

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

by

Bob Beaudet, W1YRC

Mary and Charlie were busy one day recently engaged in their annual spring project, planting their garden and several flowerbeds around the house. They couldn't have picked a better day. It was simply spectacular on DX Hill, crystal clear and sparkling with a perfect 70-degree temperature. Visibility was extraordinary with the far hilltops across the valley totally visible in detail without any haze at all. The light northwest breeze kept the air dry and made the couple feel very comfortable working. It was almost a shame to do any work on such a glorious day and spoil the perfection. Their prized and highly trained watch hound, Rufus, certainly wasn't wasting any of his day. He was spread out, one leg pointed to each 90-degree compass point, lying in the soft clover around the tower base, and snoring so loudly and with such determination that Charlie looked up at the guy cables to see if they exhibited any vibration due to sympathetic resonance.

It was nearly noon and they had been working steadily since 9. Mary stood up, stretched and surveyed what they had accomplished. With her hands held together in front of her, she exclaimed to Charlie, "My oh my, Charlie! We've done so much this morning. We've surely earned a nice lunch, don't you think, dear?" There's one thing certain about Charlie. You never need to call him twice for a meal, especially if Mary was in charge of the menu. He had been kneeling for a long while, putting in rows of beans and peas, and when he pulled himself up, leaning heavily on a sturdy shovel, he grunted, "Ugh... Oh boy... Are you sure AARP says it's healthy for us to be doing this, Mary?" Mary just waved at him, and said, "Come on, old boy. Sure, it's good for you. You just can't jump up like you could 40 years ago. Well, neither can I."

One of Rufus's eyes partially opened and after a few thoughts of a biscuit crossed his mind; he pulled himself up too and slowly lumbered toward the kitchen door along with Mary and Charlie. As they all reached the door, they heard a sound in the road leading to their driveway. Then, they saw a new red pickup truck coming up the driveway. Mary was first to see who was driving and said, "It's Brian just in time for lunch." Waving, Charlie called to him as he climbed out of the truck, "Hi stranger. We didn't recognize the truck. Hope you're hungry." Brian smiled and glanced at his watch as he walked quickly to the house. He nodded and said, "College students are always hungry, you know that. This is my dad's new truck that he picked up to pull our camper."

He gave Mary a hug and Charlie a warm handshake. Charlie apologized for having dirty hands; "We've been working in the dirt, Brian." Come on in and tell us what you've been up to. You're more than half way through that VI-A program, aren't you?" Brian nodded and said how much he's learned in the work projects and how well the practical experience has matched the classroom. They headed into the house and washed their hands. Mary found a nice big dog biscuit for Rufus and he hurried to his corner to work on it. Then, Mary told Charlie and Brian to get out of her kitchen until lunch is ready. "I'll call you, don't worry", she said with a grin.

The guys headed to Charlie's shack where the sound of CW was playing softly in the headphones. Charlie said, "I finally worked the Mellish Reef crew on 40 this morning, just before they shut down to come home. Brian frowned and asked, "You didn't need it did you?" Charlie replied, "Well, not for a new one but I always like to work good DX after everyone else gets the new one for themselves. Speaking of new ones, I did work Ed Giorgadze, P5/4L4FN in Pyongyang, North Korea for a new one." Brian shook his head in amazement. "You do have them all, don't you?" he asked. Charlie nodded. Brian continued, "...and when something new is authorized, you're in there to get it. Golly, that must be great!" Charlie pointed out that when he was a working man; he had to be lucky during the week to catch a new one and went without sleep quite a few times to get new countries. Specific propagation and the DX station's times of operation don't always line up with reasonable hours in our part of the world. "It's part of the game to a serious DXer. No big deal at all."

Brian looked bigger, he's put on a few pounds since last summer. Charlie hadn't even seen him since Christmas and then, only for a few minutes. Mary and Charlie regard Brian very highly and there were plenty of questions Charlie wanted to ask but none more important than learning how his studies were

progressing at Tech. Brian just started to answer when Mary appeared in the shack door, "Lunch is ready, boys."

They moved to the small dining area next to the kitchen and looked over Mary's huge salad bowl and sandwiches, an assortment of chicken, tuna, ham, and egg salad. Brian remarked, "Wow, I surely miss this at school. This is great!" Charlie recalled, "I don't remember that any of MIT's cuisine can compare with Mary's, Brian." He surely agreed with that comment and they all sat down to a great lunch and continued their conversation.

Brian described his coursework as a junior in the VI-A EE program. "Well, my grades are OK. I'm maintaining a 4.64/5.0 GPA. It would be higher if I hadn't carried a double course load two semesters ago. My professor wants me to continue in the Advanced Signal Processing research we've been doing, but I don't know if I should. Maybe I should go into something else. I've been on this project since it was first funded two years ago." Charlie recalled, "Brian, aren't you the research student team leader? What does your professor think about your plan?" Brian had consumed a chicken and a ham & Swiss sandwich and was selecting half of a tuna and half of an egg salad sandwich as he composed an answer to Charlie's question. He learned to pause before answering from Charlie when they first met. Charlie always takes a few seconds before responding to most any question because he found that better answers generally come out of his mouth if he gives the brain cells a few seconds to come aboard the process.

Mary noticed Brian's half sandwiches and said, "Dear, you can take an entire sandwich. It's no problem. I'll make more for you." Brian didn't stop to think, "Oh, oh no. That's OK. I just didn't want to waste anything and I really just wanted to try some of each." Mary understood but added, "Well, the other two halves will be waiting for you later on." She knows how much food a hungry and growing college student can consume. He's already had two sandwiches with a salad and is well on his way to devouring two more.

Brian started out, "Well Charlie, I'm still the team leader and my professor wants me to help him write the proposal for the next grant application. He thinks we have a good shot at getting nexgen non-corruptible secured communications development work that NASA is looking to fund. It's worth well over \$100 million and they're asking only four universities to submit grant proposals." Charlie could read more into Brian's words and asked, "What happens to MIT's chances if you leave the team?" Brian looked down at his sandwich and took a bite. He chewed and thought. Finally, when he swallowed, he replied, "Well, Professor McKinney says that the work will go to either Stanford or Illinois." So, there it was. The decision had to be made in full knowledge of how financially important it was to the school but directly in the hands of a junior engineering student.

Brian was quiet as he finished his last sandwich. "Charlie, should I do what's best for MIT or for myself?" Charlie was thinking in that direction already and said, "The simple answer as a student, is that your purpose for paying tuition is to learn, not procure funds for the college. Do you have another project to join that's as exciting as this advanced signal processing?" Brian shook his head, "No, Charlie. I love this work. What I'm afraid of is that I might become too specialized." Charlie grinned and advised him, "As a junior underclassman, I wouldn't worry about that just yet. In your last year in VI-A, just before you graduate, that might be a concern but you have another year, don't you? It's still a five year program, isn't it?" Brian added, "If not six year." Charlie picked up the last chicken sandwich and said, "Well then, what's your problem?" Brian paused, smiled and picked up the two second halves of the sandwiches he left earlier. Brian simply said, "What problem?" They finished lunch with a piece of fresh baked apple pie with ice cream. Mary apologized for not having blueberry pie, "I know it's your favorite but fresh blueberries aren't available now and I won't use frozen or canned." She is so pleased to have Brian come over for a meal because she usually doesn't have leftovers.

After lunch, Mary shooed the boys out of the kitchen and into Charlie's shack. Brian sat in the big old chair to tune the bands. He found a good sized pile up on 15 meter sideband and listened carefully to figure out who the DX station was. But instead, all he heard on the DX station's frequency were the pileup police, directing stations to call 'up' and some very nasty remarks directed at certain stations. Brian asked, "Charlie, were the pile ups always like this back in the old...uh, I mean before I was a ham?" Charlie chuckled, "You mean, in those ancient times when we used spark? Well, we had our share of wackies but

operating has changed plenty since then. It's so very simple for anyone to make a mistake and forget to press that tiny 'split' button on our modern transceivers, whether on CW or SSB. We all forget to press it now and then. Years ago, accidentally operating on the DX station's frequency was more difficult because equipment features weren't as numerous or versatile. Phone DXers would set up their transmitter up in their band, say above 14.200 and listen down in the DX band, below 14.200 but that was when we used crystals and outboard VFOs with huge dial faces. It was hard to not know where you were. Of course, we still were caught using wrong crystals, tuning a driver to a harmonic, or setting our VFO too close to our band edges. Making this kind of split mistake that you're talking about was just about impossible, way back there in those old days, Brian."

Brian was embarrassed at Charlie's teasing, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...." Charlie stopped him still chuckling, "Forget it Brian. Don't be silly, I'm not offended. In fact, you're right. Those days are long ago and in a different era. But, we had our wackies back then too, but most of them were on SSB. Maybe that's what kept me on CW."

Brian stayed operating and chatting until it was almost time for dinner, being with his mentor and enjoying every minute. The academic program he's enrolled in at MIT demands every moment of his time and maintaining a high grade point average requires that he use plenty of scheduled sleep time for study. All in all, it's a grueling ordeal and a period of relaxation is pure luxury. Charlie brought him up to date on his new adventures in using PSK31 and let him type his way through a few QSOs. He showed him the new commercial amplifier he picked up at the recent surplus warehouse sale. Of course, each of these show and tell periods used up an hour. No ham is known for being brief. So, it wasn't any surprise that 4:30 rolled around quickly and Mary leaned into the shack to tell Brian that she had called his mom to tell her that her son would be staying here for dinner. Brian looked at his watch and leaped to his feet, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. No, I can't. That is I shouldn't. I mean, I mean, well. I should go." Mary asked, "Why, Brian. Ann says that your dad doesn't need his truck tonight and you were going to stay home and rest anyway. I made pot roast and buttered sweet potatoes for dinner. Your mom says it's one of your favorites."

Brian smiled sheepishly and said, "It surely is and I'd be delighted to stay if it's no trouble." Mary and Charlie love this fine young man as if he were their own son. Now that their own children are grown and live far away, helping to look after another fine son like Brian is simply terrific. Greg and Ann appreciate their help also. Brian stayed well after dinner talking with Mary and Charlie about school and new friends he's made. Of course, since Charlie is an engineer, Brian seeks his viewpoint because it's more in focus with his own. It's been said that it takes a village to raise a child. By the same logic and just as true is that a great engineer doesn't just happen by accident. By the time Brian or any engineer graduates, his or her thinking has been molded by many professors, grad students, work study supervisors, teaching and research assistants, upper classmen, and thousands of hours of experience in the lab and on work assignments.

Most of all, someone like Charlie stands tall as the reason they chose their profession, without whom they would have possibly listened to their high school career counselor and gone into finance, "because they excelled in mathematics". It's absolutely essential that every bright student pursue the best career choice for him or herself, the one that will make him or her happy for a lifetime. It takes a keen technical eye to spot that special talent in young students. Keep those eyes peeled when you help teach your club's classes or Elmer that high schooler. Engineers are an endangered species. We need all that we can find to carry us into this new century.