

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Remember those eight auto-tuned commercial linear amplifiers that Charlie bought last month? Can you imagine what he decided to do with the seven that he came home with? Well, the first thing he did was to push his old home brewed amp into the corner behind the shack door. It's a relic and has earned retirement. He then wrestled one of those 1975 jewels onto a strong table next to his operating position and carefully made all the connections to his antenna switching box, control circuits, rf feed, alc, ptt, etc. He was amazed how intuitively clear the book was written and diagramed. Being prepared for installation by a wide variety of people and skill levels all around the world, the manufacturer put extra effort into making the process foolproof.

However, he reminded himself that the thing hadn't even been out of its packing, let alone tickled with AC voltage since it was boxed over 25 years ago. With extra caution, he connected the 240-volt input through a heavy Variac and reduced the primary to 190 volts. He rechecked his connections, held his breath and flipped on the primary switch. Fans and lights came to life making Charlie smile. After a few minutes of "smoke testing", he slowly cranked the primary up to 205 volts and pushed the red HV button. The HV meter swung up and settled at about 2500 volts dc. After another wait, he cranked the Variac to 240 and waited for something to pop. After all, he felt brave with six more amps unopened in the boxes. But, as luck would have it, nothing happened. In fact, the little beauty behaved just as the designer had intended in 1975.

Before very long, Charlie had it putting out 1500 watts PEP into a dummy load. The monitor scope showed a nice clean signal with no hum, spurs or other distortion. He turned up the back panel control simply labeled "power" and watched the output rise to well over 3000 watts. Naturally, he'd never run that kind of illegal power but it's nice to know that the amp can loaf at 1500 watts!

He had six more amps in the box to dispose of. Since they were auto-tuned there was hardly any need to set one up on each band, so he decided to keep one as a spare and sell the other five. He called Mike, his dealer friend and within 24 hours, all were sold to hams within the area. Charlie turned a nice profit and made folks happy in the process.

Like all of us, Charlie has been concerned at the virtually zero growth amateur radio has experienced in the last several years. Finding reasons why teens and pre-teens don't find radio an attractive outlet for their time won't solve anything. A short minute's worth of thought will easily paint a picture of competition and diversity in young folks' lives. We know some of them take an easy path and use the Internet to "work" DX and others may not identify with some of us older timers, a.k.a. gray heads, who teach classes and operate Field Day and special event stations.

Charlie understands that and naturally, counts himself among the "gray heads". He's quite proud of what he's done in amateur radio as well as how amateur radio practical knowledge augmented his career as an engineer. Given a half a chance, Charlie will expound on the value of an amateur radio background to anyone preparing him or herself for a career in design, field service, international business and any other field requiring knowledge of the world and inter relationships in different cultures.

Just how do create an audience to listen to all this wisdom is the problem. As often as not, when Charlie has Elmer'd a young person to become a ham, the parents have become as or more interested. Charlie is an engaging character and his wife Mary says, "he can persuade a mockingbird to sing opera". She should know after more than 45 years of marriage. Some friends ask her why she never became a ham and after a few humorous replies like the shack is too small for two, she can't climb towers or Morse code always gave her a rash. Mary would simply reply that she actually is very interested in ham radio because it's Charlie's hobby. She knows how deeply he loves the hobby and the friendships and knowledge he's gained from his half century of being licensed. Supporting him when he's solving a problem in some equipment by offering a kind word or simply a squeeze of his hand and encouragement gives her as much satisfaction as she could hope for. Furthermore, her personal hobby is in crafts like quilts, embroidery, knitting, ceramics and

gardening. Charlie, in turn, derives great satisfaction in supporting her in her hobbies in the same way. That's why they're still each other's best friends after nearly a half century.

Charlie was relaxing in his big lounge chair with his ole' hound dog Rufus lying at his feet one day recently. He was reading an article in a current ham magazine that contained a phrase explaining the 1987 rule changes by FCC. It referred to it as "an effort to stimulate interest in the Amateur Radio Service....". He put the magazine down and scratched his dog Rufus's head while thinking how sad that sounded to him. It's hard for Charlie to believe that anyone needed "stimulation" to become interested in amateur radio. He can't remember needing stimulation to become a ham. But, he realizes that in his case, it was an issue directly connected to knowledge. The question then becomes "How do we make folks **want** to learn about something they don't know anything about?" Sort of a chicken and egg story where knowledge would bring interest if we only had interest to bring knowledge.

It made Charlie think back to a class held a few months ago for new hams. It was run by the new federation of radio clubs in the region. He was invited to sit in and observe, but before long, one of the instructors who knew Charlie very well, saw him sitting in the back of the room, quietly sipping coffee trying to be inconspicuous. He announced to the class that they were privileged to have an expert in the class who could answer just about any question on DX, CW operating or about anything else. He threw Charlie a question asked before he arrived by a young lady sitting up front. He recalled her question as, "How can I know if the station I'm talking to on the air is really where he says he is or even really IS who his call signed is licensed to?"

In order to give Charlie a few seconds to formulate some thoughts, the instructor introduced him, "Folks, I don't know anyone in this country I would rather hear answer that question other than this gentleman in the back of the room. I've known Charlie for well over 30 years and he is the person responsible for getting a few hundred others and me into amateur radio. We call gentlemen like him our Elmer. In fact, he should be teaching this course, rather than me! What do you say, Elmer...I mean Charlie?"

Charlie stood and smiled, "Thanks, Steve for the nice words but you're doing a splendid job here. You surely don't need me and your student has asked an absolutely brilliant question. What is your name, Miss?" She stood and turned to face Charlie, "My name is Jacqueline. I'm a freshman at Hilltop High School and want to get my license first in my family." She seemed wise beyond her years and made Charlie curious as to what brought this 15 or 16 year old girl to the class in the first place. That is, until he asked, "Are there any others in your family studying for their license?" She laughed and motioned to her side, "They're all here." Six hands went up and Jacqueline added, "My dad, mom, three brothers and older sister are here."

Charlie was stunned. He asked, "My golly, you'll have to compete for air time in your house! Well, that's wonderful, even amazing! Your question is truly a very good one, Jacqueline. As you probably know from Steve, we're required to identify ourselves on the air during and at the end of our communication work. Signing an incorrect call sign is illegal, even if you have a license to operate on that frequency. Our regulations are designed to prevent false signals from being transmitted. Now, before you call me naïve or worse, I'll add that "bootlegging" has existed since the first licenses were issued nearly a hundred years ago. Bootlegging refers to operations without a license or under other false pretenses. So, to your point, we really don't know or can be sure that the station on the other end is genuine other than statistically, but the odds overwhelmingly favor a legitimate operation above a fraudulent one."

The instructor, Steve popped in and asked Charlie, "Do you mean guys like Romeo Stepanenko operating in North Korea or Don Miller operating on Minerva Reef?" He laughed as he spoke but no one other than Charlie caught the joke, of course. Charlie had to explain, "Steve reminded me of two famous bootleggers from the past who fooled thousands of DXers to believe they were in a very rare place but were actually operating in a comfortable hotel hundreds of miles away and not in the country they claimed to be. In their cases, the motive was ego satisfaction and possibly even monetary. But, that's well beyond your question, isn't it Jacqueline?"

Jacqueline wasn't laughing. No, it isn't Mr. Charlie. My dad is a UN legal advisor. We've traveled all over the world and seen things just as you said, and much worse. Some countries' licensing is nothing but a farce. At that point, her dad stood and said, "Charlie, Jacqueline has seen first hand how lucky we are to live here in the United States. In some countries, you must know what jeopardy citizens assume to operate a transmitter or even a receiver. What we accept for a given as you suggested here in our country is exactly the reverse of some actual conditions elsewhere. We value our way of life and will protect it to any end."

Wow, Charlie was speechless! Rarely is Charlie ever without words, but this time he realized that he had answered the young lady's question too abruptly and with an answer correct for the millions but excluding her. It was clear from her dad's comments that she had seen far more than her years would suggest. After a pause of several seconds, he chose his words carefully and composed a response.

"I apologize, Jacqueline. Of course you're right. We are never really sure where everyone is that we hear but it's usually safe to assume from the call sign that a station is in the western US or the northeast although even that rule has changed. Now, a W1 can be in Texas and a KA6 can be in Michigan. The great majority of stations on the air are where their call prefix suggests, however. Does that answer your question, Jacqueline?"

She thought for a few seconds and replied, "No, well sort of, I guess. But, what I wanted to know is how to tell who someone is and where they are when I hear the call sign. Is there anywhere on the Internet I can look up in a directory or something?" Charlie and the others all looked at one another. It was apparent that they had been trying to answer an entirely different question. Charlie answered for the group, "Yes, you may look up calls and addresses on www.qrz.com. We're sorry. We all misunderstood your question."

Understanding any question is the first step to answering it. It reminded Charlie of a question that was asked many years ago by the young son of a well-known child psychologist. He asked her simply, "Where did I come from?" She decided the time to explain one of life's greatest miracles had arrived and she proceeded with a lengthy and detailed reply followed by, "does that answer your question, dear?" The boy replied, "Well, no. I meant where did we come from before we lived in Philadelphia?"