

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE
By Bob Beudet, W1YRC

ARRL Field Day is a terrific club activity, probably the most popular single club event in North America. This year was the first time that several families in Charlie's club participated together. Two families came in large RV's, entirely self contained and hardly roughing it but ready for any emergency, regardless. A few came with slide on and pop-up campers. Some came with conventional tents and folding cots. Others just came for the day, not intending to camp overnight. All in all, this was the best-attended Field Day ever. The club is very fortunate to have access to a public park, complete with water, rest rooms and plenty of off-street parking. Of course, everyone's welcome regardless of his or her extent of personal commitment to the club project. Field Day promotes camaraderie among members and with the public in a most unique manner. It also provides a unique opportunity to showcase amateur radio to the public.

This was the first time that Brian's family came to Field Day all together. Although not present yet, they have a new slide on camper unit for their pick-up truck and were planning to try it out for the first time at Field Day. Charlie was anxious to see it. Dad, Greg and Mom, Ann have their licenses and planned to operate as well but mostly, they wanted to support their son, Brian. He had arranged his school schedule so that he could spend the weekend with the club before rushing back to Cambridge. He has come to Field Day before but only for short stays due to his studies and other work. He has now completed his first year of college and has been accepted to participate in a research grant this summer. But somehow, he succeeded in budgeting time into his busy schedule to enjoy Field Day with his club and his family. It proves that regardless of how busy you are, you can always find time for something you really want to do.

Charlie and Mary agreed to come to Field Day as they usually do. Of course, Charlie is a DXer and not a contester. Regardless, he enjoys the fellowship and the opportunity to help first timers and ham radio prospects who stop by the operating setup to see what's going on. Just don't ask him to operate the SSB station. He cannot sit behind a mike and operate contest style. It drives him wild. Of course, he'll take a few hour stint in the cw tent without trouble.

They arrived early on Saturday morning, complete with hot coffee and muffins just baked in their kitchen on DX Hill. They found several folks already setting up tents and unrolling wire and rope. Charlie jumped in and quickly figured out the game plan and started stretching out wires with them. Mary's not a ham but is very friendly with many xyl's and quickly joined in and became hard at work getting lunch ready for the crew.

The FD chairman, Don had his pocket notepad in hand and a pencil between his teeth as he tried to read, talk and pull a wire while walking backward across thick grass. As could be predicted, his heel quickly found a rabbit hole and he landed flat on his back. Luckily for him, one of the two doctors in the club was present, helping to put up antennas at the site and he rushed over to evaluate Don's condition. "Well old boy," he said after a few minutes' exam, "I hope you weren't planning to go dancing tonight. This ankle looks broken. We better get you to the hospital for x rays."

Don was in some pain and his ankle had swollen to near double normal size. The doc told Don to stay where he was until he could get his car closer to him. Charlie offered to bring the car down from the parking area so the doctor could stay with Don. Within minutes, Don was off to receive medical attention at the hospital. True ham that he is, the doctor shouted from the car that he'd be back. Knowing Don, most bet that he'd try to appear later as well.

This year's plan was to operate in the 3A category, i.e., using 3 stations all on emergency power. Now without a Field Day chairman, Charlie found a role for himself. He secured Don's notebook and tried to follow the plan that had been established by the committee. Luckily, those who were to arrive with generators, tents, food, and all the rest of odds and ends did so as planned and by noon, the stations were on the air and running very well. They all took a break for a very nice lunch, complete with peach cobbler and ice cream.

The doctor returned a few hours later and reported that Don had seriously broken his ankle in four places. It had to be pinned and he won't be out of the hospital for a few days. "I guess that makes you FD chairman, Charlie," exclaimed the doctor with a chuckle. The club president was within earshot, smiled and nodded his approval. Charlie really didn't mind officially taking charge since all the planning and Don had addressed logistical issues and there were no major problems. Setting up stations was simple because each one had a captain who handled everything for his or her station.

Max and his brother, Jeff, handled power. Neither is a ham yet but both are affiliated with the club through ARES and RACES. They are with the Fire Department and are pleased to test the department's brand new power generating equipment under actual field conditions. The power plant is self contained aboard a 4x4 all terrain vehicle and consists of two 25 kw generators and two 7.5 kw generators. All are diesel powered and the vehicle has a hundred-gallon fuel tank squeezed aboard, just behind the passenger compartment. Any of the four generators may be operated independently to supply the power needs of the emergency situation. Pretty nice setup and seeing its first service anywhere.

Charlie was wondering what happened to Brian and his family. They should have arrived by now. All three stations had started at 1800 UTC, more than an hour ago and he hadn't seen Brian or his parents and their new camper yet. No sooner did he think it that Greg wheeled the new camper into the RV parking area. Brian leaned out the window and waved to Charlie. "I'll bet you were wondering about us," he called. Charlie waved and admitted that he was.

Once backed into a nice spot under some maple trees, Brian jumped out, carrying a large book bag. He explained, "I have to read some research articles over the weekend. We need to develop our plan on Monday." Charlie understood but was sad to see Brian not taking time away from his work even for a day. "You know," the old mentor started, "it might do your brain cells to switch completely for a while. You've been working awfully hard for a long while." Greg and Ann joined them and overheard Charlie. Ann was first, "See Brian? Charlie sounds like me. Leave the bag in the camper...please, dear." Brian delayed long enough for Greg to offer a compromise to his son, "Tell you what, Brian. If you take a few hours away from the studies and operate, I'll keep log for you." Brian smiled from ear to ear. Greg hadn't shown that much interest in operating and this gesture was powerful. "OK, you've got a deal for a few hours. But, do you suppose we could eat first?" Charlie laughed and pointed toward Mary in the cook tent. "She'll fix you up, 'ole boy."

The three stations on SSB, CW, and VHF were purring along and propagation was favorable. Activity calmed down to a routine by dark and the RV's and campers were connected to the central power truck since there was such a surplus of electric power available. The food tent even had a TV playing. It was amazing just how quiet the generators were although in truth only one 25 kw unit was running and provided more than enough power for the equipment. The SSB tent was set up on the opposite side of the RV and camper parking area, about 800 feet from the CW tent. The VHF and cook tents were between them and the power truck was positioned off to the far side to minimize noise. All were within a 1000-foot circle as required by the rules.

Brian operated CW with his Dad for several hours and finally, Greg called time. Brian could have gone on but it was almost 10PM and the next shift was ready. They had great fun working together, their first team effort but surely not their last. Brian made his way back toward the camper to retrieve his book bag and then to the cook tent. Isn't it wonderful how students are always hungry? Guess it's just all the calories the brain needs to function.

Charlie found some non-ham visitors and was holding court for them, explaining amateur radio over coffee, cookies, sandwiches and some terrific fruit salad that Brian's Mom put together. Brian curled up in a corner with a gooseneck light and soon was mentally miles away reading papers and taking notes. Mary just looked over at him and came over to Charlie to say softly, "Look at him, dear. He reminds me of another engineering student I knew once." Charlie knew she was referring to himself when they first met back in college. He just smiled and squeezed her hand before continuing his talk with the visitors.

The visitors left with a better understanding of why amateurs set up emergency communications tests and will understand them better from now on. Brian was deep into his studies when midnight came and Charlie reminded him that he was supposed to be on 40 cw. He looked puzzled but eventually remembered that he agreed to operate at midnight. After finishing a few quick notes in his book and marking the page, he stuffed the books away and headed out of the camper. When he got to the cw tent, he found the operators in the midst of a run. They wanted to stay another few minutes so Brian said he'd be back in a while. Brian told Charlie on his way back to his family camper to resume his studies.

However, on the way, he walked past the power truck and smelled burning rubber or plastic. Everything was running smoothly. Where was the odor coming from, he wondered? Since everyone was operating, he didn't want to shut it down so he just looked and sniffed around the truck and saw nothing. After several minutes passed, he was ready to call Max or Jeff. Just then, the power breaker on the working 25 kw diesel generator snapped off and a large puff of thick smoke plumed from the compact unit. The engine continued to run and Brian yelled for help. All the lights at the power and cook tent were running on a different generator, the 7.5 kw unit, so fortunately, they weren't plunged into darkness.

Within seconds, Max appeared and immediately shut down the engine and sprayed the generator with dry extinguisher. Brian felt awful because he felt he could have prevented this damage. Charlie and most everyone else soon appeared and that only made Brian feel worse. Within a few minutes, Max had transferred the power cables over to the other 25 kw generator and had the stations running once again. He determined that the faulty generator unit developed a short and burned itself up. He saw that Brian was really upset and explained that the truck was still under warranty and this was its "shake-down" operation. "This can happen with any new equipment. That's why we like to test them out before a real emergency strikes." Charlie added, "That's why the truck has redundant supplies also." Max nodded his agreement.

Charlie put his hand on Brian's shoulder and led him toward his camper. "I know you are blaming yourself. There's no real harm done because the unit is protected with breakers. But, you should have called for help the moment you realized there was a problem." Brian was still upset with himself; "I blew it! I tried to diagnose the problem before I isolated it. I should have killed the power and the engine before I smoked it!" Charlie knew that he was right. He should have done that but he never experienced anything like this before. It should be a learning experience for him.

"Brian," Charlie started, "Yes, you probably should have called for help and killed the generator before doing any investigation. You won't make that mistake again, I'd wager." Brian shook his head and knew he had learned a valuable lesson.

Emergency exercises like Field Day are designed to shake out equipment, operators and procedures. We must become smooth in these exercises so that lives won't be endangered when it is not only a drill and our communications skills could be relied upon to save lives and property. Now, during the test is the time for equipment and personnel to experience problems so that they may be worked out. But, the greatest benefit of an emergency exercise like Field Day is the great enjoyment it provides for everyone concerned. Let's get started now planning for FD 2002.