

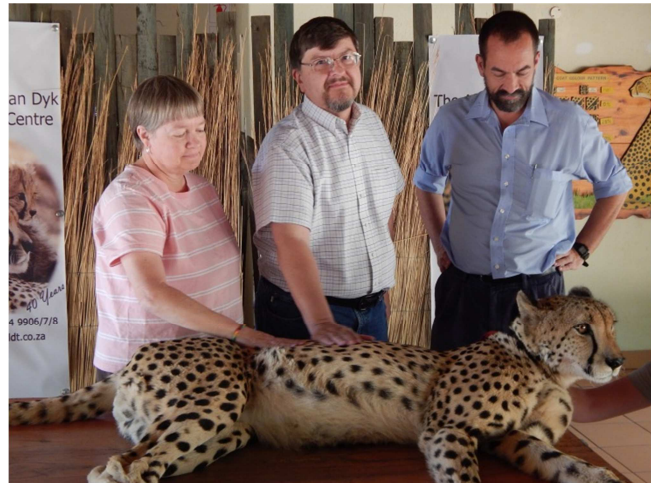
Visit to New England: July 2014

Chris R. Burger

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During October 2013, I had a visit from my long-time buddy Doug Grant¹ and his wife Karen. Around 1996, they had hosted my first visit to the USA. In almost two decades since then, I've been in regular email contact with Doug, and we've met in person a few times. A lot of banter has been exchanged, but this was my first opportunity to again spend a few days with the Grants in person.

We had a lot of fun, as I guided them on a whirlwind tour of all Gauteng's attractions. One of the topics that came up repeatedly was the World Radiosport Team Championships. Doug was heading the group of 500 volunteers making WRTC happen in New England in July 2014. The event would be timed to coincide with the centenary Convention of the American Radio Relay League, which would take place in nearby Hartford, Connecticut the weekend after WRTC.



Karen, Doug and Chris patting an African domestic kitten

Doug encouraged me to offer myself as a referee for WRTC. I had competed in three events between 1996 and 2002, and despite having missed the two subsequent WRTCs, I was very keen to be involved. WRTC is a gathering of the greatest radio operators in the world, where one is surrounded by individuals who shaped the world of amateur radio. Also, WRTC has led to several long-term friendships.

The idea was certainly attractive. However, I was not certain that I would be able to scrape together the resources. The application deadline for referees was approaching and Doug assured me that I would be able to chicken out if required, so I applied. I took great pains to explain that I was the best referee money could buy. My southern neighbour Bernie van der Walt² also applied. When the referees were announced, we were both on the list.

The next few months went by in a blur. I was in the process of selling my flying school, while holding down a full-time job, training for an ultra-marathon and being a part-time flight instructor. In March, I had a major setback. While on a training run, I ran through a wire that someone had strung across a sidewalk, ripping my left knee ligaments to shreds and necessitating reconstructive surgery. The rehabilitation process was slow and painful, taking several weeks out of my life.

Bernie had undergone a similar operation some years ago, and assured me that I would not be ready to travel in July. He had me worried. Progress was frustratingly slow, and I feared that he might be

¹ Amateur radio callsign K1DG.

² Callsign ZS4TX.

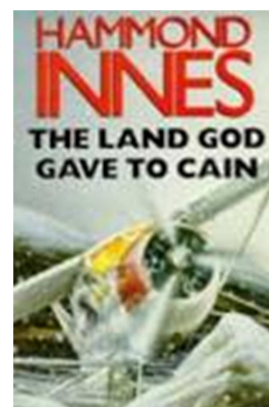
right. However, around the end of May I finally decided to bite the bullet and buy the plane tickets. By this time, the options were severely limited. The people of the north had left very few plane tickets unbought for their peak season. I needed considerable resolve to spend the amount they demanded. However, the decision had been made. I would head for New England in July.

WRTC would keep me busy for a week. With close to four full days required for travel, I decided to make the trip a bit longer, and include a few other side trips in my schedule. Firstly, I wanted to visit all the states of New England, and if possible also the provinces of eastern Canada. Labrador was the most important single target. Secondly, I wanted to take the opportunity to add a seaplane rating to my American pilot licence. Finally, if the opportunity presented itself, I wanted to show my face at the ARRL Centennial Convention.

How it all started

At this point, the story must rewind to 1972. As a schoolboy, I was a keen reader. My school library had an assortment of books, mostly in my native Afrikaans. At one point, I found a book that had a storyline quite unlike anything I'd read before. It displayed a level of complexity and tension that I hadn't encountered before. I resolved to find more books by the same author: Hammond Innes. Unfortunately, there was only that one translation available in Afrikaans. It was evident to me that I would have to learn English.

I started with great resolve, tackling *The Land God gave to Cain* with a dictionary in one hand. I distinctly remember having to consult the dictionary in the very first sentence. In due course, the dictionary became less and less needed, and I continued to read all Innes's and Alistair Maclean's books within about two years. All this reading had a great impact on my subsequent development. Not only did I learn English, but I was also introduced to a wide range of places and industries. Still, no single novel had as much impact as that first one. *The Land God gave to Cain* revolves around amateur radio and Labrador. I do not know to what extent that content influenced my subsequent interest in amateur radio, but I can certainly state that I resolved then that I would one day visit Labrador.



In later years, I had the opportunity to travel, both in my engineering career and in my flying. I even managed to make the odd recreational trip. However, Labrador's remoteness meant that it never combined nicely with any of my trips. I would have to make a specific trip to get there.

Planning

I soon realised that the trip to WRTC might be my long-awaited chance to see Labrador. I contacted Nazaire Simon³, who is the prime mover behind the Western Labrador club station VO2WL. Nazaire was very helpful, but would be out of town during my visit. He introduced me to Gordon Parsons⁴ who would be home and who was prepared to show me around and provide access to the club station. This cooperation was great news. I would not need my own radio equipment to put Labrador on the air; something that I was very much hoping to do.

³ VO2NS.

⁴ VO2WW.

I investigated the option of driving there. It isn't far from Boston; only about 1600 km. However, the road is largely unpaved and winds through hilly terrain, leading to low average speeds. The idea of a 25 hour drive each way did not appeal to me.

The obvious solution was to rent a plane. Doing so should not have been difficult, as I already held a US Airline Transport Pilot certificate. I found several flight schools in the Boston area with suitable planes. However, to my amazement, rental rates are now higher than in South Africa, and this option would prove very expensive.

I gradually formed a novel idea. Perhaps I could find someone who had access to a plane and who might be interested in joining me in the venture. Labrador held some appeal for radio amateurs, as it is in very rare CQ Zone 2. Perhaps I could find a pilot who would be prepared to contribute to the costs in exchange for the opportunity to travel with a relatively experienced instructor, or a radio ham who wanted to operate from a sought-after location.

I asked Doug if he knew someone who might be interested. He referred me to Dave Pascoe⁵, a celebrity in his own right as founder of the LiveATC Web site. Dave owned shares in a suitable aircraft and appeared very keen to go, but was a key member of the WRTC organisation. He would not be able to disentangle himself over that period. However, he was a part-owner of two aircraft, and had partners who might be interested. Unfortunately, this option was thwarted by an engine problem which took their Bonanza off-line just a week or two after our discussions started. However, Dave found Gene Shablygin⁶ who owned a Cessna Corvalis and was keen to share the trip with me. Gene and I had much in common beyond ham radio and flying. We both work in the information security industry. He offered a very generous cost-sharing arrangement, which definitely placed the project within my reach. It also appeared likely that we could talk business, as his company has technology that might prove useful in my work.

The next few weeks were very busy. Apart from having to catch up on backlogged work from my recovery period, I had to make provision for disappearing for a couple of weeks and had to make all the preparations for the trip. During discussions with Gene, he suggested St John's in Newfoundland as a possible fuel stop. I immediately suggested that a side-trip to St Pierre et Miquelon might then be feasible. These two tiny islands are the last vestige of France's erstwhile North American empire. They lie just off the island of Newfoundland, which in turn borders mainland Labrador. Gene immediately accepted, as he is also a keen traveller who enjoys seeing new places.

This side-trip sounded like a great idea. It would give me the opportunity to see a new "country" (at least for amateur radio purposes⁷) without a major detour. Amateur radio licencing would be easy under the CEPT agreement, so we would even be able to operate our radios. However, we now suddenly had a need to take our own radio equipment. Gene immediately ordered a collapsible fibreglass mast and some wire antennas. I liaised with two regular visitors, who had operated from there as FP/W6HGF and FS/KV1J. Both Allan and Eric were very helpful, and introduced me to Jean-Pierre Carrerre⁸. I now had detailed information about fuel, services, taxis, phone services and accommodation. I booked our accommodation in Hotel Robert (a.k.a. Hôtel du Vieux Port), a

⁵ KM3T.

⁶ W3UA.

⁷ DXFC (dxfc.org) had a major influence on the way this trip panned out. And most other trips that I make.

⁸ FP5CJ.

location that has hosted many visiting operators in the past. I specifically asked for a room in the outbuildings.

There was another little twist to the tale. I had decided early in 2014 that I would build a radio station to bounce signals off the moon. One component of this station would be a high-power transmitter, which I did not yet have. A solution presented itself, in the form of some decommissioned analogue Canadian TV transmitters that appeared on the market. These units were far more affordable than new equipment. However, as the surplus equipment was being sold by individuals, I had trouble finding a shipping company that was prepared to ship them. My trip might provide a golden opportunity to get them back home. I would have to pay some overweight charges, but I would be able to get them home without too much trouble.

The stage was set. I was going to New England. I would work in my long-awaited Labrador trip, visit all New England states and as much of eastern Canada as I could, enjoy a week at WRTC, get my seaplane rating, see a new country and return with my new moonbounce equipment. It certainly seemed like a good way to use a plane ticket.

There was one major uncertainty. My research about Labrador and St Pierre revealed that fog was a major feature during July in both locations, with fog expected to be a daily occurrence in St Pierre. Fog and aviation do not mix well.

This trip, like most of mine, was preceded by several weeks of breathless haste to obtain visas and navigation data for three countries, conclude some last-minute business, fly several short-notice ambulance trips to central Africa, finalise the transactions around my new equipment, plus time-consuming rehabilitation sessions and exercises. During this period, I was amazed and delighted to lay my hands on a Reader's Digest condensed version of *The Land God gave to Cain*. It was the perfect serendipity. I didn't have the time to read the full version, but was delighted to be able to re-read the story that had started it all. There is no doubt that some of the subtleties of the story had escaped my initial reading as a small boy, but there was equally little doubt that the novel described a compelling backdrop; the construction of the iron-ore railway line into Labrador in the early Fifties. I also enjoyed the descriptions of amateur radio in the story. Now, as an expert, I could appreciate some of the subtleties of the descriptions. I was pleased to find that my early respect for Innes's research had not been misplaced.

The trip starts

Sooner than I could have imagined, the big day arrived. I grabbed my hand baggage and headed for the airport. After seventeen hours in flight and a three-hour transit in London, I arrived in Boston. A bus dropped me off in southern New Hampshire, where I was collected by Gene's wife Inna for a quick shopping trip. On arrival at Gene's house, we decided to leave the following morning. Dave arrived, and the evening was spent finalising a mobile phone contract and preparing some of the hardware for the trip.

After a hearty breakfast, we proceeded to Nashua airport for the departure. Dave was there to see us off. He used the opportunity to test a live video feed to be used at WRTC. Unknown to me, Dave had generated considerable interest in our trip in WRTC circles. The intrigue was greatly increased by the fact that the aircraft sported the tail number N6AA, a callsign that just happens to be used by one of ham radio's enduring legends, Dick Norton.

The weather was lousy, and I got a wonderful opportunity to try out the aircraft's XM weather system. The aircraft has no on-board radar, relying instead on ground-based information gathering received via an XM satellite receiver. I had never used this system, as my normal playground is not covered by XM.

Our first stop was Saint-Georges, Quebec. Although the plane was capable of flying to Wabush directly,

we had to clear Canadian immigration. With a South African on board, we were not eligible for standard US-Canadian facilitation arrangements. We also wanted to top up our fuel, as fuel prices and availability were far less favourable from there on out. Immigration officials at Saint-Georges were somewhat skeptical about our story; two guys wanting to travel to Labrador and St Pierre to play with radios? Pull the other one! Fortunately, though, we were sent on our way after a thorough search of our baggage.



Southern Quebec, with bad weather off to the right, as seen in the aircraft



We dodged bad weather all the way to Labrador, using the XM system as a guide. Intermittent gaps in the clouds revealed increasingly desolate landscapes. Rolling thickly-forested hills alternated with crystal-clear lakes. The most remarkable of these, Lac Manicouagan, is unlike anything I've seen before. It is even visible on large-scale maps of Quebec as an almost perfect circle around île René-Levasseur. With the exception of some isolated logging areas,

very little evidence of human habitation was visible. Even roads were all but completely absent.

We landed at Wabush airport in the late afternoon. Shortly afterwards, Gordon arrived to pick us up. We secured the aircraft and loaded our baggage into his car. Gordon took us to the Two Seasons Inn, close to the club station. We then went on a guided tour of the twin towns of Labrador City and Wabush. Gordon was the ideal guide, having run a newspaper in town for decades. He knew the terrain and the stories and the people, and many passers-by clearly knew him too.

After a hearty buffet meal at another local hotel, I returned to the hotel for some sleep while Gene operated the radio. Although I originally thought we would use the club callsign VO2WL, after consultation



Gordon Parsons VO2WW

between Gordon and other local amateurs, we decided to use our own callsigns. Mine would be VO2/ZS6EZ, which would identify both my location and my personal identity. The only down-side was that I would have more paperwork when I got home, but I was happy to do so to save the locals from the same fate.

After several hours of reading local history books that Gordon had given me and a bit of sleep, I walked across to the station to relieve Gene at the controls. I took over from him and gnashed my teeth for a while, as software gremlins caused random variations in my Morse code speed. I had fun regardless, as many old friends called in. Many of them expressed amazement at hearing me in that location. They clearly realised that Labrador is off the beaten path for a South African boy!



W3UA/VO2 operating VO2WL

Gene stuck around while I operated. After some time, I decided that I'd had enough, as the messy Morse code was both frustrating and embarrassing. We made the decision to walk back to the hotel, leaving our equipment to be collected in the morning.

After a good night's sleep, we made an early start. Gordon took us back to the station and from there to the airport. We were keen to get going, as there was a strong wind⁹ howling off the east coast of Canada. I was hoping that the wind would reduce fog formation, providing a gap for us to sneak into St Pierre. We flew over the railway line that provided the backdrop for that novel from so long ago in exactly the area in which that action took place. I was euphoric. After 42 years, I had managed to fulfill a childhood ambition. Labrador lived up to all my expectations. It is a stark, forbidding land indeed.

We flew over Churchill Falls and Goose Bay before crossing the channel to Newfoundland. To this denizen of tropical climes, a highlight was seeing my first iceberg. To be precise, I probably saw my first hundred icebergs. Most of them were relatively small, with it being mid-summer, but the waters off the northeast coast of Newfoundland were dotted with them to the horizon.



Refuelling at Gander

Our next stop was Gander, the traditional technical stop for trans-Atlantic flights. The very name conjured up visions of high adventure. We refueled and replenished our oxygen stores before leaving for St Pierre. The forecast indicated that we would make it, but there was nothing comfortable about the weather.

The flight to St Pierre was short and mostly uneventful, although it was interesting to notice that the French navigation data did not make it into the American databases entirely intact. Flying the arrival procedure took a fair amount of creativity. Some ten seconds before our decision point, we were still in solid cloud. We were grateful when the approach lights appeared from the murk, followed by the runway itself.

⁹ 35 knots at ground level.

The low overcast provided a grim backdrop to our attempts to offload the equipment and work our way through customs and immigration. Again, we faced incredulity from officials who just did not buy this ham radio story. However, after some intense paperwork, we were released to go on our way. We phoned one of the taxis on our phone list and were on our way to the hotel.



Several hours of hard outdoor work resulted in a workable station. After a great dinner in the hotel, Gene fired up the radio while I snatched some sleep. I got up early, before dawn. Gene was sleeping. I sat on one frequency for several hours. The software continued to play up. I downloaded the radio's manual from the Internet and reconfigured the radio to eliminate the automatic keying. I used a manual paddle for the rest of the time. Although I'm very rusty after a decade of inactivity, I managed to make several hundred contacts including all continents. Many old friends reported in, including several that I knew would be at WRTC later that week. This was ham radio at its best; a simple radio on a desk connected to some wires, resulting in world-wide communications. It really is all magic.

Gene woke up just as I was starting to consider taking a break. We went for a leisurely breakfast and discussed our plans. More bad weather was on the way. We both felt that we had achieved our objectives, and decided that another night would not be necessary. We immediately started breaking down the station and headed back to the airport. Getting fuel was an adventure, as their large fuel tank had been sent away for an overhaul. We refueled from drums and had to drive into town to pay. The price reflected the non-routine arrangements.

A visit to the control tower revealed that the daily airline flights almost always managed to land, regardless of fog, as the runway was equipped with a Category III Instrument Landing System. Being part of France has its advantages!

As we entered the runway, the air traffic controller reported visibility of less than 500 m on portions of the runway. We would not be able to land back if things went pear-shaped. I asked about the runway light spacing, and we counted the visible lights until visibility had improved sufficiently to allow us to go—and return. As soon as we could see enough of those lights, we took off.

The next sector, to Bangor, Maine, required careful planning. The wind that had provided us with a respite in the weather also provided a massive headwind, causing our progress to slow and our gliding range to become extremely asymmetric. We climbed to about 20 000 feet to enable us to remain within gliding range of land, making good use of our oxygen system. We crossed over Newfoundland and then over a stretch of sea water before crossing Nova Scotia, Prince Edward



Gene looking pleased with the sophisticated French sandwich

Island and New Brunswick. We entered the US in eastern Maine. We filled up at Bangor, where we encountered a ferry pilot who had just flown a TBM900 from Paris. He was amazed to learn that we had also flown in from France. It took him a while to realise what we were really saying.

The final leg to Nashua was uneventful. We parked the plane at Nashua and returned to Gene's home, tired but happy. Gene's friend George drove me to the WRTC venue in Massachusetts.

WRTC

Arriving at WRTC was a wonderful experience. Although only a small portion of eventual participants had arrived, I was surrounded by familiar faces that I hadn't seen in a decade, as well as labels sporting familiar callsigns attached to faces that I had never seen before.

I did have a logistical problem, though. I had arrived a day earlier than planned, and the hotel was fully booked. I had to organise another hotel some distance away, and a taxi to get me there. With the hotel's help, a taxi was scheduled for midnight. Just a few minutes before midnight, I was offered a bed in the hotel. I paid the taxi driver, who was somewhat surprised but probably relieved that he could go back to bed again without having to earn his fee.

Wednesday was the scheduled arrival date for the majority of competitors. More and more old friends and famous callsigns poured into the venue. I also found a good swimming pool in the hotel, and was able to fit in several training session over the next few days. The pileup contest, organized by Don Greenbaum¹⁰ of CW Ops, was an interesting challenge. With the exception of the previous two days' operations, I had pretty much been inactive for a decade. Pulling those Morse code callsigns out of the noise did not come easy. However, I was gratified to end up in the middle of the bunch. In this world-class company, the middle of the bunch is no disgrace. Or at least so I kept telling myself.

Competitor and referee briefings started on Thursday. There were 59 teams of two members each, along with a referee for each team. In addition, there was a team of five judges who would mostly be responsible for adjudicating the contest after the fact. I was one of the referees, and would be responsible for watching a single team for the entire 24 hour contest period. I had to listen to both radios simultaneously and report any discrepancies that I might find. I would also have to assist in smoothing out any logistical glitches and in reporting the score to the real-time scoreboard if the automatic reporting system malfunctioned.



Thursday included an outing to the ARRL in Newington, Connecticut. Apart from a guided tour through the entire facility, we also got to operate W1AW, using the special callsign W100AW. My personal favourite part of the trip was the visit to the DXCC desk. I had the opportunity to meet Sharon and Sabrina, whom I've talked to so many times, and the other staff members. I also got to finish some long-unfinished business and submit an endorsement application in person. The visit was marred by the news that Bill Moore had been involved in a serious

The W1AW Station at ARRL, with a statue of ZS4TX

¹⁰ N1DG.

accident, with a real prospect of lasting damage.

Friday was taken up by more briefings, the drawing and our eventual departure to the sites. My team was Tom Georgens W2SC and Dave Mueller N2NL. Both are accomplished testers, and I was looking forward to watching them at work. I'd worked Dave so many times in Guam, but he had just taken a new assignment in Hawaii. I was also pleased to find that they were pleasant guys. This was going to be a great weekend.

My team decided to return to the hotel on Friday night, leaving again early on Saturday before the start of the contest at 08:00 local time. With a one-hour drive each way, it was going to be an early morning. Obviously, we wanted to get back to the hotel as early as possible on Friday.

Our station, along with perhaps a dozen others, was set up in a state park in southeastern

Massachusetts¹¹. Lush vegetation was all around, but our station was situated in a strip of cleared land apparently intended as a hunting zone for small animals. Our logistics crew had everything under control, with the antennas and the tent already erected. There was even a small ablution tent nearby. The generator was fueled up, and we were ready to go.



Team K1S in front of the tent: Dave Mueller N2NL, Tom Georgens W2SC, Chris R. Burger ZS6EZ (referee)

Despite the nasty weather of the previous few days, we had wall-to-wall blue skies. The weather remained perfect for the duration of the contest. Stormy weather could have made life miserable, both because of wet conditions and the resulting static crashes on the radio.

The station setup included vast amounts of gear. Two completely independent stations, each consisting of an Elecraft K3 and a logging computer, shared the antennas through an automatic switching arrangement. Using a triplexer, both radios could operate simultaneously, as long as they were not on the same band. The arrangement meant that both stations would be pretty much going full bore for the entire contest, unlike previous WRTCs in which one operator would always be idle to some extent.

The guys had obviously done this before, as the station assembly was quick and effective. However, it soon became evident that there was spectacular mutual interference with some of the neighbours. Although the nearest neighbours were within visual distance, they appeared to be pretty clean. However, another neighbouring team was cutting up the band whenever it transmitted. There was no way that these stations could coexist. The team had to make a decision: Opt for a spare operating site or hope that the problem would be resolved. Obviously, a spare site might have new problems of its own, so moving would be a risky option. It would also be time consuming, resulting in reduced rest before the contest.

¹¹ Myles Standish State Forest.

Frantic enquiries indicated that the offending team was using an Icom radio, which appeared to be the source of the problem. A chain of events was set in motion, eventually resulting in a replacement power supply and a much more manageable noise level. Things started looking up.

The next few hours consisted of tidying up the wiring, shopping for supplies and making some on-air contacts to shake down the station. Many other teams were all over the bands. There was a very real sense of excitement.

The trip back to the hotel was uneventful. The atmosphere was somewhat more subdued than the previous night, with most teams getting to bed early. Our early-morning departure happened on schedule, and we were ready and waiting almost two hours before the contest started.

The contest itself was pretty hectic. Astute advertising had resulted in lots of interest. Many stations were looking for the distinctive 1x1 callsigns of the WRTC teams. The guys were able to keep a continuous run going most of the time, often even on both radios. My stereo headset could be switched between both radios, or wired to both at once. The completely different signals in both ears would require some concentration, especially for 24 hours straight. Interestingly, sitting behind both radios made things much easier. Looking at each radio in turn, I was able to “hear” pretty much only that radio. It was much easier than I thought.

Interesting as the contest was, it was at times excruciatingly difficult to stay awake. I nodded off several times in the early hours of the morning. Fortunately, every time I woke up, there were still familiar callsigns on the logging screens. At least not much time had gone by!

I had to work on some hardware modifications in the scoring system, resetting the scoring reporting system periodically and occasionally manually sending scores to the central computer when the scoring system was playing up. It appeared that our cell network coverage was a little iffy out in the boondocks, and needed a bit of help. It was important to keep providing scores manually when the automatic system collapsed, to allow the public to see each team’s score on an ongoing basis. The competitors themselves did not have any access to other teams’ scores.



During the contest, we also had a stream of visitors. Several judges arrived to ensure that the interference had been adequately addressed. Many of the visitors sported badges with very familiar callsigns indeed. I struck up a conversation with Paul Young¹². We had never met, but had made regular contacts over a thirty-year period. I regularly contacted the annual DXpeditions cum dive trips that he and his wife Charlotte Richardson¹³ were running during the early Eighties. Paul mentioned that Charlotte had recently taken up flying. They had bought a plane, which was based at a local airfield. Paul suggested that Charlotte could probably be talked into taking me for a flight. I thought that was a great idea, as I’d never flown a plane in Massachusetts before!

¹² K1XM.

¹³ KQ1F.

The end of the contest arrived, and results looked pretty impressive. The guys had accumulated well over 4000 contacts and 400 multipliers in 24 hours, using two 100 W radios and simple antennas. It couldn't be too far off the mark. Or could it? The team was really keen to see the electronic scoreboard. When we did, news was mixed. Our score wasn't far off the mark, but the ranking was around fifteenth. Only about 10% separated more than a dozen stations, including ours. Except for the two leading teams, the results were pretty tight.

We disassembled the equipment and packed it back into the rental car, while the tower team arrived to take down the beam. The operation was quick and painless, with the tower being lowered in just a few minutes and all the antenna work being done on the ground.

After the hour's drive back to the hotel, we sat around listening to the banter between teams. There was a lot of talk of unequal stations, with claims of huge disadvantage being heard. I found some of it amusing, having participated in WRTC three times and having had to work through the realities of a middle-of-the-bunch score on more than one occasion. It's never easy to accept. I completely understood the somewhat subdued mood in many of the teams.

The judges were very busy with the logs. Apart from software analysis of the competitors' logs, there was also an effort to quickly gather logs from other contest participants for cross-checking. Even international phone calls were made to verify some contacts, to ensure the maximum degree of fairness possible.

On Monday, I went on the Macaroni outing, where we would visit some Italian guy's radio station in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. I was very disappointed that they never served us any pasta. We just saw some old buildings with even older radio equipment. Talk about misleading advertising!



I was also hoping to fly with Charlotte on Monday. However, the gusty winds of the previous week had returned, and Charlotte did not want to tempt fate. I was disappointed, but fully supportive. After all, it's better to be on the ground wishing you were in the air than to be in the air wishing you were on the ground...

That evening, the closing ceremony took place. While the claimed scores indicated that the first two places would not be in doubt, there was a lot of speculation about third place. In the event, the third place was decided by accuracy. The German team signing W1P was the cleanest team in the competition. Their low penalty ended up moving them into third place, from their original claimed spot of fifth.

I have mentioned the long-term friendships that I have maintained through ham radio. WRTC has been a major contributor to these friendships. This time, a very pleasant surprise was my roommate Stewart Cooper¹⁴. Stewart runs DXFC. Although I've so far only mentioned DXFC in a footnote, it was a major influence on this trip. It has also ruined my life. DXFC.org lists the countries visited by individual radio hams. It is a simple honour-based system, where people register and mark off their

¹⁴ GM4AFF.

countries based on nothing more than a claim. I started playing the game around 2006. I'd always enjoyed travel, and had taken the chance to visit new countries wherever I could. However, DXFC has lent added impetus to that game, and has added the dimension of trying to put all those countries on the air.

I'd exchanged ideas with Stewart on several occasions. I always found him approachable and pragmatic. Learning that he was my room-mate was a pleasant surprise. I was not disappointed. We discovered that we have other things in common too. Stewart is a former Royal Navy helicopter pilot, and as keen about aviation as I am. He also possesses a whacky sense of humour (something to which I've always aspired...). We had many discussions, ranging from the completely frivolous to the very serious. I look forward to many years of fun.

On Tuesday morning, most of us departed. Thus came to an end a memorable week. I'm sure I'm not alone in my resolve to make a WRTC visit a regular institution in my calendar.

Maine

I pointed my rental car in the direction of Maine to get to the flying school where I was going to undergo seaplane training. In South Africa, seaplanes are not allowed due to concerns about water contamination. I'd flown a seaplane once before, but did not manage to complete my rating on that occasion. This time, I was hoping to set the record straight.

The sunny weather from WRTC did not last. I drove into increasingly lousy weather, much like the weather we'd experienced during the outing to Labrador and St Pierre. I kept hoping that my flight training would not end up in jeopardy.



Nathan and Chris

I was soon to realise that the old saying is not in vain: The planes in Maine fly mainly in the rain¹⁵. When I arrived at Twitchell's base, there was very little activity. My notification earlier in the day that I was running about an hour late was misconstrued, and the instructor had left. There was no other flying for the day, because of the bad weather. Fortunately, my instructor Nathan Theriault was able to return and the game was on.

The plane we were supposed to take had run aground, as the river's water level had suddenly dropped. We had to take the other one, which was moored in deeper water. Unfortunately, we were only able to do one flying session due to the arrival of even worse weather. That evening, Nate and I completed all the theory, in anticipation of an early start the next morning.

I found Nate to be a lot of fun to work with. He is an engineering student who flies part time and who enjoys music. We had a lot to talk about.

¹⁵ This quote was not taken from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* or from Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*.

At the end of the day, I took a drive up the hill to a ham radio station than Nate had told me about. It soon became clear that it wasn't just any old radio station. There were two tall towers with big beams, all for the 50 MHz band. A quick phone call to Doug revealed that it was probably Lefty Clements's station¹⁶, the leading 50 MHz station in the USA. The house appeared to be occupied, but no amount of knocking could attract any attention. I walked around the house several times, then took a dozen pictures of the tall towers and their antennas. Eventually, just before giving up and leaving, I managed to make eye contact with someone in one of the rooms, and to attract his attention.



K1TOL

Lefty came out and introduced himself. He'd been listening on 50 MHz with headphones, and hadn't heard my knocking. We spent about an hour chatting, exchanging ideas about operating and contests. Lefty pulled out a copy of the current National Contest Journal sporting special coverage of WRTC, and appeared very excited about it. He also showed me all his QSL cards from southern Africa. As expected, most of them were in Namibia, with the closest being ZS6NK about 260 km north of me.

I returned to the airport and made myself at home in a small vacant cabin by the river. A Walmart sleeping bag is cheaper than a night's accommodation, even if you have to leave it behind!



On final approach for a confined area of the river

We made our start early the next morning. Fortunately, Nate's other bookings fell by the wayside due to the lousy weather, so I had his undivided attention. I was a little apprehensive about the fact that they hadn't organised an examiner for my rating, and said so.

We spent the whole morning driving up and down the river, trying out different kinds of takeoffs and landings. Although it was exhilarating beyond description, I

was starting to feel somewhat the worse for wear. Having to extricate the aircraft from a sandbar that I'd managed to perch us on didn't help. We were soaked. Fortunately, Nate had warned me not to take anything with me that I didn't want wet. By the end of the four-hour session, I was ready for some rest. As we returned to the dock to refuel and rest, the examiner arrived. He was ready to start immediately. I would have preferred a break, but as I'd pushed for an examiner, I guess I was committed.

The test itself was relatively uneventful. I demonstrated everything I'd learned and it went reasonably well. After the paperwork was done, Nate and I went on a quick photo flight up and down the river. Less than 24 hours after arrival, I was out of there, mission accomplished.

¹⁶ K1TOL.

Vermont

I left Turner westbound, with low cloud above. I followed my nose, generally aiming west to travel through New Hampshire and into Vermont. My intention was to spend the night in Vermont, as I'd never been there. Unfortunately, my sense of direction was off by a few degrees. I ended up going further south than I'd planned. The drive was worth it, though. The terrain is so unlike anything we have in South Africa that I spent much of the time gawking. It was truly a memorable experience.

It didn't hurt that there is a great classical music station in the Boston area, with relays on several stations scattered around New England. I enjoyed their fare in all six states. Is it coincidence that the station callsign is WCRB, or is it destiny?

I found it hard to believe that I'd only been in the US for a little over a week. It felt like months. I was very relaxed indeed.



Quechee Gorge

I hit the Vermont state line around 22:00 and found a place to stay. The place had a Laundromat, and I did all my laundry while I had the chance. I crashed into bed around midnight.

The next morning, I was up reasonably early. The only local attraction appeared to be Quechee Gorge. I clambered down the ravine and back up again. It was a pretty sight, but I felt that their slogan "Vermont's Grand Canyon" was perhaps a little overblown. Not that a couple of hours getting my pulse racing in fresh air wasn't welcome. I was especially pleased that my knee appeared to be holding up, at least in broad terms.

Connecticut

Around mid-day, I started making my way down to Hartford for the ARRL's birthday bash. I decided to shun the direct route, deviating to the west instead and driving through upstate New York. I'd never driven a car in New York before--another one for the books. I eventually swung east again and made my way to Hartford. Doug had made arrangements for me to share his room, and I would be able to attend the full programme of events.

The next two days were comparable to WRTC in terms of the social life. I spent time with several old friends and met some faces that I'd spoken to dozens of times on the air. I had a leisurely lunch with Doug and with James Brooks¹⁷, whom I hadn't been able to catch up with at WRTC. They, as director and video producer for the event, had been kept constantly busy. The Convention included a large

¹⁷ 9V1YC.

exhibition and some interesting presentations. I also had an opportunity to bolster my collection of blank QSL cards, finally pushing my country total over 200¹⁸.

Apart from the ARRL Convention, I also attended an event with major donors at ARRL HQ.

The exhibition had one nefarious effect on me. I've always thought that the Elecraft KX3 was desirable. When I saw it in real life, my last resolve crumbled. Now I just have to find a way to lay my hands on one...

Rhode Island

After the Convention, my next stop was Rhode Island. I drove directly to Newport, the site of the holiday mansions for most of New York's billionaires from the nineteenth century. The sheer scale of it is amazing.



After the compulsory drive through Newport, I found my way to the Connecticut state line. I found a seedy motel just inside Rhode Island and settled down for the night. My trip was winding down, and a good night's sleep didn't hurt.

Connecticut—again!

The following morning, I drove back into Connecticut to see some submarines. The US Navy's submarine academy and a major nuclear submarine factory are in New London, and the Navy's submarine museum and memorial are in neighbouring Groton. I spent the morning looking through the museum and memorial, and clambering through the USS Nautilus, the world's first nuclear submarine.

The part I found most interesting was a cavity in the bulkhead right next to the captain's cabin, containing an 1892 edition of Jules Verne's *20 000 Leagues under the Sea*. This science fiction story provided the inspiration when this ship was named almost 80 years later. The book was handed to the captain by the head of the French navy when they landed in Le Havre after the first passage under the North Pole in 1957.



The remainder of the morning was spent shopping. I had to find a huge suitcase to bring back my luggage. I had four large wooden crates. I couldn't take more than four pieces. So I found a suitcase¹⁹ that could accommodate one crate, and stuffed all the newly-acquired trinkets in the open space.

¹⁸ My collection of blank QSL cards from over 200 countries is a great antidote for guys who take ham radio too seriously.

Homeward bound

On the way back to Boston's Logan airport, I took a leisurely drive through Cambridge, the site of Harvard University and MIT.

There was nothing leisurely about the check-in process. Although I had paid for overweight in advance, the Virgin Atlantic check-in staff proved abusive and very, very uncooperative. The airline won't easily attract my business again.

The trip itself was like most long-distance trips—very wearying indeed. This one had another little twist in the tail: I had a twelve-hour layover in Heathrow Airport. The transit hotel proved impossibly expensive, so I found a spot on a bench somewhere and snatched several hours of sleep. At least it wasn't a total waste!

During the layover, I sent my eldest sister a text message for her birthday. I was astonished to learn that three of my sisters were in Prague, ready to attend a performance of Mozart's Don Giovanni that very night, in the very same theatre where Mozart had conducted the premiere in 1787. I was indignant that I had not been invited!

The overnight flight landed in Johannesburg at 09:00. After a lengthy negotiation with customs around my TV transmitters and with Virgin Atlantic around my broken luggage, I went straight to the office. There was nothing gentle about the transition from an idyllic fortnight's holiday into a normal working day!

The Aftermath

I stepped straight into the normal hustle and bustle of work life. This time, I had a few other fish to fry. I had to plan a major delivery flight to Asia in a small plane, and had to complete the handover process of a business I'd sold.

Within about a week, both Gene and I had uploaded our logs onto the Logbook of the World. I've been amazed by the response; more than half of the contacts were confirmed within a month of the operation. I also received several direct requests by mail within a week or two of arriving home. Although a postal strike has now quenched the flow completely, I'm sure the deluge will continue. The QSL card design was not easy. It was a real challenge to reflect the happenings of this fortnight in only two paragraphs of fine print.

One would think that the memories would fade under the harsh glare of a hectic schedule and varied commitments. Don't believe it for a moment. These memories will stay. Labrador was an ambition that I had harboured for more than four decades. The float plane flying was very special. The unique experience of the ARRL's Centenary was a bit of history in the making. I visited all the states of New England. I spent at least one night in each of them, and drove a car in each of them. I made side trips into Newfoundland, Quebec and New York State. I brought home the equipment for another chapter in my ham radio career. And I had the opportunity to rekindle some lasting friendships.

It will be a while before you can wipe this smile off my face again!

¹⁹ I visited four shopping malls before I finally found one big enough. In South Africa, this particular suitcase would be marketed as a mobile home.