Scandinavian Activity, WAG, and the All Asian. My preference is definitely CW. I've never operated any other digital modes (I had my fill of

radio teletype in the Signal Corps) or participated in a VHF/UHF contest.

Regarding contest strategies, I generally try to beat my previous best score from the same event. When using *Win-Test*, I download the targets file from a prior contest and use that to set hourly targets. This provides an incentive to beat those hour-by-hour rates, as well as a view of when I took breaks in the past contest and, therefore, judge when to plan for breaks. The targets file is an excellent feature in *Win-Test* that I have come to depend upon.

In 24 hour contests, I attempt to operate the full 24 hours, but in 48 hour events, my goal will be to log at least 36 hours. I don't believe I have ever logged a full 48 hours in any contest. In ARRL Sweepstakes, I operate without the cluster, as I like the challenge of getting the unassisted sweep. In WPX contests, I find that there are enough mults to keep me busy without having to watch packet spots, so I do those unassisted. For DX contests, I generally use packet to find the juicy mults that I might otherwise miss. If I am operating a contest from a DX location, I seldom use the packet cluster, though, because I usually can keep runs going and, furthermore, Internet access may not be available. All logs are uploaded to the ARRL's Logbook of The World (LoTW).

I like to refer new contesters and old timers alike to the *HF Contesting Guidelines* on the ARRL website (www.arrl.org/hf-contesting-guidelines). This is a 2014 update by members of the ARRL Contest Advisory Committee (CAC) of an original version done years earlier. Updating of the document addressed changes in technology that had affected contesting over the years, and presented a current understanding of contesting standards and practices. It is a worthwhile read for *all* contesters.

In looking back over 50+ years in Amateur Radio, I must give credit to this great hobby for providing incentives to search out those faraway places with strange-sounding names that provided our family with many wonderful experiences. Along the way, we have built a vast array of friendships that will last forever. And the pileups haven't been bad either!

Thanks, George, for sharing with us the various stages of your years in ham radio. As a key competitor in the world of contesting, you not only have accomplished so much personally but also serve as a role model and ambassador for radiosport. Your story and experiences should inspire others to become better contesters.