

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE  
By Bob Beudet, W1YRC

Brian returned from college a few days ago and after having dinner with his family, he hurried up the road to DX Hill so he could tell Charlie more about his research work with Professor Rawlings. As he expected, the professor received a substantial grant from one of the leading telecom companies to study advanced digital signal processing applications and investigate how to integrate them into the commercial and industrial markets. It surely will give Brian some practical experience this summer and he could barely wait to get started.

He knocked at the door about 6:30 and then wondered if he should have called ahead. Maybe, they're not home, he thought. But, Charlie always tells me to just drop in anytime. From the sounds in the house, however, someone was home. Sure enough, Mary opened the door and greeted Brian with her usual warm smile and said, "Well, hello dear. Come on in. It's so nice to see you again. We just finished dinner and Charlie was about to cut into my apple pie that I made this afternoon. Would you like ice cream with yours? What flavor, vanilla, chocolate or coffee? Go in there and sit with Charlie." Of course, Mary knew not to wait for any answers. The only decision he had to make was to choose his ice cream flavor. Brian came in and closing the door, replied politely, "Chocolate would be fine, thank you."

Brian made his way into the dining room and found Charlie dishing out three generous helpings of pie. "Hi stranger. How've you been? How's it feel to have your freshman year behind you? Do you know your grades yet?" Brian chuckled as he sat. Just then, Mary entered with three cartons of ice cream announcing, "Here you are, boys. You might want a different flavor for your second piece. Don't be shy." She started scooping as Brian noticed that Charlie was looking directly at him, waiting for some answers. He got the hint and took a deep breath.

"Well", Brian started, "my grades won't be in for another couple of weeks but I think I did all right. It's great to get through the freshman year and I'm fine." Charlie was waiting for more. They started on their pie as Mary just sampled her small piece and broke the silence, "Did I use enough nutmeg, boys?" Charlie assured her the pie was perfect as usual. He went on, "But, something is bothering you, Brian, isn't it my friend?"

He was a little bewildered as he explained, "Well, yes, I guess. You see, Professor Rawlings took all of his grant team to meet staff folks in the research lab. The man who runs the lab is a tough older man who seems angry about everything. He's not very friendly. I don't know where they found him, but he surely doesn't act like anyone else I know at MIT. Professor Rawlings told us to be sure to check anything we do in the lab with this man but didn't really tell us why." Charlie pursued the point, "Well, is he a professor? I'll bet he isn't. Maybe his only job is to manage the lab. Isn't that where all the college's grant lab work is done?" Brian nodded that could be the case.

Charlie finished off his pie and looked over at Mary. Without a word, she knew his thought and cut a second slice. She gave him no ice cream this time advising, "You'll be bigger than our house, dear." Charlie promised to walk Rufus an extra mile to work it off. Then Charlie said, "You know Brian, I'll bet nothing has changed at school. They probably still have that separate lab to do all the outside work so they can keep its cost isolated. Back years ago, we had a lab manager who had served 35 years in the Navy and retired as a Master Chief Radioman. He had gold service bars on his sleeve from wrist to elbow. He was as crusty an old salt as you could ever find and had stories about the big war that would chill your blood. I wondered how in the world he fit into a place like MIT just as you wonder about this fellow. He seemed angry most of the time until you got to know him. Then, you learned that he wasn't angry at all. He was still the Master Chief down deep and saw us kids as his recruits.

But, you know? I learned that he could make everything in his lab easy for me if he wanted to. Just as easily, he could make my life miserable. He knew everything we needed and all the ways to get any job done quickly and efficiently, without disrupting the lab or any other project. Brian, there was nothing that could stump this man. I learn to respect the ground he walked on.

I also learned that MIT always tries to hire experienced military retirees to be in charge of their lab and many other positions because they have the knowledge and discipline to keep the place square. Can you see some tweedy professor keeping all that test equipment in good repair? You know, in the service it's common practice for officers transferring into a new outfit to search out whoever has the power upon arrival and quickly learn the straight scoop about the new organization from him or her."

Brian was confused and said he didn't understand. This time, Charlie's metaphors weren't explaining why this lab technician had more power than Professor Rawlings did. He questioned the point, "After all, Professor Rawlings runs all the research work and has all the power, not this guy." Charlie jumped on him so quickly that he almost choked on his pie as he told him, "No, Brian. You're very wrong! **Don't ever mistake authority for power or vice versa!** The professor has the authority but, it seems, this lab supervisor has the power, and probably for very good reason." The one with the power is the one everyone runs to when something goes wrong. Usually, the manager of any organization depends on one or two people to assure that his feet don't land in the fire. Rarely, the same person has both authority and power. The organization's power might be with a technician, a secretary or an administrator or just about anyone. I suggest you make good friends with this lab supervisor. He'll go out of his way to help you later if you show him some respect now. If you're anything like me, you'll need lots of his help."

Brian was quiet and thought for quite a while. This was a new concept for him to comprehend. He finished the last of his pie and before he could even think about a second piece, Mary took his plate and refilled it. He looked at her and exclaimed, "You read my mind! Thanks!" Charlie grinned and pointed out that the person with power always anticipates situations before they become problems. That made Mary grin. Brian still looked puzzled. "It's because of their experience. They've been there and done that, probably many times. They can anticipate where you'll have difficulty before you can and guide you through it or, if they prefer, can just let you struggle by yourself. A wise person will gratefully seek their help."

Brian smiled and took a big bite of his second slice of pie and smiled. He finally understood and said, "Thanks Charlie. Thanks Mary. I think I see what you mean now."