

How Hot Tuna, a YouTube Video, and a Backyard Cook from South Jersey Ended Up at the World's Greatest Contest Station

What K3LR taught me about radio, brotherhood, and why the shrimp scampi matters just as much as the pile-ups.

By Terry Rossi, N2LQH

It's 2 AM on a Saturday somewhere in western Pennsylvania. Eleven of the fourteen best contest operators on Earth are locked in — each one seated at their own Icom IC-7851, each one knowing exactly what they need to do and doing it with quiet, practiced precision. Outside, fourteen towers rise over a sixteen-acre compound, their antennas aimed at every corner of the globe. The contest started at 7 PM Friday and won't end until 8 PM Sunday, and not a single one of these men is thinking about anything other than the next contact and coming out on top. What was a new HF operator and a backyard cook from South Jersey doing in the middle of all this? Funny you should ask.

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Let me back up about a year.

I was first licensed as a Technician Plus back in the early nineties, but life and the sun cycle had other plans and the hobby quietly faded away. Then in 2025, something pulled me back. I sold my business, my kids were grown and I once again had time to explore amateur radio — and boy had it changed. Suddenly my vocation, computers and IT, could be part of my avocation. I upgraded to General, rediscovered HF, fell headfirst into CAT control and digital modes, and started poking at contesting. I was a newcomer with enthusiasm, decent equipment, and absolutely no idea how deep the rabbit hole went.

That changed when I started researching the ARRL Worldwide DX SSB contest — one of the first real contests I'd ever participated in. Down the YouTube rabbit hole I went, and eventually I landed on a 168-slide club presentation given by one Tim Duffy, callsign K3LR, CEO of DX Engineering and owner of one of the most celebrated contest stations in the world. I watched the whole thing. The towers. The shack. The compound. The operators. The barn that sleeps eight. Eleven radios running multi-multi. I was blown away — and I was just watching it from my couch in South Jersey.

Then I hit a slide that stopped me cold.

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There, in the middle of a slide about what keeps the K3LR team fueled through a 48-hour contest weekend, was a face I hadn't seen in four decades. Someone Tim introduced as "Chef Sal, WM2H." But I knew him as something else entirely — the older brother of my childhood friend Neff. Sal Anastasio. Their dad was a ham. And Sal, following in his father's footsteps, had become one too — though I had absolutely no idea.

Back in the day, before any of us had our driver's licenses, it was Sal who drove a group of us to Catholic high school every morning. He had an 8-track deck in a Chevy Chevelle and an iron-clad devotion to Hot Tuna and Jefferson Airplane. Eight-tracks, lap belts, and the faint smell of leaded gasoline. If you know, you know. It was not exactly on my playlist at the time. But you don't argue with the guy who's driving.

All those years later, there's Sal — on my laptop screen — credited as the man who feeds the greatest contest team in the world. We'd been friends for over 45 years, though time and distance had gotten in the way. And I had no idea he was a ham.

— *"You never know who you're going to see in a YouTube video."*

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I sent him exactly that line, along with a screenshot of slide 154. Over the next couple of emails we had a good laugh, shared a little catch-up, and I didn't think much more of it. The world is small, the coincidence was delightful, and that, I assumed, was that.



A few weeks later, I received what appeared to be a routine customer satisfaction email from DX Engineering. The sender was the CEO — Tim Duffy himself.

Now, most people write back a polite two-line reply. I wrote Tim a letter. I told him about my experience with DX Engineering (ten out of ten, genuinely). I told him about getting back into the hobby, about upgrading to General, about my first foray into contesting. And then I told him the whole story — the YouTube video, the 168 slides, the Hot Tuna 8-track, the Catholic high school carpool, and the moment I saw Sal's face on a presentation about contest food. I closed it the only way that felt right: 73, Terry Rossi N2LQH.

I had no agenda. It was just a good story, and Tim seemed like the kind of person who'd appreciate it.

What I didn't know was that Tim loved the email so much he shared it with the entire DX Engineering staff, the broader K3LR contest team, and Sal himself. Sal, to his eternal credit, wrote back and told Tim I was a great chef. Now, Sal has known me for over 45 years. He knows exactly what I am and what I am not. But Sal is also a man who may be thinking about his retirement options — and a co-chef who can handle a pork Wellington, or equally important, a Pork Roll, is a valuable thing. For the foreign operators and any readers who didn't grow up in South Jersey, Pork Roll is its own food

group around here. I choose to believe Sal's endorsement came from a place of loyalty. I cannot prove it came from a place of honesty.

Either way, it worked. Tim extended the invitation and I was in — part of the team for the 2026 ARRL DX Phone Contest.

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Nothing prepares you for K3LR in person. The compound stretches across sixteen acres. Fourteen towers dot the property in every direction, some of them rising to genuinely staggering heights — including a 275-foot 40-meter tower that dominates the skyline. Standing beneath those towers is something no photo can prepare you for. Antennas from top to bottom, each one rotated in a different direction, layer upon layer of aluminum disappearing into the sky. You find yourself just staring up, turning in a slow circle, trying to take it all in. There is a lot of aluminum at K3LR.

The shack is purpose-built, organized with deliberate precision that tells you immediately this is not a casual operation. Eleven Icom IC-7851 transceivers — each one worth over ten thousand dollars — sit at eleven operating positions. And if you're thinking that sounds expensive, Tim keeps two more as spares. Because that's the way Tim rolls.

But the radios might actually be among the more modest investments at the station. State-of-the-art single-band amplifiers home-brewed by Tim, stacked antennas as far and as high as you can see, CW skimmers, sophisticated listening devices, and elaborate antenna switching systems — each of them separately rotatable — round out each position. Threading it all together is an interlock system that physically prevents two operators on the same band from ever keying up simultaneously — a hard requirement under contest rules, and an engineering challenge unto itself.

And then there's the noise policy. Or more accurately — the absolute, non-negotiable, zero-tolerance war on RF noise that Tim wages across every square foot of the property.

You will not find a wall wart at K3LR. Not one. No phone chargers, no off-the-shelf power adapters, no switching supplies straight out of the box. Anywhere you would normally find a plug-in transformer, you will instead find a 12-volt supply with a precision step-down to the correct voltage, the whole thing wrapped with a toroid coil to kill any noise before it can breathe. Every appliance on the property is evaluated for electronic noise before it earns a place at K3LR — and that standard applies not just to the shack and the main house and the DX barn, but to the two guest houses Tim owns along the street to accommodate the full contest team.

And the light bulbs? Every single one on the property is incandescent. No LEDs anywhere — not in the kitchen, not in the bedrooms, not in the guest houses down the road, and not even in the four aviation beacon lights mounted on top of that 275-foot tower. Think about what it takes to track down incandescent beacon bulbs for an FAA-required aircraft warning light in 2026. Tim tracked them down. Because at K3LR, there are no compromises, and there are no exceptions.

— *Every light bulb on the property is incandescent. No LEDs — not even on the beacon lights atop the 275-foot tower.* —

Each of the main HF bands — 10, 15, 20, 40, and 80 meters — is worked by a two-person team. One operator holds the frequency for the full duration of the contest, calling CQ and working every station that answers. The other searches the band for multipliers, hunting new entities and rare contacts to add to the score. They work in constant coordination, helping each other, wasting nothing, logging everything. One hundred sixty meters has a sole operator — a band that demands its own patience and its own particular skill set. When the final buzzer sounded at the close of the 2026 ARRL Worldwide DX SSB contest on Sunday evening, K3LR had logged over 6,600 contacts and amassed a score of 11,829,195 points. They finished first in the Multi-Multi category. First. In the world.

Tim had come into the contest with a station goal — to break the ARRL DX Phone contest USA Multi Multi point record. The station was ready. The team was ready. But the ionosphere, as any ham knows, answers to nobody. Propagation simply didn't cooperate the way the score would have required. In any other context, 11,829,195 points and a worldwide first-place finish would be an unqualified triumph. At K3LR, it also means Tim is already thinking about next year and how to do better.

And the operators themselves. Most of them have been making the trip to this compound for somewhere between twenty and forty years. These are world-renowned contesters — known by their call signs the way musicians are known by their stage names. They travel here on their own dime, from across the country and across the globe, because this is simply where they want to be at the beginning of March. Watching them work is a master class in DX operating that no licensing exam could ever prepare you for. And did I mention that many of these same operators make the trip to K3LR multiple times a year — for both the CW and SSB contests?

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But here's the thing nobody tells you about elite contesting: between the pile-ups, the people come alive.

K3LR runs on traditions as much as it runs on kilowatts. Before the contest begins, the team gathers for a group dinner — a proper sit-down, a chance to reconnect with old friends and meet new ones before the clock starts ticking. Tim says a few words. There's a warmth to it that you don't expect from a place so focused on winning.

The traditions don't stop at the dinner table. Tim is a man who sweats the details of hospitality with the same energy he brings to RF engineering. Every member of the team receives a custom K3LR mug — their name and call sign printed right on it. You get two: one to take home, one that stays at K3LR, waiting on the shelf for your next visit. It's a small thing. It's also Tim's quiet way of saying: *you belong here, and we expect to see you again.*

And the t-shirts. Tim is a devoted collector and commissioner of custom contest apparel, and every year brings a fresh selection for the team to choose from. The shirts the team wore for the 2026 contest — a tribute to a record-breaking 406 contacts in 60 minutes on 10 meters, achieved the year prior — were a gift from Tim to the team. A wearable piece of K3LR history. Just another way he makes sure everyone who comes through that shack knows their effort is seen and remembered.

During the contest itself, there are no long breaks and no group meals — operators eat at their stations or grab food between shifts, fueled and ready to go back in. The shack doesn't stop. But the table near the kitchen becomes its own kind of gathering place, somewhere voices rise above the noise, stories get told, and decades of shared contest history gets passed around like a side dish.

Which is where Chef Sal and I came in.

Breakfasts were made to order every morning by myself and Sandy DL1QQ from Germany. Breakfast was served up as the operators headed to their positions. John N2NC made sure nobody went without — he brought enough Pork Roll for everyone's breakfast every single day. One morning I found myself hiding the last few slices for a late riser. Priorities.

Before the contest started, the team gathered around the kitchen table and assembled a full run of cold-cut sandwiches together — sealed in zip-lock bags and labeled with a black Sharpie. Most were marked in plain English. The Italian hoagies, however, were labeled in Morse code. Because of course they were.

For sixteen people, Thursday through Sunday, Sal and I ran the kitchen and dinner was our main jam. King crab. Shrimp scampi. Spinach sautéed in olive oil and garlic. Pork Wellington with green beans. Smoked pork tenderloins with grilled asparagus and house-made applesauce. And at the end of the contest — because great effort deserves great reward — smoked filet mignon and big juicy sirloins with mashed potatoes, steakhouse-sautéed mushrooms, and creamed spinach with Gruyère.

Bonnie, who made the trip with her husband Andy N2NT, is no stranger to contesting — she is, as any ham spouse knows, a contest widow of the first order. This was her first time at K3LR, and she wasted no time making herself indispensable. She became the heart of the kitchen operation — the house mom who kept everything running while Chef Sal and I played executive chef, cleaning up behind the two of us without complaint and keeping the whole operation sane from the first meal to the last. We would not have managed without her.

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When the contest ended Sunday evening, the shack exhaled. The operators who had been running on adrenaline and good food for 48 hours finally let themselves stop. Tim gathered the team — the operators, the volunteers, the people who had driven or flown in from across the world entirely on their own time and their own dollar — and he thanked them. Not a quick thank-you. A real one. The kind you feel. The kind that reminds you why people keep coming back year after year, decade after decade.

Then there was one more moment from the visit I won't soon forget. Tim brought out a cake for Dr. José "Otis" Vicens, NP4G — affectionately known to the ham community simply as Otis. He had no idea what was coming. We told him — and told the whole room — that he had been selected as the 2026 Dayton Hamvention Ham of the Year. This was a full day before the announcement was made publicly. The look on his face was worth the trip to the Pennsylvania/Ohio border all by itself. In a room full of world-class operators, Otis is held in especially high regard — and watching the team celebrate one of their own that way said everything about the character of this group and the tight bonds they share.

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And then came the Maker's Mark.

A bottle of bourbon was passed around the room, and one by one, every member of the team uncapped a marker and signed their callsign on the label. That bottle gets saved — along with countless others — proudly displayed high on a shelf in the DX Barn, a room only the chosen few ever set foot in. Each bottle is a record of a world-class finish by a world-class station, a permanent history of who was there, who worked the bands, who cooked the food, and who raised a glass together when it was over. It is the quiet kind of trophy case that only means something if you were there to earn your place on it.

Take a look at the team photo. Every one of those callsigns was on that bottle. K3LR. NP4G. N2NC. WM2H. N3GJ. K3UA. N2NL. W2RQ. N2NT. N5UM. N3SD. K1DG. DL1QQ. K1AR. And Bonnie, Mrs. N2NT. Calls from Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Germany, and points in between. All gathered in one place, one weekend, for the pure love of this ridiculous, magnificent hobby. All legends.

I signed mine: N2LQH.



The 2026 ARRL DX Phone Contest Team K3LR. Back row (l-r): N2NC, WM2H, NP4G, N3GJ, K3UA, N2NL, W2RQ, N5UM, N3SD, N2LQH. Middle: Bonnie, N2NT. Front row: K1DG, DL1QQ, K3LR, K1AR. First place, Multi-Multi — 11,829,195 points.

— *A backyard cook from South Jersey, on a bottle with some of the best operators in the world. Because of a YouTube video, a childhood friend, and Sal Anastasio stretching the truth just enough.* —

So there you have it. I am not a great chef. But I believe in one thing above all else — if you want to prove your value, give results in advance. Show it, don't talk about it. I try to do that with everyone I meet. Sal stretched the truth to get me in the door. I'd like to think the food and my willingness to help took it from there. And if Tim ever needs someone in the chair on 15 meters at 3 AM when the band goes quiet — well. N2LQH is already packed.

Radio brings people together in ways you never expect. That's the whole point, isn't it?

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Terry Rossi, N2LQH, is a General class operator based in South Jersey and a member of the ARRL, South Jersey Radio Association, Gloucester County Amateur Radio Club, Burlington County Radio Club and several others. First licensed in the early nineties, his inaugural years on the air included a brief but unforgettable contact with cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev aboard the Mir Space Station — the man who would later be known as the last citizen of the USSR. After a long absence, Terry returned to the hobby in 2025, and has been making up for lost time ever since — most recently on HF and in the kitchen at K3LR.