

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Charlie ran into an old college friend recently. He was someone he had become friendly with during the two years they both spent at Cal Tech earning their Master's degrees fifty years ago. Both were completing this portion of their education as part of their mandatory military obligation. Charlie was part of an Army communications team that was planned to be deployed to Korea. However, the Korean Conflict ended before his departure, so his orders were cancelled and he happily never left the US after completing his grad work. Geoff Scott Andrews was a British subject in the non-uniformed service of the Crown, part of a deep security program originally designed in the pre-WW II years and expanded to civilian service following the war. Each government had decided to send their two promising candidates to grad school as part of their advanced training for government service, a decision both welcomed greatly.

Back then, Charlie was recently married to Mary and the three of them socialized along with a few other military grad students. Charlie and Geoff took the same classes, studied together and spent plenty of time together. Consequently, they became very close friends. But, after grad school, they went their separate ways and haven't seen one another in five decades.

Geoff had selected to study at Cal Tech from a list of several world class graduate schools made available to him by his government. He settled on Cal Tech mainly because from 1954 to 1955, Dr. William Shockley was Deputy Director and Research Director of the Weapons System Evaluation Group in the Defense Department of the university. He greatly admired Dr. Shockley, the developer of the family of semiconductor that still bears his name and studying with him was a dream. Geoff believed that, although it was never acknowledged, Dr. Shockley's British sponsor was MI6, the secret intelligence gathering group of the government. In 1956, the same year in which Geoff and Charlie finally earned their Master's degrees; Dr. Shockley was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for his breakthrough work in semiconductor and materials physics research, an act which certainly validated Geoff's admiration.

Well, as usual, I've gotten well ahead of myself in telling this story and I apologize for the need to drive the truck in reverse but I guess I felt that it's important to know Geoff's background in order to more fully appreciate Charlie's reaction to meeting him again after nearly fifty years of obscurity.

The Homeland Security Department was sponsoring a series of lectures and tutorial programs designed for the average citizens of our country. The county where DX Hill and several other small communities are located was one of a dozen sub-urban and rural counties selected for this part of their schedule. All of the specific aims and goals of relevant programs were explained to the public in full page newspaper releases months before the program's launch. Before you start trying to figure how many taxes were spent buying full pages of their newspapers, let me be quick to point out that a full inside page of a rural newspaper could be negotiated for not more than a few hundred dollars. In fact, most often, public service messages like this are nearly always given for the tax deduction it provided.

It was a comprehensive program offered without cost of any kind to the citizens. It was aimed at acquainting and familiarizing average folks with the precautions they were seeing and hearing every day through the news without feeling unnecessarily threatened or frightened. Obviously, these are troubled and nervous times for all of us but we must be aware that our terrorist enemies are striving to gain power over us largely by inflicting fear and causing irrational behavior over us in our daily lives. To counterbalance this, our Homeland Security officials have designed several special programs to help us understand tactics and counter intelligence in their basic belief that "Knowledge is Power".

Charlie and many other retired engineers like him had signed up for these programs. These folks are generally more patriotic than others but regardless, seeing Geoff was quite a shock for Charlie. At first, he didn't recognize Geoff at all. It had been forty years since they last saw one another. But, some things don't change even in that much time. It was Geoff's voice that Charlie recognized when he asked a question concerning deployment of homeland defense out of the country such as in passenger or cargo boarding points of US destined aircraft or ships.

Charlie turned to look at Geoff who was sitting a few rows behind him. As Geoff's question was being answered, he caught Charlie's glance and slowly smiled as recognition set in. With proper British protocol, he graciously thanked the speaker for his informative answer and then said softly to Charlie, "Well hello, you old buzzard. How in the bloody blazes are you?"

Fortunately, the program was nearing a break so Charlie merely pointed at his watch and then to the rear of the hall. Geoff acknowledged with a nod. Within a very few minutes, the moderator announced that there would be a ten minute break and that he hoped the first half had been useful to those who came. The applause of the thousand or so answered the question.

Charlie headed to where Geoff had been seated but couldn't find him. "Now, where did he go in just a few seconds," Charlie wondered? He looked all around and then felt a hand on the back of his neck. "If you were a nasty bloke, you'd be an ex-bloke now", he said. Charlie turned and saw Geoff laughing heartily. "How the dickens are you? What have you been up to? Where are you living?" Charlie had many questions. Geoff said he was fine, still working for his company and living in Henley, just outside of London.

When Charlie last knew of Geoff's employment, he was doing super secret things with an agency of the British government called MI6, but that was a very long while ago and because of his work, he avoided being very close to people. In fact, his career doubtlessly was responsible for his drifting into obscurity after grad school. Agents aren't very successful if their profile is high.

Charlie asked, "Geoff, aren't you retired yet? Are you married yet? Are you traveling alone?" Geoff smiled and held his head, "You're giving me a headache! There's too much to talk about, old boy. Say, what are your dinner plans tonight? We need to catch up. Yes, I'm officially retired from the old place but still do contract work for them when they have an interesting gig. I never married because I never found any lady patient enough to put up with my crazy life, so I never tried."

Charlie was afraid to ask what sort of gig he was following now. He really didn't want to know since MI6 does some nasty things and has some nasty rascals on its payroll. Charlie said, "Why don't you come on over to our place for dinner tonight. Mary and I would be very pleased to talk about all these years that have passed and what we've been doing. What's your favorite food, Geoff?" He smiled and slapped his well rounded midsection with both hands. "Blimey Charlie, you should remember that. Good food is my favorite. I remember Mary. You and she had just married before the Army sent you to California." Charlie nodded and said, "She's a wonderful lady and the best cook in the entire county. I'll call her and tell her we have a guest for dinner. It will be spectacular, I'm sure."

Charlie called Mary right away on his cell phone. She remembered Geoff after a little thinking. She hesitated for a moment and then said, "Oh sure....He's the good looking Brit who worked for the spy agency, isn't he? I used to call him double O seven. He was always so mysterious. Does he still prefer his Martini shaken, not stirred?" Charlie replied, "That's him. He hasn't changed much, I suspect. But, that's why he's coming over. We can get caught up on old times." With a mind for priorities, Mary started thinking of what dinner she would prepare, asking Charlie if he'd like this or that or something else. Charlie only said, "Dear, just do whatever you were planning to do this evening for us and it will be outstanding as always." She replied with a chuckle, "You're no help. What time do you think you boys will be here?" Charlie could only guess about 5 or so. With that, they said bye for now.

The second half of the presentation was starting and Charlie sat with Geoff so they could quietly chat without speaking above a whisper. Quickly, though, it became clear to Charlie that he wasn't going to be able to concentrate on the program. He was so curious and wanted to ask so many questions but of course, had to wait until later. Minutes seemed like hours. The Homeland Security speaker covered the programs that were planned to be launched in this county and within fifty miles. They included all the things that both were already familiar with so they just sat politely, at least for a few more minutes.

Finally, the government official broke out boxes of hand-out material that he had brought along for everyone to take home. He learned that old speaker's rule of thumb some time ago, not to hand out reading material while you're still in the speaking part of the program. People will read and not listen to what you're saying. After picking up copies of the comprehensive brochures and charts Homeland Security had prepared for them, Geoff and Charlie could see that the essential part of the program was behind them and headed for the door. Many others did the same.

Outside, they started some serious talking about professors and how their lives had been over all these years. It was only then that Geoff revealed that he had gotten an Amateur license back in the U.K. Charlie was stunned. He didn't know if he should be happy or upset. After all, Geoff had kept this all to himself for four decades. Charlie values his ham friends and felt terrible that they could have QSOD during all these

years and kept in touch. It wasn't something he liked at all. Geoff, being the spy that he was, had likely kept track of Charlie more than he was revealing in this little chat.

Charlie just started to say something and Geoff stopped him, "Look Charlie, I understand how you must feel, but over all of these years, I couldn't really talk about anything I was doing. In fact, it was the agency that wanted me to get the license. Earlier, in the war, they used British and other European hams to carry out all sorts of undercover work. These guys even designed some weird radios that they used to knock out Gerry's lights. I was never the avid ham that you were. Over the years, being a ham worked rather well as a cover for some odd communications work I had to do. I truly never assembled a real ham station anywhere. Antennas are a give away, you know."

Charlie thought about it as they walked. He supposed that Geoff was right. At least, he was willing to give him the benefit of his doubt. Finally, they reached the parking area or 'car park' as Geoff called it and Charlie simply told Geoff to follow him back home, rather than try to give him directions. Charlie asked if Geoff had a 2 meter radio with him, to which he replied that he didn't think his HT was in the car. Charlie said, "That's too bad. We could stay in touch on 146.52." With a shrug from Geoff, they went to their cars and started out with Charlie in the lead for the short drive to DX Hill.

All the way, Charlie kept watching Geoff's car in his rear view mirror. Somehow, he suspected that he might deliberately change his mind and swing off the road and later claim he was lost. Charlie didn't entirely believe what an intelligence agent tells him, nor despite being an old friend, he never felt he could trust anything Geoff told him. Another thought that ran through Charlie's mind as he kept an eye on the car following him was that he wondered how many cars Geoff had followed over the years without being detected. Charlie didn't try any evasive turns just to test Geoff because he didn't want to give him any excuse for getting lost.

Soon, they reached the driveway to Charlie and Mary's small home. "Well, that was an easy run, my friend," came through the 2 meter radio speaker. It was Geoff and he had found his HT. Charlie responded that it was and signed with his call. Geoff did the same, signing his G call followed by portable W1.

Charlie got out of his car, chuckling. "I still never know what you're going to do." Geoff laughed and said, "You can't ever trust what I tell you, old boy. I knew you were listening to .52. I would have called you if I didn't like your route." That sort of remark made Charlie realize what a strange life Geoff must have led. He wondered what Geoff meant by calling if he didn't like my route. Could Geoff have known all the while where DX Hill was? You never can trust these agents. They live in world that's very different from a normal one that we're accustomed to.

They were walking toward the house when Mary opened the door and held out her arms to her "boys" as she always refers to Charlie and his ham friends. Geoff burst into a smile and said, "Blimey, you're more lovely than I remember, Mary. What's your secret?" Mary wondered how sincere he was in saying that after all these years and all the people he's seen. Never the less, she was quite flattered and said, "Well, double O seven, you haven't lost a bit of your charm. Thank you."

They were in for a treat. Mary decided to make one of Charlie's favorites. She took one of the four pound rib roasts from the freezer that morning and was going to make it into some smaller dinners for Charlie and herself that would likely serve a half dozen meals. Instead, with British company coming, Mary prepared a traditional roast beef with green beans and carrots with Yorkshire Pudding.

Mary asked her boys to give a few minutes to pop the Yorkshire Pudding into the oven. "All the rest is ready", she said. "Give me 15 minutes." That was fine with Charlie since he dragged Geoff into his shack and showed him around. Geoff just smiled and shook his head. "This is what I'd imagine you'd have. Everything you ever wanted including a well used radio dial." Geoff had noticed the roughness on the panel next to the receiver's main tuning dial, suggesting plenty of use, tuning back and forth. Agents notice these tell tale signs, at least good ones do. It seemed like no time had passed before Mary called them to dinner which they dutifully obeyed.

As Geoff seated himself, he observed that he came to the US to have a British dinner. "I would have enjoyed pizza or hamburgers just as well." Quickly, he added, "But this looks and smells outrageously delicious."

Mary had made Geoff a Martini in a shaker, just for a joke. Of course, she had no idea if he drank those things any longer but she found a little gin and vermouth in the back of her cupboard and thought she'd get a laugh from him. As the boys came into the dining room, Geoff saw the glass and shaker and burst out laughing. "I don't believe it, Mary! You still remember the OO seven thing with the shaken, not stirred Martini. You're an amazing lady," Geoff remarked. They all laughed and took a seat. Charlie had a small sip of the Martini, not a drink he has had in decades but Geoff seemed to be more familiar with his. In truth, it had been nearly fifty years since they had seen one another. Mary had no idea what Geoff's present taste in food or drink was but she had a good memory. Geoff was mightily impressed. Dinner was delicious, of course.

After dinner, they talked for hours, catching up on people they remember. Geoff spoke quite freely about several projects he performed around the world. He surely led an exciting life serving his entire working career for MI6, the Secret Intelligence Service of the British Crown. The super secure agency has been around for decades and performed some of its most valuable work in the years prior to and during World War II. A better known British security entity is known as MI5, which is the UK's security intelligence agency. Both agencies are active to this day but details about them cannot be determined without a need to know.

Geoff tried to explain the distinct differences in roles between MI5 and MI6 but the more he tried to point out the distinctions, the greater the two agencies appeared linked and performing many similar or related tasks. He explained that there were other Military Intelligence agencies dedicated to special tasks also, numbered MI7, MI9 and others. None were ever very well known as MI5 was, thanks to Ian Fleming and the James Bond fans. It all sounded exciting and Geoff was quick to point out how valuable hams had been in helping the agencies to carry out their work, especially during the war years when conventional and legal ham radio work was discontinued in most countries.

Geoff explained that news about ham radio and little known history about their contributions to the allied war effort are slowly but surely becoming known now, to their grandchildren's generation. He pointed out, "A book called 'The Secret Wireless War' has just been released. It's a collection of stories taken from British and German communications specialists who served in the War. Some of these stories are positively jaw droppers. You must read it." Geoff went on to say that some of these old agents are in their 80's and 90's and someone must have figured that they better interview them before their stories never are told or even recorded.

Mary, Geoff and Charlie were only in grade school when the big war ended so their memories are mostly second hand from relatives, teachers and documentaries. Geoff explained that this book goes a long way to make places like Bletchley Park and devices like the mysterious Enigma machine into things they could relate to and marvel over. Learning about these things now will show how dangerously close we were at times to being overcome by the Nazi forces. Little advantages we had, like our hams made a big difference. In their discussion, they agreed that the world of electronics and communications had surely grown at an astounding rate in the past half century.

Charlie made a typically profound observation after they had chatted for a while, "If communications technology progresses about the same amount in the next sixty years as it has in the last sixty, it's impossible to imagine the state of things." Indeed, he is correct. It surely is impossible and incredible.

Geoff finally said he had to return to the UK after tending to some business in Washington. They had talked late into the evening before Geoff looked at his watch and insisted that he return to his hotel room and catch a few winks before his noon flight tomorrow to Baltimore's BWI airport. He thanked Mary for an outstanding dinner and wonderful evening. He promised that he'd be back, soon. When Charlie suggested that they try to work one another when he gets home, Geoff explained that he had no station set up but would stay in touch by e mail. As usual, Geoff was mysterious. "Why doesn't he have a station set up now? Antennas can't be a problem any longer." Charlie wondered to himself.

Mary and Charlie said good night to their re-found old friend and watched as the tail lights of his rental car disappeared down DX Hill. Charlie couldn't keep from wondering what secrets were also disappearing with him, always to stay with Geoff. From what he said this evening, it was apparent that Geoff has sacrificed having a family or any of the joys of raising children and having grandchildren in order to live his life of intrigue and mystery. Certainly, it was valuable service to his country and we can only guess what other stories will be locked away forever.

It was midnight and a beautiful night with a full moon. Mary went along with Charlie as he walked his pal, Rufus. It was nice to just enjoy the quiet of the hill, see the twinkling lights below in the valley as well as above in the clear night sky. As they walked along quietly, Mary said "Charlie, I'm glad you didn't end up doing what Geoff did in his career. He's right, no wife could live with a husband who she never could get to know and share things with." Charlie just smiled and replied, "I couldn't live in Geoff's world either, dear."

They walked arm in arm a little further than normal that night. That's the effect a good partner has on anyone, you'll be able to go a little further and smile more often. Of course, Rufus approved too. He loves long walks on DX Hill.