Al Rovner K7AR Transcript

Eric 4Z1UG
K7AR, this is Eric 4Z1UG. Are you there, Al?

Al K7AR
4Z1UG, this is K7AR. Go ahead, over.

Eric 4Z1UG
Al, thanks for joining me on the QSO Today podcast. Can we start at the beginning of your ham radio story? When and how did it start for you?

Al K7AR
I was first licensed in high school after seeing all the equipment that my electric shop teacher had. In the shop, we had workbenches where were taught basic electronics. We verified Ohm's law, we verified Watts law. And in the corner was an amateur radio station. And I didn't know what it was at the time. The teacher found that I was interested in it and tutored me and what the equipment was. He made some contacts for me, and that really piqued my interest. After that, I got my license in my junior year in high school, which was 1971.

Eric 4Z1UG
That's a, that's a very similar story to mine. Did you work on the. And one of the things we did in electronic shop was we found a five tube super heterodyne AM receiver, you know, at a swap meet or something, and we tore it down to the parts and then rebuilt it. Did you do something like that?

Al K7AR
Yes, but that would have been in my junior or senior year. So the electronics instruction came in the form of a kit with various parts. And as you move through the third and fourth year of the program, you started building more complex items like a receiver and even a transmitter. And the transmitter came with warnings to only use one banana lead as antenna or you could cause interference. So I took 100 banana leads and strung them all around the shop. And the teacher said he could hear my transmitter out in the parking lot. And he came in and he said, there's only one person I know who would do this. And of course it was me. So, yes, we built more and more complex products and that got me interested in my engineering career.

Eric 4Z1UG
And what was the hometown?

Al K7AR
This was in Westmont, New Jersey, in Haddon Township, which is just outside of Camden, New Jersey.

Eric 4Z1UG
And you, you obviously got to electronic shop in the ninth grade for some reason. Was there, was there Some kind of electronic trigger in your childhood that caused you to have this interest?

Al K7AR
Well, I, I've always been interested in radio, even as a young boy. And I had several transistor radios and I found that I could hear a lot more stuff at night than I could during the day. And I asked my dad why is this? And he told me he didn't know, but he noticed the same thing driving around in his car. He could pick up more stations at night. I was just always interested in that, even as a 8 or 9 or 10 year old, and really enjoyed it.

Eric 4Z1UG
Amazing. So here you are in four years of electronics courses, you get your ham radio license as a junior in high school. Did you have friends in high school who also shared the interest?

Al K7AR
No, I didn't know any of my classmates. I did know other local hams that invited me to a club. And everyone in the club was an electrical engineer from Drexel University in Philadelphia. And they steered me toward going to Drexel and getting my electrical engineering degree, which in retrospect was a great idea.

Eric 4Z1UG
And so you're also strong in math and science as well.

Al K7AR
In high school we met with a guidance counselor who gave us various tests to determine what direction might we be good at after high school. And they told me I was off the charts in science and math and would be a good candidate for engineering. So I had kind of two or three people pointing me in that direction.

Eric 4Z1UG
Amazing. When you got out of high, when you got out of Drexel, you had the bse, I guess. Did you go on to do further academic work in engineering?

Al K7AR
Yes, but not for, oh, let's see, I would have been 23, probably not for 12 or 13 years. Here in the Oregon area. I went back for a master's degree in computer science because my employer at the time, the famous company Tektronix, asked me to do a database development to characterize our manufacturing process. And I told my manager I really didn't know anything about databases. And he sent me to a class at the local college and I liked it so much I asked if I could continue to go to school. He said sure. And that wound up being a three year project where I finally got my master's degree.

Eric 4Z1UG
And you were able to solve the problem that Tektronics was having? Yep. How about that? What was your first rig? Before we move on a little bit.

Al K7AR
My very first rig was a home brew transmitter I built from the, I believe it was the 1969 ARRL handbook crystal controlled 6001.646 output. Final. And of course were limited to 75 watts input. So that was my very first transmitter, which I only used for, I don't know, six months or nine months. And I was able to scrape up enough money to buy a used Helicrafters HT32A. That thing was big and heavy.

Eric 4Z1UG
That was the transmitter. What was the receiver?

Al K7AR
When I first started, I had the old realistic DX150, which by the way, I was also a shortwave listener before I was a ham. And I continued to use that radio until I found it was not particularly good at ham use. And I wound up getting a Drake 2B, which even today I still like. I always thought that was a good receiver.

Eric 4Z1UG
Do you still own the Drake 2B?

Al K7AR
Unfortunately, no. Ever since. So when I started at Drexel, honestly, I had no time for ham use. I was incredibly busy. I sold all my equipment and I didn't get back into ham gear until 1980 when I had moved to Southern California. And all my co workers were hams. And they urged me to get back in the hobby, which I did then.

Eric 4Z1UG
And so in 1980 you were living in the Los Angeles area, Orange County.

Al K7AR
I lived in Santa Ana and I worked in Anaheim.

Eric 4Z1UG
Really? Who did you work for in Anaheim?

Al K7AR
A small company called Interstate Electronics Corporation that was doing development of one of the very first GPS receivers ever. And were required to be in the lab whenever we had view of the one or two satellites that were present at that time. So if the satellite was in view at 3 in the morning, we had to be in the lab at 3 in the morning. And I later worked for Northrop in the defense industry also in Anaheim.

Eric 4Z1UG
Oh, that's interesting. Do you remember any of the hams there at Interstate?

Al K7AR
Vaguely. I mean, this was 45 years ago. I remember some of them. What I remember about Northrop is they had a separate building in the parking lot for a ham radio club. And they had towers out back and I could get on whenever I wanted. I used to go out there and eat my lunch in the shack and get on the air and work stuff. And this was a much better station than I had in my little apartment in Santa Ana.

Eric 4Z1UG
Amazing. Well, I actually lived in that area at that time, so I was just kind of, you know, curious if there was anybody that you might know there. Okay, well that's very interesting. So you get back into the hobby in 1980. What spurred the interest in working DX? Because we'll talk about it that you've become like number one in dxcc. And I think that certainly that takes quite a bit of dedication. What caused that interest in working dx?

Al K7AR
Well, to be honest, I was kind of bored working US States. I didn't find it that inspiring to contact Texas or Nebraska or something like that. I wanted to see, well, how far can I work? And keep in mind in Santa Ana, all I had, I lived in an apartment. And I went to my landlord and I didn't ask. I basically made a statement that I want to put up this antenna. And I showed them a picture of a hustler vertical and the landlord went, well, okay, as long as it doesn't go above the roof. And so I stuck up this vertical antenna that was like 23ft tall and it went right up to the roof line.

Al K7AR
The problem while that worked and I could get on the air and I could even work dx, I caused a lot of interference to nearby apartment people, TVs, stereos, whatever. My antenna was only just feet from their television. So I don't know, I kind of had to limit my hours to not be too much of a burden.

Eric 4Z1UG
I see. Because the antenna was kind of ground mounted. It wasn't on the roof.

Al K7AR
That's correct.

Eric 4Z1UG
Right. Oh, that makes sense. It's a funny thing, you know, I, being in Israel, I'm kind of tired of working Europe for frankly because they're on every band. Europe is wide open during the day. Oh, I have, it's kind of like, boy, I should like to, would like to work the United States or South America.

Al K7AR
I, I have a related story. I had the opportunity to go on a de expedition to Syria on two different occasions in 1994 and 1990 and excuse me, 1994 and 2001. And needless to say, the Europeans are very loud. 20, 30 Over nine. We have very limited openings to the west coast and so forth. I was trying to work North American stations and let's just say it was difficult. There was not a lot of cooperation. Yeah.

Eric 4Z1UG
So I'm playing with FT8 right now. It seems to be the best mode for checking to see which direction my inverted V seems to work on various bands and occasionally I've worked a few North Americans but not many. And I don't think I've worked any west coast at this point. So you were saying you got into, you got bored with working North America and you decided to start working dx. So what kind of, what kind of dedication did it take to become you know a real DXer. And how did you improve your craft over the years?

Al K7AR
Well, you need to be available when the DX is available. You need to know what the expeditions are planned,

what dates will they be on, what bands will they favor, and so forth. Now, back then in the 80s and 90s, we had newsletters like the Daily DX and others that they were helpful, but of course there was no real time feedback as to this station is on this frequency right now. So I consulted the newsletters and tried to keep up to date with all the news as to who was going to be on. And I made myself available. And what I found was my little vertical antenna was okay for working the Pacific and Asia, but getting into Europe and Africa was a little bit harder. And I started thinking about moving and I had several interviews.

Al K7AR
I had an interview in Austin, Texas, had an interview in Scottsdale, Arizona, and I had an interview with Tektronics here in Vancouver, Washington. And that interview in Vancouver worked out great. Half the people I worked with were hams. I fit right in. It was, it was right up my alley writing a firmware to designing electrical systems, writing the firmware to drive it. And I wound up moving here at the end of 1984.

Eric 4Z1UG
Okay, and were you able to find a QTH that lent itself well for, you know, being a DXer?

Al K7AR
It's the same QTH I'm in now. I've lived here for 41 years. All the homes in my neighborhood are one acre lots. And out of my back half acre, I have a 75 foot Roan 45 tower with a big stepper DB36 on it. And I'm not entirely sure of this, but I don't believe that I need a building permit to put that tower up. No one has ever said anything. The county has never come knocking on my door. So I went from having this little vertical to having a real antenna and a little bit of land where I could put up some wire, inverted Ls and quarter wave slopers and so forth.

Eric 4Z1UG
Okay, so now you've got the QTH and you've got the antennas that you need in order to work dx. When you say being available, are you saying that also means getting up in the middle of the night, if, you know, following the gray line perhaps in order to be there for these openings?

Al K7AR
Absolutely true. When, when I was chasing dx, I was up. Let me restart that. When I was chasing DX on 80 and 75 meters, I was here at every sunrise, at every sunset all season long for probably 10 years.

Eric 4Z1UG
Okay, but being a young man, you didn't need a nap in the middle of the day.

Al K7AR
That's true. What I found on 75 meters was there's a pecking order. You got guys with 80 meter yaggies running kilowatts that can work any station they want to work. And here I am with my quarter weight sloper and this. And the stations would go, anyone else? Like a contact with 4Z1, United Golf? And I'd throw in my call and they go ahead Al. And I'd call you and one of the big guys would go over and I would say, I'm sorry, I didn't hear him. Can we try again? And, and they'll say call again Al. So I try again and maybe on the second or third time I can hear you and give you a report. But they were nice enough to let us little guys in on 75. That's probably one of my weakest bands as far as antennas.

Eric 4Z1UG
Fascinating. Okay, so then what did it take to reach the DXCC number one spot? I mean how long did that take and what kind of dedication?

Al K7AR
I'm trying to remember. Well, before you get to number one, you have to get on the start of the honor roll, which is what, nine countries from the top? I believe so the current top is 340, so that would mean you have to get to 331 to get to be on the basic honor roll. And it's just a matter of commitment, knowing who was on, being available in the middle of the night calling before fta. I would be on CW and it might take me two to three hours of calling to get through a pile up, but I did. It's just dedication, just getting on all the time, looking for the expeditions, especially new ones that I need this country, I need that country. Well, today we call them entities,.

Eric 4Z1UG
The ex entities. Did you get North Korea?

Al K7AR

I have two contacts with North Korea. The first one was kind of odd. The station was calling CQ on 10 meter sideband with no one coming back to him. He was just cqing. And I was so surprised I called him barefoot with 100 watts. He comes right back to me and I talked with him for two or three minutes and I said, stay here, I'll announce you on the DX cluster and more people will call you. So I put him out on the cluster and a few, a handful of stations from the Pacific Northwest worked him. And then propagation went away. There was this so called flashlight propagation to The Pacific Northwest and he only worked a handful of stations and luckily I was one of them. The same station was on later on 20 meter riddy.

Al K7AR
He was 20 over S9 at my location and I can't print him and I'm pulling out the rest of my hair trying to figure out why I can't print him. And on the DX cluster it says he's transmitting at 50 baud which is not normal. So now I'm going through this software where the heck do I change my baud rate? So I found it, I changed it to 45 baud which is normal. And then I started printing him and I got through right away. That was I, I think that was in 2004 and so I haven't seen or heard North Korea in 22 years.

Eric 4Z1UG
Besides North Korea, what is the other say two countries that are the most difficult to get.

Al K7AR
A lot of these ones like Bouvet, where it takes a huge effort to go there, like Kerguelen Islands, Bouvet, South Georgia, South Sandwich. It takes a big ship and a lot of money and 20 operators. The good news is you can usually work them. I had I believe it was five contacts with the recent operation from Bouvet. I almost got them on 160. I was trying so hard to get them on 160 but all I would get was on FP8. I would decode a packet here and there, but not quite enough for a whole qso.

Eric 4Z1UG
Interesting. Do awards such as DXCC improve your operating skills? Or can award chasing sometimes distract from the larger purpose of amateur radio?

Al K7AR
I feel it does improve your operating skills learning where to call in a pile up, looking for open spots, open frequencies. And what really improves your operating skill is going on a de expedition. How well can you handle a pile up when you're now on the receiving end of it?

Eric 4Z1UG
Was that the reason that you went started going on the expeditions?

Al K7AR
Not really. I, I went on my first expedition in 1987. I was talking on 20 meter sideband to Kilo Hotel Zero Alpha Charlie, who's now a silent key. And I called him where I was located and he said oh, I'm from Camas. And you wouldn't know this but Camas is the next city over for me, two or three miles away. So we had a very nice chat about how he wound up as an administrator for the local university on Saipan. And then he invited me to, he said would you like to come out and operate for the CQ Worldwide Sideband Contest? And it took me 2Ns to hit the, push the talk button on the mic and say, yes, I'm coming.

Eric 4Z1UG
So that's great. That was, so that was your first the expedition?

Al K7AR
That was my first one and I had a ball. I just loved it. And I, I couldn't wait to go out on my next one, my next expedition. I convinced my manager at Tektronics to send me to Guernsey island where Tektronix has a plant, they have a manufacturing plant. And I went there to install new equipment and train the local people how to use it and what to do. And while I was there, I arranged to stay at a bed and breakfast run by a local ham. And he said, you have complete access to my equipment 24 hours a day. Have fun. And again, that was again, I couldn't wait to go out again.

Eric 4Z1UG
That's pretty cool. When it comes to selecting a destination, how do you decide which destinations that you want to go to for your personal D expeditions?

Al K7AR

That's an interesting question. The last 12 or 13 years I've been operating from the Pacific, sometimes by myself and sometimes with my friend Bob W7 Yaq. And we found the Pacific islands can be in high demand simply because they're very far away from places like your area and Western Europe. It can be hard to work the Central Pacific from the uk, Spain, Portugal and so forth. So the Pacific islands, we've had very good pile ups.

Eric 4Z1UG
From.

Al K7AR
Where else have I gone? I've been to Central America, I've been all over the Caribbean. I'm going back to Bermuda at the end of September with a couple of my buddies. The reason we're going to Bermuda is because we could get relatively cheap flights. The flights to the Pacific were costing over $3,000 US and we all decided that no, we don't want to spend that kind of money. So just a matter of, you know. Has this island been active lately? No, it hasn't been active for seven or eight years. Well, that might be a good place to go.

Eric 4Z1UG
Have you ever arrived at a destination to discover that the site, the noise level, the power system or the antenna space was very different from what was promised. And what did you do?

Al K7AR
Not really. One of the things, if you're going to go on an expedition and you're going to stay at a hotel or resort, you need to ask the owner for permission. Like I would like to. I'm an amateur radio operator. I would like to visit your location and install a temporary antenna system. The key word there is temporary. When I leave, I'M going to take everything down and you won't even know I was there. And I've never been turned down. No one has ever said, no, you can't do that.

Eric 4Z1UG
Are these antennas on the building itself or out on the beach or.

Al K7AR
No, I've never placed antenna on the building. What you're looking for is a location where you can put your antenna on the beach as close to the water as you can get it. When were in Vanuatu, my friend Bob and I, our antennas were like 2ft from the ocean. Okay. And magic happens when you get your antenna near the salt water. Magic happens even with a simple, like a DX Commander Vertical Antenna. Boy, that just works the world from there.

Eric 4Z1UG
Amazing. What was the most serious technical or logistical problem that you faced during a DE expedition?

Al K7AR
Well, if I go back to Syria one day, were visited by someone for the 2001 trip. I was the team leader. We were visited by someone. We operated from their. Their main telephone building. We had antennas all over the roof of their telephone building. Someone came in and said, you're causing interference to our equipment. And I knew right away what that meant. It meant, stop now. So I asked our, the operators to turn off their amplifiers and run 100 watts. And I asked the gentleman, can you please check again and see if the interference is still present? And he came back later and he says, no. Okay, now the interference is gone. So we kind of came up with an informal agreement of we'll use our amplifiers outside of business hours and we'll run barefoot during business hours.

Al K7AR
And that seemed to work out okay, but you have to be flexible, knowing that the results could be. You could be ejected from the country at that point. Point.

Eric 4Z1UG
Right. Sound to me like you didn't seem to have any problems in this particular case where you came across, you know, someone who might have been hostile, you know, to you either as an amateur radio operator or to you as an American.

Al K7AR
True. In. In Vanuatu, all of our radio gear was confiscated and locked up by the customs department. We tried for a half hour to explain why were there. We were there for our hobby. We wanted to talk with other hobbyists

around the world and that when we would leave, we would bring all of our equipment with us. We would not leave anything behind or sell it. And that went nowhere. And I had sent an email to Bernie W3UR saying that were going to be delayed because our equipment was locked up. And I received an email the next day from a gentleman in the UK who used to be the customs manager at Vanuatu. And he said, go back to them and mention my name and tell them. I said it was okay to release your equipment.

Al K7AR
So the next day went back and talked with the manager and he said yes. Oh, I remembered him, sure. But there was still questions about what is this equipment? Did you pay taxes on it? Well, we don't need to pay taxes on it. We're, we're not leaving it here. We're bringing everything home with us. And after some discussion, they finally released our gear and we lost a day or a day and a half of operating. But that's how it goes.

Eric 4Z1UG
What, what's your present flyaway station? What do you take, what are you going to take with you on your next.

Al K7AR
Well, my previous flyaway station was all the. Which added up to almost 40 pounds of carry on gear. Luckily it was small and didn't look suspicious. But that was heavy. A KPA 500 weighs 26 pounds and I'm a short person and I'm lifting a 26 pound weight trying to put it in the overhead bin on an airplane and I can't reach it. So I asked some of the other passengers to help me and they go, what do you have in here? Gold bars? And, and they said the same thing, but that's heavy. So my, my new setup is the Flex Aurora 510. That's the low end model with no front panel. However, it's still Fairly large. It's 7 inches tall. And I'm trying to come up with some kind of travel case for it, but that only weighs 18 pounds.

Al K7AR
So I'm cutting my travel weight pretty much in half or less. And I'm looking for. I haven't been on an expedition with the Aurora yet, but I'm looking forward to that.

Eric 4Z1UG
Right. And so the Aurora just for the listeners who haven't been read in yet, is Flex Radio's new 500 watt using what, polar modulation or something like that in order to be able to make that 500 watts correct.

Al K7AR
One of the things I really like about the Aurora is it doesn't get hot. You can run it at 500 watts all day long and it barely breaks a sweat. And I think that's because it's so efficient. On the 120 volt AC line, it only draws 6amps to put out 500 watts RF. So it's just so efficient, it doesn't get hot at all.

Eric 4Z1UG
That's pretty amazing. And does it have a switch for 220? I mean, if you're traveling into Europe or any place other than Japan and Canada, you're going to be faced with 220 volts.

Al K7AR
That's correct. It's all automatic. I think it does 100 to 250 volts or something. Automatic switching. By the way, you brought up a good point. If you're going to go on a trip somewhere you need to research what kind of power outlets do they use. What's the AC line voltage, what adapters do I need? You need to do that well in advance or you could be surprised.

Eric 4Z1UG
Yeah, what I do is I actually get the. From an electric supply. You can do it now on the Internet from an electric supply store in the country. You're going to just get the mail plug and put it on the end of your. I actually put it on a euro plug which is the standard three thing that plugs into most gear now. And, and I have the female euros and so I make an adapter a pigtail with the local male plug to the euro female. And then I, I bring my own power strips that hold all of my chargers and everything like that when I'm traveling and that seems to work. And you can get that stuff. And those work better than adapters. I think they're probably, it's more efficient.

Eric 4Z1UG
So you're not, you know, you don't have a lot of heat at the adapter itself.

Al K7AR
That's it. That's a good point. Yeah, sure.

Eric 4Z1UG
So you can buy a lot of, you can buy the British. Well, you might even be able to find it in maybe in supplies. Oh Alibaba. So I'll give you, I've done that AliExpress and Temu. I found those plugs you know in there as well. So just for an aside I do.

Al K7AR
A talk on going on your first D expedition and just a lot of little things you pick up you that you wouldn't think of like bring an extension cord with you but you know, little dumb things like that.

Eric 4Z1UG
So those are things that you are items that you would check. You know probably, you know the, you want to carry the rig with you know in the overhead compartment but things like antennas and in wire and balance and coax and stuff. Where do those ride?

Al K7AR
Well, I usually travel with a four foot long golf case and in the golf case I have a DX commander antenna and a TR spider pole for 160 meter antenna and all the various wires, radial wires. I, I travel in with these 1 gallon plastic bags and I, I roll up a lot of the wire and I stick it in the plastic bags. That all goes in the golf case which if you're going to go on an expedition like this, get ready to pay excess baggage fees or oversized baggage fees. It's just part of the game,.

Eric 4Z1UG
Right? And it's good to have that stuff. What can. What convinced you that FT8 should be part of a serious D expedition?

Al K7AR
I happen to like FT8 a lot. Earlier I said that I like to go places that are, that are difficult for people to work. Like for Western Europe to work the South Pacific. A lot of these stations are very modest. They don't have towers, yaggies and kilowatts. FT8 is incredibly good at digging out weak stations out of the noise. I've done some tests here at home where I said there's nothing there. All I hear is noise. There's nothing. No wrong, completely wrong. The software is digging out -24 and -25 decibels signals out of that. The other thing I like about FTA as an operator is it's very non stressful. After a four or five hour shift of operating cw, you know, I'm ready to have a drink. It's. It's Pretty stressful on FT8 running as a fox. It's not stressful at all. It add.

Al K7AR
Add operators to a queue. The software will work stations from the queue in the order you specify. And it's just very easy on the operator where you could go all day long and not be tired. Now of course with this queue, you know, if I were to hear you in the queue, Eric, I could move you up to the very top so you would be the next station contacted. And I only do that for special friends.

Eric 4Z1UG
What's the difference between ordinary FT8 operation and Fox and hound operations operation?

Al K7AR
My very first use of FT8 was on an expedition to Samoa as 5 whiskey 0 radio Alpha. I had never used the software. I didn't know anything about it. It was all brand new. And I was lucky enough to have a tutor. My friend Atsu 5 Whiskey 1 Sierra Alpha who's on the air almost every day, he came over and tutored me into how to make contacts. And my first impression was it works. I can make contacts, but it's very slow. I'm used to working 3 to 400 contacts per hour and with regular FT8 I can work 50 to 60. And then if there are retries involved then it gets even slower. That was in 2017. The next year 2018, the developers released De Expedition Mode, which is what we call Foxhound mode.

Al K7AR
As a fox, I can work three or four stations at once and I can get my QSO rate easily in the 2 to 300 an hour or higher. And then recently in the last couple years, they've released Superfox mode, where you could probably do over 400 QSO's an hour, which for someone like Bouvet, that would be wonderful. That's what they need in Bouvet and. And some of these really rare locations. So Superfox allows you to send. I hope I get this correct. Four signal reports and five RR73 reports in 115 second cycle. And really that's quite impressive.

Eric 4Z1UG

Now, do you try on it when you do your dexpeditions from a hotel or whatever, do you try to run multiple modes, not just FT8, but single sideband, CW, RTTY and FT8 in order to create a variety offerings for the people that are wanting to pounce on you and be able to give everybody a chance to work you?

Al K7AR
Yes, I do. However, I prefer cw. I like to think of myself as a reasonably good CW operator. I'll get on sideband, although I don't really like it that much because there's just so much chaos and confusion that's going on. And it takes me a long time to pull out one call sign when people don't cooperate or they keep calling or they can't hear me. So I. I prefer cw. I will do sideband. Typically, I only do riddy during a contest. In September, a couple friends and I are going to Bermuda for the CQ Riddy contest. So we'll be running riddy all weekend long from. From there.

Eric 4Z1UG
Yeah. It seems to me that it's only during contests when you actually hear ridy operation. I've kind of tuned around myself at various times and don't hear any RY operation at all unless it's a contest. Is that. That's your.

Al K7AR
Yes.

Eric 4Z1UG
Yes as well.

Al K7AR
It's. I. I think RY has become. I don't know. People will probably disagree with me. I think it's become more of a nostalgic mode than a. A practical mode for expeditions to use.

Eric 4Z1UG
Or for anybody to use it.

Al K7AR
Yes.

Eric 4Z1UG
You. You've written some articles for qst. I think the most recent one I think I saw was on networking and USB connectivity. How much. How much networking knowledge should the average amateur radio operator have now in order to be able to put their station together effectively?

Al K7AR
That's a great question. I think some basic knowledge is needed. What is Ethernet what are IP addresses? How does my home router work? What do If I want to access my station remotely? What is port forwarding? Okay, just kind of, just some basic knowledge of networking will go a long way. Speaking of remoting, I had the chance over our July 4th holiday weekend to use my Flex Aurora remotely. And I was super impressed with it. It's so easy to use that from a remote location. They, they've got it all designed in. It's just wonderful. I'm very pleased with it.

Eric 4Z1UG
Now, does Flex as a Flex Radio owner, do they have an owner's club that essentially allows you to connect to other Flex stations in the owner's group?

Al K7AR
Not to my knowledge, but I'm so new at this, I could be wrong. There's nothing that stops a friend of yours from accessing your station as long as they have the correct software and know the process. I mean, there's certainly you could let a friend use your station.

Eric 4Z1UG
Do you think that we're becoming too dependent on computers, drivers, Internet connections, etc. When working amateur radio these days?

Al K7AR
Perhaps. You know, the bottom line is we're still using RF and antennas and coax to make contacts. And I've

been on islands where I have no Internet access, so I'm not able to upload my logs to Club Log every day. So, you know, right there you've just got your radio and your coax and your logging computer and that's it.

Eric 4Z1UG
Well, it's my understanding that you could probably buy a Tesla cell phone now and go to just about any place in the world and operate the cell phone over Starlink or take a Starlink terminal. Are you considering taking any gear like that on future D expeditions so that you always have the Internet connection?

Al K7AR
Not really. It would just be extra gear and extra weight and cost that I would need to deal with. I, I, I think that's important for very rare locations so they can communicate with their pilot stations so they can upload their logs. The club log has become a very important factor in a lot of expeditions to give people that warm feeling that yes, I really am in the log. Thank you. So I do annual donation to Club Log every year.

Eric 4Z1UG
You're a member, I think, of the Williamette Valley DX Club. What value as a DXER has being a member of this club contributed to your amateur radio experience?

Al K7AR
I need to teach you how to pronounce that word, Eric.

Eric 4Z1UG
Okay, I'm ready.

Al K7AR
It's Willamette.

Eric 4Z1UG
Willamette Willamette Valley DX Club.

Al K7AR
The Willamette Valley DX Club is a club here in the Portland, Oregon area, which I joined pretty much right after I moved here some 40 years ago. And we have, I don't know, 70 or 75 members. And what I like about the club is these are active DX's, these are guys that are on the air every day. They're listening to six Meters for European openings every day. They're chasing D expeditions every day. And we have email lists and so forth where we spot our own DX for just for club members to join in. So I really like the club. It's a wonderful group of people, very active, and it's just been a great asset to the local community.

Eric 4Z1UG
If you're a listener to the QSO Today podcast and you're saying, you know, I think I'd like to become a DX or D expeditioner. Do you think joining the local DX Club has value in terms of being able to make that first step towards becoming a serious DXr?

Al K7AR
Yes, it certainly does. You can get all kinds of tips. What kind of antenna can I use? When's a good time to get on the air? What kind of calling procedure do I need to work? What is. How do I work? Split mode. All these kind of questions any DX club could help new people with.

Eric 4Z1UG
After more than 50 years in amateur radio, what part of the hobby still excites you the most?

Al K7AR
I really enjoy the de expedition part of it. And I would encourage people to go on their own trips. Even a simple trip like, let's just take a little side trip to Puerto Rico and put up a little wire antenna in the tree. You'd be surprised what you can work from there after you go through. Last November, I went to Palau, and then I realized, you know, even from Honolulu to Palau is still 3,800 miles. You really get a feel for how big the Pacific Ocean is. But, you know, you get there and you get your antenna hooked up and you hook it up for the first time and 20 meters just comes alive. You listen on 20 meters and the band is just full of stations. That. That gets me excited on every trip I go on.

Eric 4Z1UG

That's really cool. Are rising travel costs, licensing restrictions and environmental rules making future expeditions more difficult?

Al K7AR
Yes. Earlier I had said that we wanted to go to the Pacific, but the flight cost was exceeding $3,000. And that's just for a simple trip. So all these guys that have to rent a large ship and Spend a million dollars to go to an island. I think it just requires a lot of contributions from the community to support that and help them pay their costs. I'm lucky that the trips that I go on licensing is usually very straightforward. If you wanted to go to French Polynesia, licensing is done strictly by email and there's no cost involved. And they'll send your license as a PDF file in email. Very simple, very easy for anyone to do that. And again, I would encourage people to go on their own trips.

Eric 4Z1UG
Now, if you're a young person who has never printed a piece of paper, would you encourage anyone who's traveling on a d expedition to one of these islands where you've received a license in PDF format, Would you encourage them to bring a notebook full of paper that. That shows the licenses and all the permits and everything else, or is showing your phone enough?

Al K7AR
One of my rules is that I always print off my license and any import documents they may have provided, as I may need to show that to the customs inspector. And that has happened on numerous occasions where I show them my license and say, I have a permit from your government to bring this equipment in the country. By the way, a lot of licenses like French Polynesia, you have to include what equipment are you bringing, what's the model number, what's the serial number, what frequencies does it operate on, how much power are you running? And all that's printed on your license. Okay. And it's pretty hard for the customs inspector to look at that and give you trouble at that point, because clearly I have permission from your government. So I always print that off and take it with me.

Al K7AR
That that's one of my hard rules.

Eric 4Z1UG
Yeah, that's very important. If you look back, al on your amateur radio life, what has amateur radio added to your life that you would not have found anywhere else?

Al K7AR
Well, I've made a lot of friends around the world. I've traveled to a lot of destinations that I likely would never have gone to before. I probably would have never gone to Syria. I probably would have not gone to various Pacific islands. And I found my trips to the Pacific islands has been very rewarding. I've learned a lot about their culture and their history that, I mean, had I not gone on these expeditions, I would have no idea at all.

Eric 4Z1UG
So it's made you a world traveler.

Al K7AR
Yes.

Eric 4Z1UG
Yeah, certainly. I think certainly that one of the things I. That you mentioned that we share is we're a worldwide fraternity and. And that those relationships and friendships supersede politics and everything. Else I think that's in my experience that's true.

Al K7AR
If you go on a trip and you forgot to bring your 12 volt power supply, a local ham will likely glad you let you borrow his 12 volt power supply. Just things like that. When I operated from Guernsey, the owner of the station gave me complete access to his station. You could use anything, any time of day you want. And that's how fraternal we are as hamster.

Eric 4Z1UG
I think especially if you're, if you've been in ham radio for a while and you have a license like the extra for example, then I think it gives you a certain credibility worldwide with other hams. They, they I would think,

seem to think that you actually have a certain amount of knowledge that you know what you're doing if you're using their equipment and they feel better about it.

Al K7AR
Yes. And of course there's always the rule that, you know, if you break it, you bought it. You know.

Eric 4Z1UG
That's right. How about that? Al, Is there any advice that you'd give to new returning hams to the hobby?

Al K7AR
Oh, that's a good question. I think I could break it down into two words. Get active, get on the air. Well that's four words but get on the air, listen to what's out there. Get on FT8 and some of these digital modes. Try a new band like as you said. I've been a ham a long time but I don't have a lot of experience on 6 meters. I don't know when to listen. I'm not sure if my antenna is too high. When I go on an expedition and I go out for lunch, I'll leave the radio monitoring 6 meter FT8. One time we came back from lunch and the screen was full of contacts from Japan. So I got on and call CQ and you know, stand back, they all called. Every call district from Japan was calling me.

Eric 4Z1UG
Amazing. Yeah, that's one of the nice things about I, I also leave my radio on FT8 on various bands and it is interesting to see, you know, what kind of comes across the, comes across my screen. I also like these DX or these digital websites that are listening around the world for your signal or you're listening around and reporting back into these sites so you can actually hear, you know, who hears you or what are you hearing and where they are. And this is really without transmitting. This is actually quite, you know, quite cool as well. What is that? If I can remember what the name of the. Of that website is.

Al K7AR
It's. Oh, boy.

Eric 4Z1UG
PSK Reporter.

Al K7AR
That's it, yes.

Eric 4Z1UG
PSK Reporter. Amazing site. And then I've also been playing with Whisper and, you know, down at, you know, a couple of watts. And that's quite amazing as well in terms of its worldwide coverage.

Al K7AR
So what else about the expeditions? When you come home, you will have to deal with QSLing you will get. That depends on how rare your location is. You will get hundreds, possibly thousands of QSL requests. Although with Logbook of the World today, a lot of that is semi automated. But still, there's still a desire for paper cards out there.

Eric 4Z1UG
So you have, you still have paper cards yourself?

Al K7AR
Absolutely.

Eric 4Z1UG
And you know that I just mailed something to the States and it was quite expensive. So mailing paper cards around the world can be very expensive. Do you have a budget for that set aside?

Al K7AR
Well, if I'm mailing my own cards, yes. I don't do that often. So if it's just a few dollars here or there, that's not a problem with my D Expedition cards, people will send me. It used to be just one green stamp or $1 bill. Now today, like if. If you wanted me to send you a card from my Palau trip, you would have to send two green stamps to cover the postage. Speaking of which, it's going up again this Sunday.

Eric 4Z1UG
Wow. So what you're saying is it's over $2 to send a postcard now? Are you actually sending it as a postcard? Are you putting it in an envelope?

Al K7AR
No, it goes in an envelope. It's not $2. I. I think it's a $70, and it may go up to $1.80 or $1.90 this Sunday. So $2 just rounds it off, maybe covers the cost of an envelope.

Eric 4Z1UG
Wow. Al, I want to thank you so much for joining me on the QSO Today podcast. I've learned a lot and I so appreciate speaking to you today.

Al K7AR
Happy to help, Eric. And you make it very easy to chat with people.

Al K7AR
All right. Thank you, Eric. 73.

Eric 4Z1UG
73. Bye. Bye.