

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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As I'm certain all of us will understand that Charlie is very pleased to see spring finally arrive. He and Mary are fairly confident that as they become older, their tolerance for cold, snow and windy weather isn't nearly as forgiving as in the past which makes spring's arrival cause for celebration. But, it finally has arrived, major league baseball opening games have taken place, the Red Sox received their championship rings for winning the 2004 World Series, they've crushed the Yankees in their home opening game, fishing season has started, the sun is warm. What could be lacking in this picture? All is right with the world. Well, except for a few problems here and there. But on DX Hill, Charlie is certainly feeling quite well for an old DXer.

This early spring Friday was forecast to be crystal clear and fairly warm, temps in the 60s. Charlie decided it would be a good day to climb his tower and survey what damage winter's winds and cold may have wrought on his cables and hardware. He routinely performs this tower inspection every spring, usually on the first warm day when Mary is out scratching the dirt in the garden, planning what she will plant and where. This is the day chosen this spring, principally because of the gorgeous weather.

Charlie's knees have acted up on him lately, so he climbs slowly up the tower a couple of rungs at a time, securing his climbing belt and resting for a few minutes before proceeding. It takes him a while to reach the top this way but on such a beautiful day, who could be noticing that? It took him about thirty minutes to make his way to the hundred ft level where his two yagis for twenty and forty meters are perched.

The boom and driven element of the forty meter yagi is just above the thrust bearing at the top of the tower and is very easily accessible for inspection or repairs if needed. Of course, the big four element twenty meter yagi is above the tower on a very strong piece of special mast that will never bend. This morning and on a few other recent mornings, during Charlie's regular pre dawn trolling of the forty meter band, he heard some strange clicks and snaps that sounded nothing like a propagated signal. Rather, it gave the impression of something loose, broken or dirty in the antenna or transmission line. It didn't seem to affect the signal strength but how could he know? The transmitter still loaded to full power with low SWR. However, the incentive to visually inspect things was undeniable. A fast visual inspection of the cables and hardware was positive. But a closer inspection of the matching enclosure where Charlie has a pair of toroids and some lightning protection devices revealed something that looked strange indeed.

The neat rubber boot that protects to wires entering the enclosure had some tiny scratches in it and there were some tiny pieces of residual rubber or vinyl scattered on the surface of the box. Charlie removed the cover of the enclosure to reveal evidence that some moths had somehow gotten their way into the box and made their family nest in there last fall. Their residue was all over the toroids and coated the wiring to the connectors. The dielectric material in the SO-239 coax connectors were completely coated with gray dust and some unknown material left behind by the inconsiderate and messy tenants. Obviously, Charlie suspected something had happened somewhere based on the strange sounds he has been hearing while using this antenna and this finding could easily explain what he had heard. Like anything in troubleshooting, however, he always keeps his mind open for discovery of virtually any cause of the problem. The matching enclosure had a few drip holes in its bottom to permit condensation to escape and obviously these moths had found it to be a way to get into the box through these rather small openings and establish residency.

Charlie never climbs the tower without bringing along basic tools in his tower pouch; things like a couple of screwdrivers, sharp knife, side cutters, pliers, a small cheap but clean paint brush and a few box wrenches in addition to an ohm meter, spray cleaner and lubricant and some tape plus of course, a few pieces of hook up wire to make some temporary repairs if necessary. He spent several minutes brushing out the debris and cleaning the coax fittings. A dirty surface between several kilovolts of RF and ground is a perfect way to invite a flash over. The resultant carbon trail can easily cause erratic receiver performance as well. That was likely what Charlie had been hearing lately. "Darned bugs", Charlie thought as he removed the last bit of residue and replaced the cover and its screws.

Then, he took a moment to just enjoy the breathtaking view from his location. The day was very clear since a cold front from the northwest had moved through over night and delivered a high pressure system and some crystal clean Canadian air. Even though the National Weather folks called it a cold front, the air behind it was only a few degrees cooler than it was before. The day was delightful with temperature in the mid sixties. Soon enough, however, the prevailing southerly winds would bring moisture to the region and create a thin haze in the air. But right now, visibility is completely unlimited.

Charlie suddenly heard a loud roar coming from over the next hill and he looked in that direction. The Naval Reserve Air Station is beyond a ridge of land about six miles to the south and Charlie figured some reserve pilots were getting a head start on their weekend flying hours. The sound became louder and within a few more seconds, a diamond formation of four sparkling blue F-18 fighter jets flew toward him perched atop his tower and over his head. They seemed awfully close and definitely ultra loud. Being only a few hundred feet up, they looked larger than Charlie was prepared to see and he was very surprised to say the least. He held on to the tower tightly. The aircraft gracefully banked over the valley and broke their formation. He recognized that it was the Navy's Blue Angel demonstration team, right here over DX Hill. Wow, Charlie figured that he had the best observation point of anyone up at the top of his tower.

Mary had been working in the garden and looked up just at the instant that the aircraft flew over Charlie. It scared her and she was concerned that he was too close and ought to get down from up there. Charlie waved and called down that he was fine and wanted to stay and watch the show. Mary was still concerned and went into her kitchen to telephone their friend from church, Doug Lawrence who is a retired career US Naval aviator and she was certain he would know all about this. Doug's wife, Maureen answered the phone and told Mary that Doug was over at the Reserve station to watch the Blue Angels practice for their show on Saturday. They always practice on the day before a show when weather permits. Of course, that explains what was happening overhead. Mary told Maureen about Charlie being on top of his tower when the jets flew over. Maureen said that Doug had told her that they always choose certain geographical landmarks to form their pattern boundaries like water tanks, red barns and other easily seen structures. Doug told her that he thought DX Hill and that shiny aluminum in the air at Charlie's place was going to be one of their primary markers for turns and other commands. The hill is just the right distance for their turns from "show central" and the main runway at the base where the crowd will be. Mary replied, "Oh my! Wait till I tell Charlie that!"

Mary went out back, taking the cordless phone with her. Charlie was looking left and right just as one plane came from one direction and a couple of seconds later, another screamed by from the opposite direction. They seemed so close that you felt as though you could actually touch them but were actually several hundred feet above the top of DX Hill. Still, an F-18 Hornet screaming a few hundred feet over your head can be mighty loud. Charlie loved every moment of it and stayed until the practice had ended and the jets reformed over the base and landed.

Charlie started down the tower and was smiling all the way like the kid that he really was at heart. Mary asked him if he was all right when he finally set his feet on the ground. “Oh boy! I’ll say I am! Did you see those planes? They were so close, that…” Mary stopped him and said, “Charlie, I was scared to death that they would hit you because they were so close.”

Charlie poured himself a tall glass of iced tea that Mary was kind enough to bring out and explained, “DX Hill is higher than any other spot around here. That’s why the jets looked so close. They seemed much higher up to folks in the valley. They flew over our house quite a few times, though. I wonder why?” Then, Mary told him about calling Doug Lawrence and speaking with Maureen. Mary continued, “They’re using DX Hill and your tower as some sort of marker for their flying. It seems that we’re just at the right place for their show and your tower is high and visible and something they can quickly see from the air and make their turn or turn smoke on or off over it.”

Charlie smiled and said, “That’s pretty good, huh? I don’t remember ever having the Blue Angels do a show here, let alone using my tower as a check point. Is Doug at home?” Mary said that Doug was over at the base watching the practice. “But, I asked Maureen to have him call you when he got home because I knew you’d want to speak with him,” Mary added.

Charlie nodded, “Thanks dear. Yes, I want to tell him about this.” Charlie knows that Doug retired from the Navy after a long career and that he flew in Korea, Viet Nam and commanded a large attack unit in the Gulf War. Then he added, “I’m not sure, but I think he made Admiral when he retired from active service.” Mary has done some craft work at their church with Doug’s wife and reported that Maureen has never said his rank but said his uniform has a lot of gold on it.

Later, Doug called Charlie and they talked about the day’s Blue Angel experience. It was at the end of this conversation that Doug asked Charlie if he and Mary would care to be his guests in the Officer’s Club the following day to watch the air show that they’re putting on. Doug added, “We’re hosting a roast beef dinner just after the flight demo routine and the pilots, crew members and a few VIPs like you are all invited to join us. Since I’m ranking officer in the reserve unit over there, I can even get you VIP parking.” Of course, Charlie accepted for Mary and himself and they looked forward to having a wonderful time.

Oh yes, Charlie remembered to check in the shack to look for the receiver noise on forty meters that was there before and guess what? He couldn’t find a trace of it. Whether it was Charlie’s careful maintenance of the matching unit or the shock of the nearby jet engines passing overhead shaking everything loose will never be known but the result is that top performance has returned to the forty meter operation every morning on DX Hill.