Kilo Five Papa — Dispelling the Myth of Palmyra Atoll

Since its discovery in 1798, this collection of 50-some coral islands has been described as “cursed” and “hostile.” The KP5 team found the propagation a little unfriendly, but came away with 75,000 contacts and wonderful memories.

Hal Turley, W8HC

Ominous words such as “mysterious” and “threatening” have been used to describe Palmyra Atoll, located in the vast shark-infested waters of the Pacific, 6 degrees north of the equator and approximately 1000 miles SSW of Hawaii.

Deserved or not, Palmyra’s dark reputation was perhaps most notably fueled by a double murder that took place on the atoll in 1974, followed by a highly publicized trial — events that were later the subject of a best-selling book and made-for-TV movie, And the Sea Will Tell.

Even Amateur Radio hasn’t been excluded from the seemingly ominous side of Palmyra. On January 5, 1980, a Lockheed 18 Lodestar flying from Honolulu with the seven-member K6LPL/KH5 DXpedition The K5P Team (from left to right): Dick, W3OA; Glenn, WØGJ; Jerry, WB9Z; Craig, K9CT; Hal, W8HC; Lou, N2TU; John, K6MM; Mike, K9NW, and Tom, ND2T. [Perri Barbour, photo]

This spacious, air-conditioned “lab” served the K5P team well and kept them out of temperatures higher than 90° F and humidity greater than 90%. [Glenn Johnson, WØGJ, photo]
team crash-landed at the Palmyra airfield. One member of the team was severely injured and had to be medevacked back to Honolulu. Days later, the DXpedition team leader cut his hand badly, requiring the entire team to leave Palmyra, prematurely ending the 6-day DXpedition.

Those of us preparing for the K5P DXpedition wondered if we would fall victim to the “Palmyra Curse,” or if we would be successful in our efforts to move Palmyra out of the #9 position and farther down the “Most Wanted List” without harm to anyone on our team.

**Getting There**

Project organizer and K5P Team Co-Leader Lou Dietrich, N2TU, as well as other DXpeditioners in the Pacific Islands DXpedition Group (PIDXG), had been looking at Palmyra as a potential Pacific Island DXpedition site following successful operations at Midway K4M (2009), Swains Island NH8S (2012), and Wake Atoll K9W (2013).

Although Palmyra and its DXCC co-entity Jarvis Island, located some 455 miles southwest of Palmyra, both fall under administrative jurisdiction of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), The Nature Conservancy (TNC) owns Cooper Island — a substantial portion of Palmyra Atoll. Palmyra is a protected Marine National Monument being developed as a research center under the auspices of TNC and the Palmyra Atoll Research Consortium (PARC).

After Lou’s initial USFWS permit application was rejected, he was advised to seek permission from TNC through their administrative jurisdiction. In August 2014, he submitted a document to TNC outlining PIDXG’s proposed Palmyra operating plans, bio-security precautions, financials, and potential operating locations that might be used on Cooper Island. Two months later, PIDXG received an application from TNC, as did other members of the DX community who had expressed interest in operating from Palmyra.

At the end of January 2015, good news arrived — TNC had approved the PIDXG application for a Palmyra DXpedition from January 11 – 26, 2016. The operation would be restricted to 12 operators, with TNC providing room and board, as well as round-trip air transportation between Honolulu and Palmyra. Oh, and a $60,000 non-refundable deposit would be due within 30 days!

Cargo space for our gear on board the aircraft would be very limited, but TNC advised us that their annual resupply barge was scheduled to leave Honolulu for Palmyra on April 1, 2015, and would be available for us to transport equipment and supplies. This gave us a 7-week window to procure, test, and ship much of the equipment required for the DXpedition.

Obviously, we needed someone to help with logistics in Honolulu, receive and store our equipment, then transport it to the cargo dock for the critical April 1 barge shipment to Palmyra. Our go-to person for this task was Kimo, KH7U. A noted Pacific Island DXpeditioner in his own right, and member of the last Palmyra operation in 2005, Kimo played a key role in K5P’s success when he delivered 28 cases of equipment and materials to the Palmyra-bound barge — one week ahead of the shipment deadline.

We had dodged the “Palmyra Curse” thus far.

**Announcing the DXpedition and the Team**

Official announcement of the January 2016 Palmyra DXpedition was made at the April 2015 Visalia International DX Convention. Our original 12-member team included Lou, N2TU; Craig, K9CT; Glenn, KH6GJ; Tom, ND2T; Jerry, W89Z; Ralph, KØIR; Bob, K4UGE; Dick, W3OA; John, K6MM; Mike, K9NW; Jim, N9TK, and Hal, W8HC.

The budget for this project was almost $200,000, with most of the money coming from the 12 team members. Expenses to and from Honolulu (our point of departure to Palmyra), and hotel and living expenses while in Honolulu were the responsibility of each team member and not included in the budget. Each team member was also required to carry his own emergency/medical evacuation insurance.

In October 2015, we announced our call sign, K5P — or, as we frequently used during our phone operations, “Kilo Five Palmyra” or “Kilo Five Pacific.” With the call sign now on record, we awaited final confirmation from TNC on our charter flight status. But here is where our good fortune seemed to take its first turn — perhaps our first glimpse of the “Palmyra Curse?”
And Then There Were Nine

In mid-November 2015 we learned we would not have access to a 12-passenger Gulfstream aircraft as originally planned, but rather a nine-passenger Falcon 50.

Several options were considered in an effort to maintain our original 12-member format, but all were deemed cost prohibitive. At this point the team was polled for the only remaining option — asking for three “volunteers” to give up their spots on the DXpedition.

Ultimately, Ralph, KØJR; Jim, N9TK, and Bob, K4UEE, withdrew from the project — a disappointment for all of us. Beyond the personal side of losing three great ops, the practical side loomed too — the K5P team was reduced by 25%, which would certainly have an impact on our results.

Let’s Roll

On departure day, Saturday, January 9, 2016, we were finally outbound to Honolulu. Meanwhile, however, Lou had received an e-mail from TNC, advising that our flight to Palmyra would be delayed until the afternoon of the January 11, rather than in the morning.

We had hoped to arrive at Cooper Island early enough in the day to begin our setup and operation in the afternoon, but now we were not sure if that would be possible. However, there was a silver lining in this delay. TNC offered us the option of extending our stay by one day leaving Cooper on the 27th rather than the 26th. This additional day would prove to be one of our better propagation days, netting nearly 1000 unique call signs!

Welcome and Setup

TNC’s six-man team greeted us, quickly unloaded our cargo, and led us to the island’s living area, where we were given cabin assignments. Originally, our stations were to be set up in the maintenance shop area, or possibly in the “Yacht Club” adjacent to the marina, where we would be subject to the harsh tropical environment — temperatures of more than 90 degrees, as well as humidity greater than 90 percent. Fortunately, because there was no scientific activity slated during our operation, Lou was able to negotiate with TNC and relocate our stations in the Palmyra Atoll Research Consortium Dry Lab, complete with air-conditioning and Wi-Fi Internet access!

By evening mealtime, we had erected two of the verticals on the wharf and were glad to take a break from what had already been a whirlwind day. After dinner and witnessing the first of many spectacular Pacific sunsets, we returned to finish setting up the stations, network the laptops, and make our final preparations before getting on the air. At 21:06 local time on January 11 (or 0806Z on January 12), Mike, K9NW, logged the first contact from K5P with JA3EA on 30 meter CW. K5P was now the most sought-after station on the ham bands and, as expected, the pileups were intense.

Operating shifts were scheduled with the nine of us working in three-man teams so at least three stations were on the air 24/7. A fourth station was available for use by anyone not scheduled, although it was limited by available propagation. A fifth station dedicated to a 6 meter beacon operated for most of the 2 weeks, but there were no openings and therefore, no contacts.

By the end of our second day on the island, K5P was in full swing and we had done a good job of keeping Murphy — and perhaps more importantly, the “Palmyra Curse” — at bay.

Palmyra Atoll

Our gracious TNC hosts encouraged us to see as much of the island as we could during our off-hours. This included offers to take us by boat to different areas of the atoll to fish, snorkel, or kayak.

We saw hermit, sea, and coconut crabs by the hundreds, fairy terns that would fly down and hover practically in our faces or over our heads, red footed boobies on the nest, eels catching crabs on the shore, poisonous water snakes, manta rays, and 4-foot-long black-tipped sharks in a feeding
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any worse —but it did! “Jackhammering” auroral flutter, or signals arriving simultane-
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Now, About that “Curse”
After only a few days of operating, it seemed the only “curse” was the less-than-
favorable band conditions and poor propagation. SFI was running about 100 and the A-Index was “high.” Working the polar path(s) into the EU presented its own set of challenges with short openings. Western Europe was especially problematic.

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Trying to copy weak EU signals with QSB, auroral flutter, or signals arriving simultaneously LP and SP seemed like it couldn’t get any worse —but it did! “Jackhammering” from the dreaded “Dragon,” an over-the-horizon radar source, would pop up, wiping out large chunks of the entire spectrum and leaving us with little choice but to sit and wait until the Dragon was gone.

SSB was often an uphill battle of picking out partial calls, a single letter, uncertain phonetics, and fluttery signals, all of which seemed to be at the same signal strength. There were times we would start operating phone, only to switch to CW when it became too much of a struggle to copy SSB signals.

CW became the preferred mode during the brief EU openings and gave us the best possibility of maintaining acceptable operating rates. This also explains why we concluded with a more than 3-to-1 CW-to-SSB QSO ratio to Europe; 5948 CW to 1764 phone —arguably disproportionate.

However, for the entire operation, CW was unquestionably the mode of choice, with K5P logging 43,877 CW contacts compared to 23,273 on phone and 8162 on RTTY.

Glenn, W0GJ, discovered another “curse” via an Internet resource. It seems that for the first 10 days of our operation, there was an “electron cloud” hovering over the middle of the Pacific and directly overhead Palmyra that apparently also wreaked havoc with propagation.

I’m convinced if there was indeed some sort of “Palmyra Curse,” it chose to manifest itself with undesirable RF propagation during our DXpedition —especially to Europe, where Palmyra was the #2 Most Wanted entity!

K5P Afterthoughts
In spite of the difficulties, we concluded our operation with a respectable 75,000 QSOs and 24% unique call signs. Although our log indicates a somewhat disproportionate 11.4% EU QSOs compared to 46% NA and 34% AS, this was not really a surprise, based on the propagation forecasts.

Perhaps most importantly, the K5P Palmyra DXpedition was completed without incident —nobody was injured or murdered, and nobody had to be evacuated or medically treated. Oh, and we met all of our team goals!

I think I can officially dispel the “Palmyra Curse” as nothing more than folklore, myth, and legend. Given a chance to return to “Kilo Five Paradise,” I know I’d go, and I am fairly certain that the other operators would as well.

Acknowledgments
PIDXG is grateful to the USFWS and TNC for granting permission for this DXpedition, with special recognition to Palmyra’s TNC staff for their support and assistance above and beyond our expectations.

We extend our thanks as well to our radio equipment and antenna sponsors: Elec-
raft, SteppIR, Expert Amplifiers America, Array Solutions, DX Engineering, Midwest Antenna Systems, and Arlan Communications (RadioSport Headsets).

We also wish to recognize our major financial sponsors — NCDXF and INDEXA — as well as the many other DX clubs, organizations, and individuals from all corners of the world who graciously provided financial support to make this DXpedition a reality. Thank you all!

Hal Turley, W8HC, was first licensed as WN8ZAT in 1967, at the age of 15. He was bitten by the DX bug in 1988 and slowly moved up the DX ladder, achieving Top of the Honor Roll status in 2005. Since 2012, Hal has participated in four Pacific Island DXpeditions, including NH8S, K9W, VK9WA, and K5P. He looks forward to being a team member on the 2018 3YØZ Bouvet DXpedition. Hal retired from the chemical manufacturing industry in 2012 and currently enjoys time with his grandchildren, when he is not traveling. He can be reached at w8hc@arrl.net.

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