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**QST Issue:** Aug 1956

**Title:** Socorro Island--1956

**Author:** Lee Bergren, W0AIW/XE4A

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## Socorro Island—1956

BY LEE BERGREN, \* WØAIW/XE4A AND F. A. CARMICHAEL, M.D., \*\* WØMAF

• In June there was a flurry of activity on the DX bands as Socorro Island was on the air for a brief but productive session. XE4A was manned by WØAIW, WØEIV, WØIEV, WØMAF, WØOJW and WØUQV, who battled weather and land crabs to make over two thousand contacts. Socorro has subsequently been added to the ARRL Countries List, as noted on page 80 of this issue.

WHEREAS the never ending hunt for new DX continues, the geographical choices fitting such criteria have been diminishing to the vanishing point. For a DXpedition, Socorro Island seemed the most desirable of the remaining spots, and was thereby chosen in spite of the sparse amount of geographical information available. This island is one of the group of four which comprise the Revilla Gigedo Islands owned by Mexico, the location being about 18° 20' N Longitude, 110° 45' W Latitude. The group was apparently named for Count Revilla Gigedo an

Lipscomb, a neurosurgeon of Denver, and Dr. White, an anesthesiologist of Kansas City, intrigued by the fishing possibilities, rounded out the party.

Obtaining a license to operate in the Revilla Gigedo group of islands presented a considerable obstacle when information obtained on weather conditions dictated that these forboding islands must be visited not later than the first half of June if the most desirable of weather conditions were to be availed this year. This occasioned a rather tight time schedule which could not have been consummated without the timely and efficient aid of XE1H, XE1AX, and the Liga Mexicana de Radio Experimentadores. With such excellent assistance, a license for XE4A was obtained in about two weeks.

The diesel yacht *Malibu*, skippered by Capt. Leslie Thuett, was chartered to sail from Mazatlan, Mexico, on June 4. The *Malibu* is a twin screw, 100-foot boat fitted with excellent navigational gear and is extremely seaworthy. Even so, the Pacific tossed the *Malibu* about like a cork in a mill race.

On May 30, WØUQV at the wheel of his grossly



On the beach at Socorro, in front of the "shack"—WØAIW, WØUQV and WØOJW (l. to r.)

early administrator of Mexico under the Spanish Conquistadors. The only previous amateur operation from this group of islands occurred a few years ago when a radio operator with a temporary Mexican weather station had a limited number of contacts on 40 meter phone, in the Spanish language only.

The expedition had been conceived in the minds of several Kansas City hams, notably WØAIW, WØUQV, and WØMAF. Once preparation for the DXpedition was under way, WØEIB, WØOJW, and WØIEV quickly threw in their oars. WØMAF's son, Mike, along with Dr.

overloaded station wagon, and accompanied by WØIEV and WØAIW, weighed anchor in Kansas City, bound overland for Mazatlan. The vehicle somewhat resembled its western predecessor, the Prairie Schooner, except possibly for the "putting" gas-powered generator mounted on the top luggage carrier and one of the Rangers and 75A4s mounted in the rear compartment, ready for mobile operation. All of the other various gear was somehow wedged in the remaining spaces, which was rather miraculous considering the displacement of WØUQV himself. The equipment selected for the trip consisted of a pair of Ranger-75A4 combinations powered by two PE214B generators. The generators were generously loaned by the Johnson County Radio Amateurs

\* Radio Industries, Inc., 1307 Central Ave., Kansas City, Kansas.

\*\* Plaza Time Bldg., Kansas City, Missouri.

These are the land crabs that launched the counter-attack. This black-and-white reproduction doesn't do justice to the brilliant colors in the 35 mm. slide sent in by WØAIW.



Club of Mission, Kansas. A Central Electronics 20A was also taken along for s.s.b. transmission. After picking up WØOJW in Tucson, Arizona, the trip was successfully pursued to Mazatlan without serious event, but with the expenditure of two tires which succumbed to the ravages of overload and road hazards. WØMAF, WØEIB, and the fishing contingent were all met at dockside in Mazatlan on schedule, in itself a remarkable feat of synchronization. The radio gear was quickly stowed aboard the *Malibu* and set up for maritime-mobile operation of XE4A.

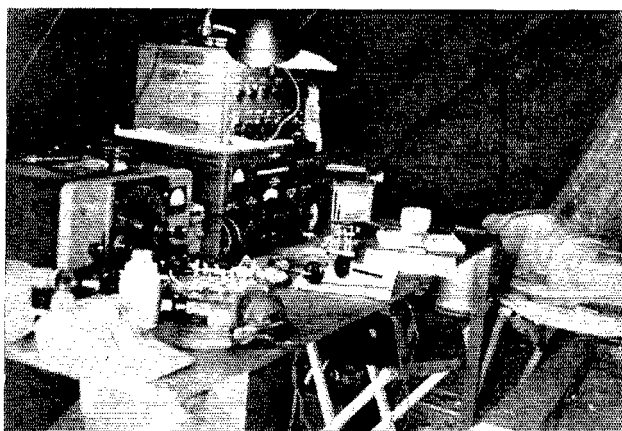
The Captain was not long in acquainting everyone with the fact that this volcanic island group was particularly unsavory weatherwise at this time of year. Chubascos, the Mexican term for hurricanes, of unpredictable violence seem to swirl about these islands during the summer months with an average frequency of one about each 10 or 12 days. Landing facilities and shelter from these storms were said to be particularly meager. Also, the surrounding waters were rather copiously infested with Manta Rays and sharks of various sizes, types and ravenousity. All of these facts were to be verified beyond all doubt!

Mazatlan, the Pearl of the Pacific, is the largest west coast port of Mexico. Its picturesqueness was amplified in the brilliant afternoon sun as the

*Malibu* set out on June 4, passing in turn, elements of the Mexican Navy, charter fishing craft, and small skiffs much farther at sea than caution would dictate. The passage to Cape San Lucas at the tip of Baja California was uneventful and smooth, allowing continuous operation of XE4A, maritime-mobile. Near the Cape, sea life was everywhere in evidence; marlin could be seen finning and leisurely sunning themselves. Two of the marlin struck trailing handlines, promptly breaking off the fishing gear and suspending all ham operations as everyone watched their graceful leaps for what seemed like miles astern. Giant green turtles, sharks, and fishing birds were likewise abundant. After a brief pause at Cape San Lucas to accomplish necessary formalities with the Mexican authorities, the DXpedition put out into the Pacific late the afternoon of June 5.

Immediately on rounding the Cape to the seaward side, the heretofore tranquil Sea of Cortez became the not-so-peaceful Pacific. Spray came aboard and the ship lurched rather unpredictably, necessitating the removal of all radio gear from the fantail to the aft cabin and the rerouting of the generator cables and antenna lead which descended from the boat deck above. This was accomplished rather rapidly but not without jeopardy to the equipment due to the inadequacy

This is operating position number one at XE4A. The body in the background is unidentified.





With the operation of NE4A cut short by the impending hurricane, some of the operators wait for the ship's boat. (l. to r.) WØMAF, WØOJW, WØAIW, WØIEV.

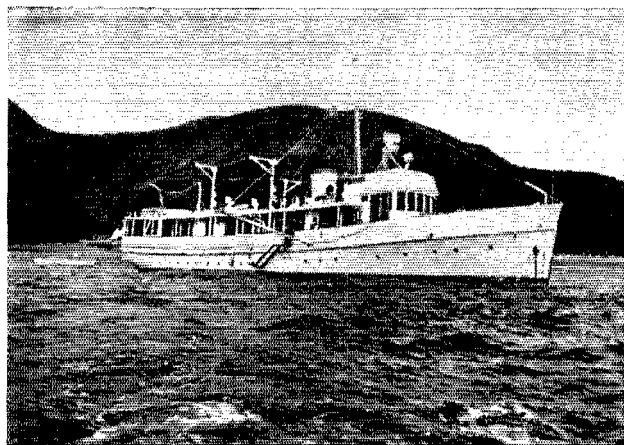
of landlubber legs which poorly anticipated the aquabatics of the ship. Actually, the next 24 hours of open sea passage to the islands were so rough that marine operation was accomplished only by placing all of the gear on the cabin floor and operating from a prone position. Even so, speakers, logs, personnel, and equipment were rather loosely coupled to the surrounding fixed objects of the cabin.

San Benedicto Island was sighted early in the afternoon of June 6, but could be seen only as the ship crested the very large swells which had prevailed during the past 20 hours. Approaching the island, it revealed itself as a very blunt, low-lying cone of gray and black stone entering the sea by precipitous palisades against which the unrelenting onslaughts of the sea seemed to have made no impression. Its visage was distinctly forboding and barren of any vegetation. From a blunt peak of several hundred feet it seemed to reach down to the sea in curving redundant folds of black lava, broken here and there by fissures and crevasses into which the sea pounded, forcing beautiful geysers of fine spray 50 to 100 feet skyward. There was no shelter, no harbor, no beach, only magnificent desolation. Contemplation of the island was interrupted by activity of a major

nature on the trailing handlines astern which were undergoing a vicious attack by several large and beautiful Wahoos. Three measuring five and one-half feet in length were boated with some difficulty. Socorro, 32 miles to the south, was not yet in view.

Some interesting medical problems arose on this overwater passage. The two main ones presenting themselves were the well known *tourista* and *mal-de-mer*. WØIEV, WØEIB, and WØAIW stoutly contended they were impervious to both maladies though the best medical consensus was to the contrary. The medicos (Lipscomb, White, and WØMAF) were in a fair way to judge but in a poor way to administer to suffering hamhood since they were obviously afflicted with at least the *mal-de-mer*. WØOJW was strangely mute which attested to his degree of disease, and young Mike, now the cabin boy, simply didn't feel well. All this time, the deplorable status of the ailing medicos was being transmitted to all listening ears via the A3 being emitted from XE4A/MM. WØUQV presented a knotty problem inasmuch as he professed the "reverse *tourista*" and pleaded for medical relief.

Socorro became a reality about 3 P.M., June 6, as a low-lying blur above the horizon. On nearing



The *Malibu* anchored at Socorro, with the inaccessible peaks in the background.

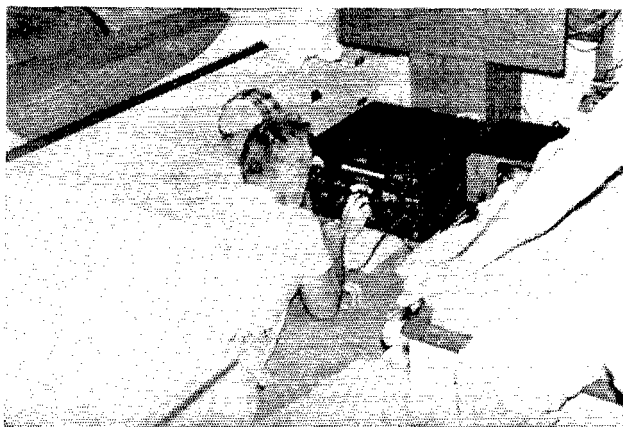
the approach, the 4,000 foot peak of the island became apparent though its summit was obscured by clouds which were ever-present. The overall impression of lush emerald green was a decided contrast to the rocky and barren appearance of San Benedicto. Seeking a safe haven for the *Malibu*, the Skipper spotted a small opening to the northeast which afforded entrance between jagged, menacing rocks protruding from the rough sea. With the aid of the electronic depth recorder, he adroitly maneuvered all 100 feet of the *Malibu* into this semi-sheltered cove and dropped anchor.

Meanwhile, furious activity was in progress aboard as W0IEV, W0OJW, W0UQV, and W0AIW prepared for the electronic assault of the island. At the head of the cove was a semi-lunar strip of steep beach about two city blocks long and flanked by rugged sea-rounded rocks inclining to impending cliffs. A skiff was quickly lowered overside and loaded with equipment while

crab army. After dark, literally thousands of dinner-plate size, brilliant orange-colored land crabs descended upon the operating tent from the surrounding hills and mountains, being attracted by who-knows-what. This necessitated a constant vigil by the machete detail who discouraged the invaders with difficulty, but with considerable carnage. For peaceful radio operation, the "crab patrol" had to mobilize and function hourly during nighttime operation.

With the crab population reduced, at least locally, to a size of competitive decency, radio contacts continued at a furious pace. The skiff was almost constantly plying between the *Malibu* and the beach, reinforcing the radio garrison with fuel for the generators, food, water, and operator replacements. After the first day of activity, the off-duty operators took time off for sleep, limited exploration of the island, or fishing as inclination dictated. Further circumvention of the island by motorboat verified that Socorro is no place for a

There seem to be several prone bodies in this picture. At least a couple of them are interested in continuing the maritime-mobile operation, but what about those men on the bunks at the sides?



all onlookers held their breaths, as even the bay was not entirely calm.

The landing party immediately perceived upon reaching shore that the choice peak which flanked the beach was unattainable by reason of dense low-growing cacti, briars, and other flora, all abundantly armed with sticking equipment. A later attempt on this small peak returned medicos Lipscomb and White to the beach, bowed and bleeding to mid-thigh.

Wishing to begin operation immediately, the beach site was selected and the tent quickly pitched, although the tent stakes would not hold in the sand, and volcanic rocks had to be substituted for stakes. The antenna masts were constructed from remnants of an old shipwreck and two long wire antennas, 275 feet long, were strung about 30 feet in the air. By this time, darkness had intervened, but XE4A was ready for operation. A short CQ was promptly answered by W6DZZ and the c.w. fracas was off to an excellent start.

The steady grind of several QSOs per minute was well under way when the first counter-invasion was begun by the Socorro Island land

land-based tourist of the pleasure seeking type. Actually, the anchorage which the Skipper found was the only semi-protected one around the entire periphery of the island. The sole population seemed to consist of crabs, lizards, and a few wild goats.

From the *Malibu*, myriads of exotically colored fish were observed through the clear water of the cove. Pompano, groupers, parrot fish, grunts, triggers and an occasional small shark seemed voracious and were caught with great facility from the deck. Fishing off shore from a motor launch was a matter considerably different. Here the seas were continuously rough and the fish large, speedy, and durable. Wahoo and tuna predominated though many other types were raised. This off shore fishing was accompanied by some hazards. It was quite difficult on occasions to boat a fish at sea before the sharks attacked and either removed all of the hooked fish, or reduced the residue to shreds. This spectacle admittedly discouraged even the more avid fisherman.

XE4A operation continued at a mile-a-minute clip until the afternoon of June 9. At this time

(Continued on page 126)



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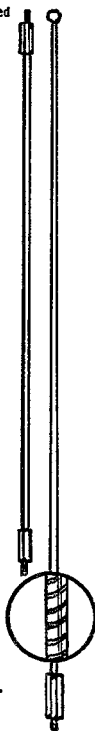
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The delegates commended the *Associazione Radiotecnica Italiana* on its excellent preparations for the conference, under the supervision of Secretary Schiff, I1AXD. Simultaneous translations of all the speeches were made in English and French; clerical arrangements were well-planned; and the personal arrangements for the delegates were of the best.

The next conference of the Region I Division will be held in 1959, at a place to be decided. The *Deutscher Amateur Radio Club* is considering sponsorship.

Those present were: SM2ZD, G2MI, G6CL, PA0DD, G2IG, and HB9GA, Executive Committee members 1953-1956: DL1WA, DL1KV, DL3FM, and DL1JB of DARC; G6OT and G2WS of RSGB; ZS5KL of SARL; ON4BK and ON4QZ of UBA; OZ2NU of EDR; EA2CA and EA2CQ of URE; OH2TK of SRAL; F9DW and F8GB of REF; PA0LR and PA0NP of VERON; I1FO, I1BDV, I1BEY, I1ABR, and I1BBE of ARI; CN8MM of AAEM; SM5MN and SM6SA of SSA; HB9J, HB9FH, HB9RS, and HB9FF of USKA; YU1A, YU1AC, YU1AA, and YU2CF of SRJ; W1BUD and W1LVQ of ARRL; and HB9SI of United Nations.

## Socorro Island

(Continued from page 49)

the medicos returned to the *Malibu* with information gleaned from a passing tuna fishing boat that a violent chubasco had formed and was rapidly approaching Socorro from a position 150 miles to the south. This bit of bad news was a grave disappointment to all because operation had been planned for several more days. However, prudence and impending weather would brook no procrastination. Therefore, with regret that the DXpedition should come to such an untimely and abrupt halt, XE4A was dismantled. In one hour all the gear was again safely transported from the beach to the *Malibu* in the skiff. A hoisting cable parted when the two motorized launches were raised aboard ship; this further delayed leaving. However, by 4 p.m. on June 9, all phases of fixed station operation of XE4A were at an end. Later weather reports stated that the chubasco responsible for the exodus struck the island at 11 o'clock the night of departure.

San Diego was finally reached six long and stormy days after leaving Socorro. The entire San Diego DX Club was on hand to meet the *Malibu* and a wonderful evening was spent rehashing the DXpedition. The trip home to Kansas City was then an anticlimax.

In summary, the DXpedition was an adventure which none of the participants will ever forget. All continents and 48 countries were worked in less than three days of operating time, with a total of 2037 contacts. The operating proficiency and courtesy of the amateur fraternity will not be forgotten.

QSLs? They're on the way!!!