

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

by

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Life on DX Hill has begun returning to a version of normalcy, following the attacks of Sept. 11th to New York and Washington. The initial shock and disbelief felt for weeks has evolved into rigid determination together with a measure of trepidation. For sure, Americans won't take their life styles for granted any more and maybe that's a good thing.

The bands have remained open through this period of course, and propagation has been remarkably good considering that we're heading down the back slope of sunspot cycle 23. Ten and twelve meter bands have been open on both long and short paths to the Far East and Pacific. I suggest that you make the most of it now because next year, we'll probably be celebrating the occasional European opening on those bands.

Charlie received a surprising phone call shortly after the attacks. The call was from the activities director of a large "assisted living" home over in Pine Valley, about 20 miles from DX Hill. The lady was very polite and carefully chose her words, "My name is Sara Lewis. The Police Chief gave your name to me. He says he knows you well and that your activities as a ham operator are astounding and you've done some amazing things with your station. We have several residents at our home that are asking me questions about radio. I'm as curious as they are about radio, but some of them know much more than I do on the subject. What happened on September 11th and the news about emergency preparedness have stirred their interest. The press has carried stories about how the hams have provided communications for New York and how hams have been such a great help to the city. Well, I was hoping you could come here to the center some evening and just talk about some of your adventures. Our residents would absolutely love that. Is it possible, Mr. Mr..... I'm sorry sir, I don't know your name except for 'Charlie'."

Charlie chuckled and said, "Charlie is fine, Sara. I'd be very happy to come by and talk about ham radio. I might put some of the old timers to sleep, though." The director replied emphatically, "Oh no, Charlie! That won't happen, I promise. In fact, they may tire you out. The average age of our residents is 85 and come from a wide mixture of backgrounds from business, concert musicians, professors and truckers. They're a challenge for me to keep up with, I assure you, and I'm half their age."

Charlie agreed to a time and day for the talk and said good-bye. It was to be the following Wednesday evening, immediately after dinner at 7PM. Charlie had never addressed an audience made up of so many folks twenty to thirty years his senior since defending his thesis in graduate school. That was a long time ago, while he was still in the military. Regardless, Charlie figured the worst thing that could happen was that he would bore them all silly, they'd fall asleep and he'd quietly sneak out the side door. Seriously, Charlie was looking forward to this event as a new challenge.

The evening arrived and Charlie was early by 20 minutes, enough time to carry in a few boxes of books, QSL cards, pictures, a small transceiver and several old keys from his collection. He figured that there could be some World War II radio ops in the crowd who might like to recall their experiences if they saw the key they used aboard ship or aircraft. Charlie's xyl Mary was curious about these seniors and came along to help out where ever she could. Actually, she loves to see Charlie presenting information on ham radio. He usually becomes very animated speaking on his favorite subject. Mary believes it's good for his health as well.

It was five minutes to seven and no one had arrived yet. Charlie was concerned that Sara had over estimated her resident's curiosity. Mary checked her watch and reminded Charlie that it was not seven yet and the dinner schedule is probably precisely timed. Charlie smiled and nodded. "I guess you're right, Mary," he said. No sooner had he spoken that the first person arrived. A gray haired lady using a walker and moving slowly asked, "Are you our ham?" Charlie came over to greet her saying, "I sure am. My name is Charlie and it's a pleasure to meet you."

As if a bus had unloaded its passengers all at once, a large crowd followed the lady into the room. Many used canes, walkers and a few in wheel chairs. Mary helped Sara who escorted the group. After greetings and carrying in more chairs, the crowd had become settled and Sara introduced her guest, "Folks, we are pleased that Charlie agreed to come visiting us this evening. I've been told that he can answer any radio question you might have. He agreed to tell us all about his hobby of amateur or ham radio. Charlie retired a few years ago from a career in engineering and has enjoyed his time as a full time ham. His wife Mary, or XYL in ham-speak, told me that he is busier now than ever. Please welcome Charlie and Mary from DX Hill."

There was polite applause but it was clear that the group was anxious to hear everything Charlie had to say about radio. Charlie first thanked Sara for the opportunity and then spoke about his start in ham radio shortly after World War II. He had hardly proceeded past that point when a quiet gent sitting in the front row smiled and nodded to a lady sitting beside him. She raised her hand and said, "My husband George was a radio operator in the war. He used Morse code. Do you use code?"

Well, that was an understatement! Charlie laughed and launched into a side discussion about the value of code and how essential it is to know code. When he informed the group that tests have all but eliminated code from licensing requirements and that it's sadly only a matter of time before code won't be required at all, there was a noticeable gasp in the room. They were honestly horrified to hear that news. Charlie was surprised to see such a reaction from these non-hams over this issue and was curious to know why. One by one, they offered anecdotal stories relating to the code.

One lady was the sister-in-law of the owner of the region's premier ham supply store. One gent served in the OSS, the predecessor of the NSA and CIA before his career as a professor of foreign affairs. Another was a pilot and credits knowing code as saving his life when he was shot down over France. Another was a survivor of the Bataan Death March. He asked, "I'm alive because I knew the code. What will they do if their microphone or computer smokes and all they have are two wires to touch together?" It went on and on with each story extolling the value of Morse code knowledge. Charlie pointed out that they were preaching to the choir since he loves Morse code and is as disturbed at its passing as anyone was.

It was obvious that nearly every person who came to Charlie's presentation that evening had a personal reason for being there. It was also clear that most still felt passionately about radio and its magic. One lady related that she met Mr. Marconi when she was in Europe with her family. Although a young girl at the time, the meeting made a life-long difference in her life. She went on to pursue a career in engineering and taught at three universities.

Two hours flew by and Mary pointed to her watch for Charlie's benefit. She feared that if she didn't, he'd talk all night and some of the seniors might become too tired. Charlie nodded and said, "Well, folks. This presentation hasn't at all gone the way I expected. It's been great to speak to such a well-informed group and I feel we could go on for quite a while. But, before I close for tonight and leave you to get some rest, do you have any questions for Mary or me?"

A half dozen hands shot up. One lady asked, "Yes Charlie. Many of us want to get our license so we talk on the air. Sara told me that she thinks that if enough of us are interested, the owner of the home will let us put up some antennas. But, we need a little help from someone like you to take the tests. Can you help us?"

Before Charlie could open his mouth, Mary answered, "Charlie and I will be happy to help all of you. Won't we, dear?" Charlie was surprised by her offer, not withstanding including herself in the offer of help. Charlie replied, "Surely, we'll help you. Let's meet again a week from now. I'll bring some instructors from our radio club and we'll set up a program to get you all licensed." The crowd stood and applauded. Some in front shook Charlie's hand and thanked him. One lady had tears in her eyes as she was silently walking out. Mary stopped her and wondered what was wrong. "Oh nothing is wrong. I promised my late husband that I would get a license so I could talk to him while he was field engineering after the war. I never did and he was killed in an auto accident. That was forty five years ago and I'm finally going to get my license."

Driving home, Mary asked if he minded that she offered the help. Charlie said, "Oh no, not at all, dear. But, I'm curious what help you're planning to give. Are you going to teach code?" Mary laughed and said, "Don't be silly. That's your department. But, it seems to me that you'll be faced with some different issues training these seniors. Many of them were high achievers in their careers and may need some cheer leading as they work to learn something new." Charlie casually responded, "I wouldn't plan on them having as much trouble as you think, but they'll surely need encouragement and God knows that your the best cheer leader in these parts." He reached over and squeezed Mary's hand. "Thanks partner," he added.

Charlie continued, "You know, Mary. I was thinking about Jim Haynie's Education Project. He's focusing on school age youngsters and for very good reasons like encouragement of electronic careers and lowering the average age of amateurs. Do you suppose he'll have a bird when he hears about our senior citizen classes whose average age is 85?" Mary knew about the "Big Project" from discussions she had with Charlie and thought for a little while.

Then she offered, "I'll bet he'll like the idea. There's a load of untapped energy among the seniors. For sure, new hams at their age won't help lower the demographics but that's not all you should consider. They don't have the experience as radio amateurs, but just think of all the common sense and life experience they can bring to the hobby. Just think about it."

Charlie drove and thought. Neither said anything until they reached the foot of DX Hill. Then, as the car climbed the hill, Charlie again squeezed Mary's hand and said, "Thanks again partner."

Lots of senior citizens are wasting away in retirement homes and assisted living centers throughout the country. You'd be surprised how much energy they have if only given a chance. Even if towers, HF beams and kW stations aren't allowed in their facilities, VHF and UHF repeaters can provide a much better use of their time then just wasting away, staring out windows. Look into conducting senior classes in your area. You might be pleasantly surprised.