

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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As he does nearly every day, Charlie started this day by carefully cruising his favorite band, 40 CW. There were some weak Asian signals but nothing of special notice. Conditions haven't been wonderful to say the least. Still, Charlie never gets discouraged by the lack of signals. All that means to him is less QRM to get through if a DX station comes on the air. That actually does happen. A semi rare station will come on, call CQ twice and sign. Charlie will call that station once; get a 559 report followed by the DX calling QRZ with no replies. Again, he calls QRZ and receives no reply. Then, he's gone. No one is listening, it seems. A smart DXer is sitting there, ready for action all the time.

That's why only top DXers sit on the DXCC Honor Roll. They have been there to work the DX when the DX was on the air. There are no excuses in the DX world, only no contacts to show for those who are not being ready to take opportunities. Like so many other things we do, "almost and nearly" doesn't count for any points.

Later in the morning, Mary and Charlie received a most welcome but of late, a most infrequent visitor. Brian, one of Charlie's students, drove up their driveway and in his usual manner, ran to the front door. Brian never did anything in low gear. He went flat out in everything he did. Ahhh, the exuberance of youth! Don't you love it?

They greeted Brian with open arms, of course, and escorted him into the kitchen. Mary simply knows he always has room for a sandwich or at least a couple of muffins. Since first meeting Brian, Charlie and Mary have been very proud of him and how polite and naturally smart he is. He graduated from college this past June with both a BS and MS degree in Computer Engineering. Mary and Charlie were very proud that Brian and his family had invited them to Brian's graduation for which they were extremely proud. Of course, they attended and felt goosebumps as Brian crossed the outdoor stage at the ceremony to accept his two diplomas.

Brian's mom and dad honestly believe that Charlie had given their son the career guidance he strongly needed back in high school, confused about how to use his extraordinary ability in math. The high school guidance counselor and several teachers had been encouraging him to pursue a business career and become an entrepreneur. They envisioned a career for Brian comparable to Bill Gates of Microsoft. Despite the odds of that actually happening, Brian felt far more inclined toward actual design rather than development of business.

Charlie instead immediately saw the classic makings of an engineer in Brian. He had natural curiosity to quickly understand the nature of technical issues, the tenacious desire to understand and define problems and a very keen ability to quickly visualize the means and methods to efficiently devise intelligent solutions. MIT seems to have agreed with Charlie's assessment since they had just graduated Brian Summa Cum Laude from their elite VI-A Program, a multiple degree engineering program MIT offers to selected high achieving students who they feel can carry the very heavy course load required.

After enjoying a sandwich, muffin and a large slice of blueberry pie while Charlie sipped another cup of coffee, Brian smiled at Charlie and said, "I'm sorry I haven't been by to visit more often but I've been so busy getting ready for a working life. I wanted to drop in a while ago." Charlie said he understood and asked what he had planned to do. He asked, "Are you going to take a job with that signal processing company that you did your work program with?"

Brian said he could do that but was thinking about staying on at college and finish his work on campus for a PhD in Computer Engineering specializing in Signal Processing Techniques but wasn't sure. He had that job doing signal processing if he wanted it but if could afford to do it, he'd really rather hold off another year or two and finish Doctoral studies. He feels that if he doesn't do that now, he never will and he might regret it forever.

'Hmmm,' said Charlie, 'this sounds serious. Let's talk about it.' Well, they talked for a good long while after Mary shooed the boys out of her kitchen and into the den. Brian was offered over \$80K to start full time employment now but the work would take all his time. That's more money than he can imagine being paid. Furthermore, there'd be no time to do part time graduate work. Furthermore, a doc degree at MIT requires a considerable amount of on-campus work, just about every waking hour for two years. He just can't do both. He told his work-study employer about it and they said they'd sponsor the cost of Brian's graduate studies if he agreed to work for them for at least three years after receiving the Doctorate.

Charlie explained that was fairly normal for companies to do in retaining top talent like Brian. He said he'd recommend doing it. Brian seemed pleased with his mentor's approval and smiled. It seems that what he wanted to do but sought Charlie approval.

He popped up with, 'Say, what's going on with ham radio these days? We seem to be dropping in numbers and an awful lot of the new hams I know about who were licensed in the last few years seem to have lost their interest. At least, the ones I know aren't on the air. Why? Is that the way it always is? Everyone can't be in my situation simply lacking enough time.'

Charlie had noticed much of the same thing. It struck Charlie as being strange some time ago that so many people of all ages wanted to study the License Manual and take their Technician exam or even General and Extra, only to put the license in a drawer, never to use it. It makes very little sense and appears preposterous. He honestly can't recall this being the case in such volume decades ago when he first became licensed. Oh sure, some passed their ticket and then became distracted by work or family demands but Charlie honestly can't recall such a proportion of his contemporaries striving to obtain their license merely to see if they could do it, a practice which seems to be prevalent today.

The numbers that have been used in recent years by commercial and our fraternal leaders indicate that, at best, only 40 to 50% of licensed hams are active, even by the most liberal definition of 'active'. An astonishing number of new licensees in the last several years have never even obtained a radio nor have they taken any opportunity to operate someone else's station. Again recalling his early days, Charlie and his friends could barely wait to get home after passing their exams before building up some sort of station and stringing a wire antenna between the trees in the yard. But today, a disturbing number of new hams appear to see getting a license as an academic exercise, just another line item to add to their resume, showing another credential.

If one accepts the premise that only 40% of licensees are active and that about 90% of Amateurs fifty years ago were active, both definitions of active being very loose, you would reason that our active Amateur population today is about 265,000 compared with 90,000 fifty years ago. That's growth of about three times of active hams compared with the general US population's growth of about twice. This data proves that our U.S. active ham population is genuinely growing, at least in proportion to the country's population. That means that more people than ever before should be on the air, wouldn't you think?

Never the less, our current Amateur licensee breakdown shows that more than half (52%) of us are licensed in the Novice and Technician ranks. That would logically follow that more stations than ever would be active on VHF, right? Listening to repeaters doesn't validate that. In fact, most people agree that most repeaters used to be busy all day every day years ago but we may listen all day now and never even hear a 'ker-chunk' on most repeaters.

Brian observed that he had spoken with some old timers at school who told him about repeater meetings in the past where 150 to 200 members would attend but today, they have trouble even attracting a quorum for their meeting. Charlie nodded and pointed out that the theory he suggested earlier is likely true and may even be more widespread. Possibly an even larger

proportion of our population holds a license merely for resume purposes, to satisfy their ego and see if they could actually pass the fairly challenging series of tests or just to cover a hole in their wall.

If more of our brethren don't activate our frequencies, we'll be in genuine danger of losing them in future World Radio Conferences. That's serious! Commercial users of frequency space are willing to pay enormous amounts of cash in spectrum auctions for what we are permitted by the FCC to use for free. Like land, God made a finite amount of frequency bandwidth. When it's gone, it's gone forever. With spectrum in such short supply and in huge demand, the old axiom 'Use it or lose it' has never been so true.

Brian, like so many new hams always enjoys his visits with his mentor Charlie and without fail, learns something every time they meet. At MIT, Brian has obtained an enormous quantity of critical knowledge during his last six years of study in the VI-A program and will now continue doing so during his next two years of Doctoral work. However, what he invariably obtains from interactions with his mentor, Charlie is wisdom. Wisdom is knowledge that has been mellowed, matured, distilled and ripened by age and experience. Be kind to your mentor and ask him or her questions until you have no further energy in your body to ask. Both of you will be better for the experience.