

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Charlie's student Brian had eventually decided to accept an offer to remain on campus for his Doctorate work following his graduation from MIT with his BS and MS degrees in Computer Engineering. Most graduate engineering students on high end engineering campuses who are truly gifted are targets of the department professors and their research colleagues to convince staying on as long as possible. Their sometimes myopic view of reality centers around their need to staff their university's next grant from the National Science Foundation or sometimes simply to adequately fill a requisite number of research positions promised in a previous government or academic grant.

Such positions are funded provisionally based on actually staffing programs that were proposed. Not having staff members results in no payments made to the university. All too often, this recruitment by the faculty members doesn't serve the specific needs of the new graduate nor does it sometimes even consider that the person may possibly have a real life to pursue after graduation. To many academic professionals, there is no other life but the pursuit of research grants and publishing technical papers.

Brian's employer understood this practice all too well, having been absorbed in a similar campus run-around thirty years earlier. Being as realistic as he was, he had worked with MIT to employ Brian through the required work periods of the VI-A program and at the end of the final term, had offered Brian a deal in which he could pursue his Doctorate degree in one of several specialty fields within Signal Processing immediately following VI-A graduation and he would absorb all of Brian's additional graduate costs for the two years.

In exchange for this seemingly complete loss of rational business sense on the employer's part, Brian was asked to sign a binding contract with them to be exclusively employed by them for three full years following the doctoral studies. The doctoral program could easily cost Brian close to \$100,000, so this was something he had to consider very seriously. It's also something not lightly decided upon by any employer. Only very special candidates will ever be considered for such apparent generosity. Of course, benevolence has nothing to do with the decision. It's a sound business offer extended in rare circumstances to retain top talent. In return, an employer who enters into such an arrangement will generally require that the employee sign a promissory agreement for a reasonable period of employment following graduation. This is done to get some value in return for their investment. The odd thing is that while this is customary, it is essentially unenforceable. What could a company do to an employee who skips out a year or even a month early? No court would accept the case and even if it did, prosecution would cost more than the money involved in the contract. Beyond that, a judge or jury would likely feel sorry for the student who was entrapped and rule against the company.

Brian hadn't really decided whether or not he wanted to pursue a doctorate just now or instead start work, earn some serious money, begin a real life and work on his doctorate later, maybe in a few years. Charlie recognized this inclination and advised him against delaying his doc studies in view of the outstanding offer placed before him. He convinced Brian that beyond the obviously generous financial part of the offer, doing it would force Brian to complete the consuming volume of work required by the program, unimpeded by the conflicts of a "real life" like a girl friend, car expenses, social life, housing issues or worrying about how to pay for the next three credit hours. Once he enters that uninsulated "real world", it's extremely difficult for anyone to find the discipline necessary to return to academia after a few years. It's unlikely that it will happen.

Doctoral studies are very difficult to complete when pursued part time while also working full time. Furthermore, a doctoral program such as those available at MIT or other top engineering schools is only offered to full time day students working on campus. There are very sound

reasons for this. Furthermore, it's far better to knuckle down and finish while all the mental gears are still engaged from just completing the BS/MS program.

So Brian followed his mentor's advice and signed the agreement. He's now working with MIT's engineering dean to select a lead advisor so that he may begin his program in the fall. Until then, Brian was enjoying a few well earned weeks unwinding and relative freedom.

He casually dropped in for a visit with Charlie and Mary one morning last week and sampled Mary's latest creation, an apple and raspberry torte which looked and tasted magnificent. Brian had been virtually starving for a few years while working on his studies. It was now time to load up on some missing calories from Mary's kitchen, something he strongly missed. Heaven knows, he'll be back to his long study days soon enough.

When Brian finished his third helping and declared the torte the best he had ever tasted, he asked Charlie what was going on in the DX world since the sunspot cycle is nearing its minimum. Of course, he knew what Charlie would say, that DXing was a challenge and always the best enjoyment in Amateur Radio. Mary suggested that the boys continue their talk in Charlie's shack so that she could clean up her kitchen. Without any resistance, they did just that, thanking Mary for her latest desert. It was truly special.

Brian went ahead and sat in Charlie's old well worn shack swivel chair and glanced at Charlie's log book. Charlie remained with Mary, helping her to get some large containers of craft pieces down from a high shelf in the hall closet. Brian just looked around the shack. Golly, he thought, what a comfortable place this is. I wonder how many hours Charlie has spent in here. His eyes dropped to the desk and Charlie's log book. It's folded back on itself to lie flat but Brian opened it to see the cover. It was numbered book # 167. Wow, Brian thought. That's got to be an amazing number of contacts over.let's see, how many years? It must be more than 50 years. Amazing!

Even though logging requirements have been relaxed, Charlie has always maintained a written log of all that he does on the air, even tests and unanswered calls (not many of these).

Charlie came into the shack and Brian asked his mentor, "How many years have you been licensed and active?" Charlie thought for a moment and replied, "Well, my first ticket came along in 1951 and except for a few periods when I was in the service or on business trips, I've been on the air every day since then. Brian smiled and shook his head in mock disbelief. He flipped through the current log and noticed DX worked just about every day, sometimes fairly common DX but some every day. Then, he noticed notations in the right margin; #218, #219, etc. He asked, "Charlie, I know you have everything worked and confirmed. But, you have a number on the line of an LX3, another number on a TA1 entry and more numbers on a 9M8 and a 3Y. What that for?"

Charlie grinned. He replied, "Brian, I thought I explained my operating habits to you a long time ago. Yes, it's true that I reached the top of the DXCC Honor Roll a long while ago. I'm doing fairly well in the Desoto DXCC Challenge also. But, I have my own achievement measures. Every year, I reset my counters to zero and work them all over from W, VE, G, DL and all the others. I don't QSL every one every year obviously, but I keep the records. My goal is to work at least 250 entities per year. So far, I've made my goal every year and in a few years, I've reached 300 plus a couple more. It's just my own little way to keep things interesting and it lets me work some new ones all the time."

Brian thought about that and observed, "That's so simple and so smart. What else can a DXer do after he's worked everything?" Charlie quickly pointed out that he could have chased Honor Roll on RTTY, Satellite, every band, QRP or just working DX ops named Charlie. "I never found that to be very meaningful", he explained, "but many do that stuff and it can be great. My choice is my own annual DX marathon."

Brian reflected quietly on some conversations he had back on campus with some other new hams who were bemoaning their belief that band conditions were in the tank and ham radio was dying because no one uses HF bands any longer. Then, he sees someone like Charlie who is on the air before dawn every day, looking for DX and usually finding it too. In so many ways, appreciation of ham radio is similar to appreciation of literature, art, music, sports or gourmet cuisine. One must recognize the beauty within something to distinguish it from random words, colors, lines, sounds, exercise or food. That ability lies within each one of us to a smaller or greater extent.

With the FCC requesting comments from us that many believe will eventually lead them to eliminate demonstration of even basic code proficiency from our exam criteria; those of little faith or depth of intelligence believe that Amateur Radio is doomed. Others believe that soon, no one will operate CW at all and all code keys will join spark transmitters on dusty museum tables.

Charlie and many others with more foresight do not shoulder such a gloomy and cynical attitude. In fact, Charlie honestly believes that proficiency in code will continue to be held by hams who love and respect the principles of Amateur Radio as a sign of their true desire to emulate the early wireless communicators who possessed skill and creativity. Just memorizing rules, regulations, formulas and verbal syllabus of the Level 2, 3 and 4 written tests to an passing level does not magically create a ham. Beyond that, a newbie must actually show that he or she will actually walk the walk, talk the talk and follow in a proud tradition dating back to Marconi, our first ham. That includes proficiency in Morse code, whether or not the FCC feels it to be necessary.