

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

Bob Beudet, W1YRC

Hams everywhere love good band conditions and most of us complain when signals are poor or the bands are noisy from atmospheric disturbances, the neighbor's old aquarium heater or even that old rusty step down transformer on the utility pole that deserves a good retirement and soon. Whatever the cause of meddling with his or her operating pleasure, it's fair game for blame.

So, what would you do if you could receive and transmit to all parts of the world any time of day or night with strong signals, never interference or noise and your signal was always heard without your having to repeat anything? Would it be any fun at all? Oh sure, it's a silly question and we understand why it can't happen. I'm using it only to illustrate the sort of communication service we expect and even demand from our telephone and Internet providers. When we can't simply dial or punch in a number or URL and gain solid and quick communication with anyone we call on a 24/7 basis, the next call is to the provider with a complaint. Nearly 100% service is a reasonable expectation in these services.

What if we take that same set of expectations to one of Charlie's favorite pastimes, other than Amateur Radio? Long time readers will know that Charlie is an avid fisherman and truly loves the time he spends casting his line in hopes of attracting a good sized bass. It's similar to the basic science and philosophy of DXing which explains why fishing is held in such esteem on Charlie's list of things he prefers to do.

All right. Why am I carrying on like this? Basically, we're losing many young new ham candidates to the Internet because they can easily chat with someone in Australia or Japan in chat rooms or even via Internet video. They don't need a very powerful computer or any sort of transmitter. They don't need an antenna of any kind. They don't need a hilltop location. An apartment in the city is every bit as effective a location as a near perfect one such as Charlie's Signal Hill shack with gentle slopes for miles on all sides. They don't even need to study and qualify for a license. Realistically, if all a potential ham wants to gain from the hobby is the 24/7 ability to communicate, you might do us a favor to let him or her continue to wrap their interests around the Internet. His/her depth of curiosity or interest in building or experimentation is probably not there.

Our old mentor, Charlie, had started his day in his usual manner by tuning the 40 and 20 meter CW bands just before dawn. On occasion, his diligence is rewarded with a surprising gray line opening and the pleasure of a rare QSO to a part of the world not expected to be heard at that time or on that path. It requires faithful work, though. While it can be accurately predicted that openings will occur 20% of the time, the distribution cannot be predicted. That's what makes it sport. On most days by 1000 UTC, Charlie has finished and takes his old faithful hound Rufus out for their walk. They usually walk a half mile or so down the country road that winds its way over the top of Signal Hill. It's gotten to be a pattern that can't be stopped, probably for both of them. Rufus has slowed down a bit, natural to an aging hound dog but Charlie figures they match up well since he's lost a step or two as well.

1000 UTC is a good time to take a walk with your four footed pal, the sun is just coming up and not too warm yet. There's little or no traffic at this hour on Signal Hill Road. The commuters who short cut over the hill to get on the freeway are still at home, getting themselves put together for another work day. An hour from now, they'll be whizzing by trying to break the land speed record with their Audi V6s, Beemers and SUVs. Charlie put in his time in the work world and

has earned this time to do more important things that he never had time for like appreciating what was going on around him.

On the way back, almost at the edge of his property, Charlie heard the rumbling sound of a big truck, a diesel. Soon, he saw the truck coming up the hill. It had markings on it that indicated it was from the state Emergency Management Center. Charlie and Rufus reached the driveway moments before the diesel four wheel drive vehicle got there.

Charlie was amazed to see who was driving. It was Brian, Charlie's prize student. He said, "Well, good morning Brian. What in the world are you doing driving this truck? And what are you doing out so early in the morning?"

Brian laughed and leaned out of the truck. "You'll never believe it. I just finished my semester and my work study program has me working with McAllister Communications Co., about 50 miles from here. I started last week on a seven month work term. McAllister has a big contract to design some special radio systems and antennas for the state EMA. It's under a Homeland Security grant. They want me to work on a field test and evaluation program for all their prototype units before they release their designs to production. I called you a few minutes ago because I knew you'd be in the shack, but Mary said you were walking Rufus. I knew where to find you and here I am."

Charlie listened to all of this patiently and said, "Well, that's great Brian. It sounds like a terrific work term. So, why are you here with this big truck at the crack of dawn? How about coming in for something to eat for breakfast?" Brian never loses his manners or his appetite. He replied, "Well, if it's not too much trouble."

Brian pulled this monster vehicle into the driveway. Charlie noticed it better at this point and could see how large it really was. Oh, my Goodness! It made their small house look even smaller. Brian jumped down and followed Charlie into the house. Rufus found himself a nice quiet corner to nap and Mary came to the door to give Brian a hug, "How are you, dear. My goodness, college life must agree with you. Look at you! You've gained weight haven't you? I'll bet you've got room for something from the oven?"

Brian replied, "Oh yes, thank you, I put on about 20 pounds this year but always have room for your baking." Actually, he's just filling out that lanky frame. He's becoming an adult. They sat and had some classic blueberry muffins and coffee. Charlie asked again, "OK, son. What brings you here before seven in the morning in that monster of a truck?"

Brian explained, "Well, this communications equipment is fairly strange, weird frequencies, splits, mixed mode, encryption and some other things. The folks at McAllister got your name from my reference files at MIT and checked your background. They found that you had some special clearances from your work days that could be renewed and they asked me if I could arrange for them to speak with you." Charlie looked puzzled at that comment and asked, "Huh?" Brian stumbled around and continued, "Well, uhh, I told them how you helped me to get licensed. I knew some of your work and education but they knew a lot more than I did. I said you were happily retired and weren't looking for a job. Then, they told me having you mentoring my work would speed things up and that help them achieve some performance incentive bonuses that they'd split with me as a bonus."

Mary commented, "Well, dear. You didn't tell me you wanted to go back to work." Then she laughed and said, "You'd love it and you know it." Then Brian added, "Oh my Gosh, I forgot the most important part. I need to have my work certified by an engineering manager

certified to approve equipment like this. I told them they would have to speak with you but they'll pay you more than they pay me. You only have to work with me a few hours each week, maybe only every other week. I'm really sorry asking you like this but I didn't know most of these details until I reported to work yesterday. I'd really appreciate having you with me. You'll do it, won't you, please Charlie?"

Charlie was silent but Mary knew what he was thinking, "Charlie would be delighted and proud to work with you. I don't have enough around here to keep him busy anyway. When does he start?" Charlie wiped one eye and advised Brian, "Be sure you find a wife that knows what you're thinking before you say it. It saves explanations. Sure, we can do it. Where and when are we going?"

Brian looked at his watch as he finished the last of his third muffin. Gulping down his coffee, he said, "Thank you for breakfast. It was great. I'll explain on the way. We better get going now." It's amazing how Brian has changed after three years in college. He's a 'take-charge' leader now.

They climbed aboard this strange vehicle that was loaned to McAllister for installation of the first prototype. Brian headed down the driveway and down Signal Hill to the freeway. On the way, Brian explained that McAllister will be outfitting an undetermined number of these vehicles for state EMA, probably a few dozen. "They have funding for the first five in hand and expect funding in the next fiscal year for many more. The funds will determine the number since the unit prices of these are fairly fixed," he explained. He said they were heading for the office now for Charlie to speak with the engineering manager. "They told me to drive this thing home last night to get used to driving it. It's kind of like a Hummer H2 but not as plush."

Charlie didn't appreciate being cornered like this, even by Brian who he'd do anything for. Let's say it's a safe bet that it was Brian that did the cornering. Anyone else would be turned down flatly. Retirement is a great time of one's life. It shouldn't be interrupted by something awful like work, unless that's the choice of the retiree of course.

After arriving at the plant and meeting with the engineering staff, Charlie became excited over the prospects for this project. They were packing this vehicle with GPS, cell phones and radio units to cover any of more than a hundred different state and county EM COMM channels. In addition, there was provision in certain command vehicles for encrypted satellite linking on several modes. It could be adapted for different missions by users within the state; police, fire, DEM, Sheriff, EMS, even links to the military command posts. There were several optional "accessory" radio shelves that were power and antenna connected to serve different drop-in radios such as the IC-756 or more simple VHF/UHF amateur band radios. Some of the applications would be classified and using access codes which would be changed by a special black box numerical controller. There were provisions for spread spectrum communications and other frequency agile modes. On the drawings of the roof and the sides were provisions for more than twenty different antennas. All in all, Charlie was like a kid in a candy store. This thing would be a bear! Working with Brian would be a pleasure indeed, and be paid for it as well was hard to imagine.

Making contacts in Amateur Radio with people from all walks of life, we never know who we will meet or just how and when opportunities will be presented to enjoy an unbelievable experience, drawing from all the creativity and imagination we can muster. The doors in life are all there waiting for you. A good education and knowing who has answers can make finding those door keys simpler.