

A Note from Sean - KX9X

A former CU resident and TCARC member

A few months back, I posted a note on the Society of Midwest Contesters reflector asking if anybody knew the whereabouts of our dear old friend Romeo Stepanenko, 3W3RR. As many will recall, Romeo had a habit in the late 1980's and early 1990's of popping up with his gear from some of the rarest countries in the world of ham radio, make tens of thousands of contacts, and then getting us armchair DX'ers to flood him with requests for QSL cards (which included "green stamps") that often came very late or not at all. There was also that minor issue of him not being able to provide the DXCC administrators with the proper documentation from some of his adventures, proving he was indeed where he said he was. In the parlance of DX'ing, Romeo was the ultimate Slim, a pirate.

I'm a musician, and I figured if ever there was somebody that was worthy of a scurvy-dog, sea-shanty kind of song, ol' Romeo was that person. There were rumors he was a shady character, who showed up at the Dayton Hamvention in 1999, years after being expelled from DXCC, and then disappeared from the face of the Earth. He is the sort that is perfect for song and story. I needed factual material for the tune, so I started to do my homework. The note to the SMC reflector was the beginning of that homework.

I didn't get much response other than a couple of notes that said, "Yeah, whatever happened to that guy?" So, in July 2005, I posted a note on Eham.com in their DX forum, entitled "Wherefore Art Thou, Romeo?" Again, no info. So, I started searching on Google. I found an article online about ham radio in Afghanistan that mentioned him in passing, and a site that had several of Romeo's QSL's (including WX9X's fake P5/R0MEO card he handed out at Dayton one year). I printed the articles and stuck them in my notebook I keep for writing lyrics, where they have sat for a while, collecting dust. I forgot about it and moved onto other projects.

On the evening of October 19, 2005, I received a phone call from an inspector with the U.S Postal

Service based in St. Louis. He said he needed to meet with me concerning an investigation of "...one of my associates." I obviously made myself available at his earliest convenience, which was the next day's lunch hour.

I ran over to my friend Matt, NM9H's place. Was he trading endangered animals over the Internet? Circumnavigating customs laws by importing fresh fruit from Venezuela? Ripping tags off of mattresses and mailing them to Botswana? He assured me he was doing nothing of the sort, as he was "...an old man with a house full of kids, with neither the time nor energy to be surreptitious."

A night of fitful sleep ensued. We jazz and folk musicians have a sordid history in America, often lumped together with other unsavories like gangsters, communists, and bootleggers. Which of my compadres had warranted constabulatory intervention, and how did the Postal Service get involved? Besides, my youthful indiscretions are long over, as I have nothing to be discrete about any longer and I'm closer to middle-aged than youthful. In short, like my friend NM9H, I'm boring and getting old.

The Inspector came to my place today (20 October 2005), and after some pleasantries, asked if the name Roman Vega meant anything to me; I truthfully answered no. He then asked if I was a ham operator, to which I said yes. He then asked if the name Romeo Stepanenko meant anything to me, and I nodded uncertainly. The Inspector then produced a printout of my Romeo inquiry on Eham.com. He said he was following up on an investigation from the US Department of Justice in San Francisco concerning our beloved Romeo, and he wanted to know why I was asking about him in a public forum.

I gave him a Reader's Digest version of ham radio, DX'ing, and an overview of the DXCC program. I explained how Romeo pretended to operate from various exceptionally rare places, duped tens of thousands of us into sending him SASE's with green stamps included, and was then caught and expelled from the DXCC

program for these fraudulent ham activities. I explained why this caused such a scandal to a program that has had an exceedingly high level of ethics and scrutiny associated with it over the years. He was quite interested in people sending dollars along with QSL requests. I explained it was customary to help pay for the QSL you're going to receive, especially when dealing with an operation from a place as rare as Myanmar or North Korea.

I then had to explain to him why I'd want to write a song about such an unsavory character. As I explained, every hobby or pastime has some level of folklore or legend attached to it, and Romeo is one of the most infamous characters in the history of DX'ing. In baseball, people wrote songs about Jackie Robinson and Joltin' Joe. Bob Dylan wrote about Emmett Till. Heck, Frank Zappa wrote about a wacko dubbed by the press as The Illinois Enema Bandit. Numerous ballads have been written about pirates, oddballs, dogooders and ne'er-do-wells in all cultures all around the globe. Ham Radio DX'ing may be a small culture in the grand scheme of things, but it is a culture nonetheless. It stands to reason that, just like any other culture, the heroes are glorified and the villains are reviled. To me, writing a song about Romeo seemed logical and fun.

After an hour of questioning by the Inspector (nice guy, by the way), he said it was quite obvious I wasn't involved in any of Romeo's current shenanigans, and proceeded to tell me The Story:

Roman Vega, aka Romeo Stepanenko, was arrested and extradited from Cyprus to the United States in March of 2004, and has been charged with 40 counts of wire fraud and trafficking in stolen credit card numbers. He is alleged to have done this in online chat rooms. The Inspector I spoke with indicated that he allegedly bilked over \$3 million out of this scheme. Romeo has pleaded not guilty to all charges. He has been held in northern California, as he is considered a flight risk. His trial is scheduled to begin in San Francisco on Monday, November 28.

As Paul Harvey would say, "Now you know the rest of the story."

The Inspector never informed me that I was not allowed to discuss this, so I'm posting it here for all to see. He indicated the case against Romeo looked quite good indeed, and that they were following up on all leads they had concerning him. I was "lucky" enough to have been considered a Person Of Interest; I got to see a copy of my Federal subpoena, where I was "commanded" to appear in Federal court on November 28 at 8:30AM. The Inspector indicated this would probably not be needed. He did mention that San Francisco is quite nice this time of year, though, and it was almost a pity I wouldn't get to take the Government upon their free "vacation." I gave him one of those nervous smiles and waited for him to move on.

He left me his card, said he'd file his report, and told me I'd probably never hear from him again. He did give me the case number (Northern District Of California CR04-0101 CRD), since it's a matter of public record. The fact that I was sitting on the edge of my seat as he was telling me this, slack-jawed and with my eyes as wide as saucers, might have had something to do with him giving me the info as well

How did I get associated with Romeo? I'm just a ham operator who had one QSO with him when he was in Vietnam (still my only 3W QSO), spent probably hundreds of hours listening for him from his other far-flung locales, but never worked him anywhere other than 3W. I just happened to ask the right question at the wrong time.

It certainly is interesting what bites sometimes when you go fishing, eh?

I'm finally recording my solo CD now. I'll be sure to let everybody know when it's done. I could use a lead player, though; maybe I should give WB6ACU a call...

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