

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Charlie has mentored a great many new hams as well as a few older ones along the last few decades. Clearly, one of his favorite students was young Brian who came along while he was still a sophomore in high school. Since then, Brian has moved ahead impressively having been accepted into MIT's comprehensive VI program (known as Six A) and studying Computer Engineering, Signal Processing and Systems Applications. Of course, when Brian stopped by for a visit recently during a break from his studies, it underscored for Charlie and Mary too, just how time has flown.

Brian was all grown up. That awkward and uncoordinated kid riding his bike up Signal Hill just so he could ask Charlie another question had become a very confident and solid young man. It's been eight or nine years since Brian started studying for his license. This coming June, he will graduate Magna Cum Laude (with great praise) from Massachusetts Institute of Technology with two degrees, a Bachelors in Computer Engineering and a Masters in Systems Engineering and Applications. The VI program is a combination program which starts from the first class addressing the students on a higher level in the assumption that they have committed to matriculate through to their Masters program without interruption. Summers are included and scheduled practicum work sessions.

The down side of this is the lack of free time, meaning that coming home to see his family as well as his welcome trips to DX Hill are few and far between. Well, now that Brian had finally reached his last semester and knew the pace would ease, he took some time to become a real person again and assure everyone that he hadn't left to become a hermit, even though that's what it appeared had happened. Most of his time between January and May will be spent editing, presenting and defending his comprehensive thesis which details his work. In actual fact, VI students start preparing for this semester at the beginning of the program and continue to add material to the growing folder of notes and diagrams over the six to seven year program. At the end, the process is mostly assembly and composition of his notes into a polished thesis that conforms to MIT's standard for submission. Being the over achiever that he is, Brian had prepared for this time and is virtually ready to be signed off to graduate, according to his advisor.

Well, Brian called by telephone to see if Charlie would be home for a while. He wanted to come up the hill and get Charlie's views on some things they had talked about in the past. Of course, Charlie assured Brian that he'd be home and told Mary so that she could get something ready for one of the healthiest appetites in the county. It was about 10 in the morning when Brian pulled up the driveway. It was a typical gray and damp February day that felt colder than it actually was. Perfect antenna weather, many would say.

Charlie greeted his start student and led him into the cozy den where they could sit and chat. Mary intercepted him and gave him a big hug. "How are you, Brian. Do they feed you enough at college?" Brian grinned and said, "Well, they don't have anything like your cooking there. I surely miss that." Mary patted him on the cheek like her little boy and said, "Now you just sit down here and I'll take care of that."

Charlie knew that there was no use trying to stop Mary from doing that. She will do what she wishes to do, regardless. Brian won't complain. They sat and Charlie asked, "OK, what's the problem, Brian?" He immediately said, "Oh, there's no problem. It's just that old contester thing that we've talked about before." Charlie wrinkled his nose and said he didn't understand. Then

Brian explained that many of the hams he met at college are big contesters in VHF and RTTY on the HF bands. He explained, "They've built the club station into a multi op, multi station setup and whenever we have a meeting, they're always arguing about something. It's just no fun being there so I leave. During a contest weekend, I've occasionally dropped in and watched them operating. I even sat in an empty chair once and worked a few on the 440 MHz band. It was no fun. All I felt was the pressure to run stations and dominate a frequency. The team leaders were yelling to go faster, go faster. Eventually, I told them I didn't feel well and left."

Charlie was grinning as Brian explained. He said, "That very thing has run off some very talented hams from ever wanting to operate a station. Not every ham enjoys driving at that pace. If a new ham feels that 'real hams' operate that way, they quickly decide they don't want to be a 'real ham'. Of course, that's terrible and shouldn't happen but it does."

Mary arrived with an oversized tray of blueberry and corn muffins. She said, "Brian, with all the all nighters you must have done, I'll bet you drink coffee." Brian replied, "Yes mam, I surely do." He started to get up and Mary quickly added, "Charlie will get your coffee and one for himself. It's fresh on the counter, dear. How do you like your coffee, Brian?" He replied black with one sugar. Charlie recalled his college days when he said that. "That sounds like study coffee, Brian." Brian nodded, "Yes, I guess so. It keeps me going."

After the coffee was settled and the muffins were disappearing, Charlie remarked, "You know, some hams spend their lives and every cent they can lay their hands on to build a station that will beat the guys in the next state over. Some of them put up a dozen towers or more that are 200 ft tall. There's more aluminum hanging from those towers than Budweiser uses in their canning plant in a month. There are miles and miles of cable running all over the place, hundreds of radials under the towers, Beverage antennas that are a thousand feet long stretched out each three degrees of the compass. Can you imagine how much wire that is?" Brian thought and replied, "About 22 miles?"

Charlie laughed. "I might know that you'd figure that out easily. But seriously, some hams don't feel that their goals have been met unless they construct a station that can work any station in the world with a single call in just a few seconds. I know guys who've lost their family and life savings over building a mega station and didn't care.

Their competitive drive is so strong that they simply cannot accept being in a pileup and not coming out first with contact. Being the tenth station to work the other station isn't sufficient. Working a station on three bands and not five isn't either. It makes sense to them to maintain this level of competitiveness but not to me." Charlie sat there, sipping coffee and thinking.

Brian started saying something and stopped. He wanted to rephrase his comment. Then, he said, "Charlie, you want to be heard by the DX station also, don't you? You've got a big tower out back and a few big yagis up on it. What's the real difference between you and these other hams?" Charlie thought for a while. Brian had asked a very good question, as he usually does. After another sip of coffee, Charlie asked, "Brian, are you familiar with what's going on in sports these days? Some very gifted athletes have been using all sorts of drugs and chemicals to improve their strength and performance in their particular sport. It certainly isn't quite the same but it illustrates the point that in competition, some will go to any extent in order to be the best. It doesn't matter that it may not make sense. Some hams have justified to themselves that spending enormous and likely disproportionate amounts of money and work on their stations just to achieve that edge that will put them on top of the heap in a pile up or achieve a high contest score. For sure, it's a personal thing for each of us but some exceed reasonable limits by such a margin that it's difficult for me to understand."

Brian asked again, "But, some hams and even non hams will drive up DX Hill and look up at your tower thinking the same thing, that you've gone over the top. Other ham's G5RV wire antenna hanging between their house and a tree is all they have to work DX and look at your tall tower as something they can only dream about. Some must wonder why you've gone to all that trouble and expense of building the tower and big antennas. How is your situation very much different, maybe other than in number of towers, etc?"

Charlie loves this young man because he always quickly grasps the essence of a question and seeks the answer without becoming wrapped up in the process that led to the question. It's a gift that the best engineers can draw upon.

He thought quietly and asked Brian, "Are you familiar with the extent some golfers, fishermen, runners, tennis players, chess players, book collectors or just about any dedicated hobbyist will go to in their pursuit of enjoyment?" Brian nodded that he understood but then asked, "But why are you critical of some who set up huge contest stations and even some contest operators?" Charlie noted that once again, Brian had focused on the essential issue. He replied simply, "It's all in balance and priorities. You know that I'm a DXer. I've chased stations set up on rare rocks and sand bars all over the world. I've stayed up all night more than once to work an expedition. I've even rescheduled work hours a couple of times to be on the air during mid day. The antenna system I have may be better than some but it's very simple compared to serious contesters. I've always thought it was extreme overkill to use three stacked 6 element yagis to get that last tenth of a db gain and have the strongest signal this side of California."

Charlie continued, "That's where you have to look at the diminishing return for the huge investment you have to make both financially, mechanically and logistically. Maintaining structures like these are many times more trouble than a single tower and a beam or two. Then, the serious stations aren't satisfied with one tower. They have three, four or more. Many of the biggest stations have over twenty 100+ ft towers. It's difficult to justify this using conventional logic."

Brian seemed to be comfortable with what Charlie was saying. It resonated with his sense of balance and normality whereas what he had experienced in his exposure to the serious contesting crowd was disturbing. He could easily imagine the endless maintenance that a super station would require to say nothing of the expense in labor and finances to build it. Then, there's the liability issue with the many different people working on multiple towers regularly. It seemed to be a total nightmare and far more than he wanted to get into.

Charlie asked Brian, "You're graduating this May, right?" Brian smiled and said that was correct. Charlie asked what he was going to do after graduating and Brian told him that he was taking on a permanent position with the company he coop'd with while doing his graduate work in signal processing. He proudly told Charlie what they offered him for a starting salary and he nearly gave his old mentor a heart attack.

"Oh my Gosh! Do you know that you'll be making more starting out than I made after twenty years on the job after I graduated?" Brian smiled and said that he realized he had been offered an attractive compensation package with 401K, stock, bonuses, etc. Then, almost sounding defensive, he added, "But, that's what VI grads are offered this year, Charlie. I guess my offer was a little higher because I had worked for them and my grades were pretty good." Charlie laughed and said, "You could say that, my friend. You worked hard and I'm mighty proud of you. Say with all that coming in, you could go buy a big farm and set up towers all over it."

Brain frowned and said, “No way. But, I am going to get a good transceiver with my first paycheck. I was looking at that new Ten-Tec Orion transceiver. Is that a good one for me to get?” Charlie knew a little about that radio from some friends and he replied, “Yes Brian, reports on that unit are very positive. The receiver is very good with low intermod distortion and it uses signal processing for minimum noise. You’ll be happy with the Orion. It’s probably the best HF transceiver on the market today.”

He smiled and said that he met a very nice girl at college. “She’s going to graduate in May also. Her name is Susan and comes from Nebraska,” Brian commented. She’s not a techie though. She’s getting her Bachelors in Fine Arts from Boston University. Susan isn’t sure what she wants to study in grad school so she may hold off for a while.”

Mary overheard Brian talking about his girlfriend and came in to ask, “Has your mom met Susan and do they like each other?” Brian laughed and said, “Oh boy. I’ll say they do. Just after New Year’s, my mom came up to school and I introduced her to Susan. They got along like old pals, went shopping and never stopped talking. I became invisible. Mom’s name is Susan too and she said that they had plenty in common.” Mary, never one to mince her words, said, “That’s right. They both are fond of you, aren’t they?” Brian just smiled and said, “Well, I guess.”

Mary could guess what Susan’s plans might be, wait to see where Brian’s work will take him before deciding on what and where to study in grad school. She asked, “Do you think you two could get serious? What is Susan doing after graduation?” Brian said that she was taking some temporary work with the local classical music FM station, WCRB, until she decided on graduate work and it definitely could become serious.

Mary replied, “Uh-huh, that’s nice.” Of course, that merely confirmed her guess. Charlie jumped in and suggested that Brian spend some time in the operating chair and tune the bands. Brian jumped at that suggestion and picked up dishes and cups. Mary waved him off, “Go on. I’ll tend to this. Go have fun on the radio.”

For the next few hours, they made some QSOs and chatted about the bands and what new DX might be coming up. Charlie considers Brian one of his sons and is so very pleased that he has done so well in building his career. He’s also pleased that ham radio helped to show him the way into engineering a few years ago when his high school guidance counselor was so sure that she should push this math prodigy into a business career. More than 50% of last year’s undergraduates received a business degree and engineering degrees are declining in number every year. The country cannot maintain its high technology edge with a generation of business people. We need more and more science and technology graduates. Brian is surely contributing his fair share to his family and his country.