

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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The popular opinion among many these days since FCC has expanded phone bands and dropped Morse code is that nothing positive will happen now in our hobby. Some believe that these developments are the beginning of the end for ham radio as we knew it for decades. Charlie, as loyal readers know very well, loves to chase DX on CW and always will. Like his friends, he was more than a bit concerned as well. Change to the status quo is usually feared anyway but this was a shocker. But, shortly after the news broke about FCC's latest rule change dropping CW from its testing, Charlie received a phone call from Don Doran, a very sharp engineer who worked for him before he retired, asking where he could learn how to get a ham ticket. He explained that he read about the news in the Wall Street Journal and Charlie was the first person he thought to call when he realized that not facing a code test meant that he could now become a ham. This engineer had never expressed any interest to Charlie about becoming a ham, so it surprised Charlie just a bit. Don revealed that he was always fascinated with ham radio but was scared to death of the code requirement. He memorized the code when he was in the Scouts in order to get his merit badge but he never liked it. He recalled that it was frightening and painful for him. Now that he was about to retire, he realized that some ham equipment for his boat and his car would be very nice. The news to drop code from the requirements to obtain any ham ticket came at just the right time for Don.

Hearing that learning code was painful was troubling to Charlie. That's something he cannot understand. In the few years in which Don worked for Charlie, not a word of this had ever been mentioned. Gosh, Charlie wishes that Don had said something to him about it but he didn't. If he only had known, he would have been happy to help him and make Don's problem disappear. But since childhood, Don had carried the issue inside of himself as a barrier and he didn't ever want to face it. Obviously, it was painful for him and he stayed away from it for decades, at least until now that terrible barrier was about to be removed.

Charlie directed his old friend to one of the regular club instructors who would take care of him very easily. After extending his wishes for success and saying goodbye, Charlie sat and thought about Don and his conversation. Charlie wondered what it might mean in a larger sense. It was very nice to hear from Don after all these years, for sure. It gnawed at Charlie to think that there might be hundreds, maybe thousands of people out there who were run off by code years ago and have been laying back with this secret desire to become a ham. Every time they see something in the news about ham radio, it must give them a knot in their stomach to think that they aren't a ham themselves. But, now all that may suddenly change.

Charlie pondered for a half hour and then called his long time friend Mike with the thought of discussing Don's phone call. He briefly described the call and Mike somewhat surprised Charlie when he said, "You know Charlie, it's funny that you called and asked about this because I got a call just a few days ago from a guy I know in the flea market circuit. He's a major dealer, selling audio amps for concerts and other stuff like radio control gear and even CB stuff. He asked me if there are any classes around the valley where he could study to get his ham ticket. I nearly fell off my chair. I've known him for years and he's never mentioned a word about ham radio. He knows I'm a ham, of course but I never knew he had any interest. What do you think this is? A sudden epidemic of ham fever?" Charlie thought about Mike's observation. He made a very good point, as he usually does.

"You know Mike, this all seems to be the obvious result of the news about dropping CW. I never thought so many ham wanna-bees were out there just silently waiting. If you and I are seeing this

here immediately following the FCC's decision, it might be happening all over the country, wouldn't you think?" Mike agreed with Charlie's conclusion and went on thinking aloud, "You know, in the next few months, we might find a crowd of new people coming to our flea market in April to buy gear. Maybe prices will go up with all the new demand." Then he chuckled and added, "I better look through the barn and bring some stuff that I didn't sell last year."

Charlie agreed and reminded Mike that this may just be a spike of pent up demand that'll be gone as quickly as it appeared. Mike knew that Charlie was right. He added, "Regardless though, hundreds maybe thousands of new hams will pop up that never existed before. It's a totally untapped pool and these folks don't seem to be the kind that will stop at Technician, either. Maybe we can pull some new DXers out of this bunch."

Charlie wished Mike luck in gathering up enough stuff to fill his table at the flea market and said 73. Then, he sat and pondered. He concluded that for the next many years, there may not be any change at all to the ways we use our bands. Of course, lots more of the new no code hams will fill the new vacant space in the expanded phone bands. Just as many hams who enjoy operating CW will continue to do so and it's possible that some will even discover how productive CW operating can be in DXing and contesting. There might even be demand for code classes in some of the contest clubs. With no doubt at all, Charlie will be a CW operator until Silent Key time as will be the case with many of his friends.

On the whole, Charlie has come around to believing that the FCC's decision to drop code from the US Amateur license requirements, in alignment with the World Radio Conference - 2003 decision to ask its member nations to drop code, may very well prove to be a great stimulant in recruiting new higher level hams here in the states. Early inquiries from individuals around the country who wish to become codeless hams have come from mostly experienced and accomplished engineers who, if the trend continues, will be welcome additions to ham club programs, em comm leadership posts and generally raise the overall technical level of our entire licensee base. Let's keep a close watch on trends in the next several months. This change from the ITU and FCC that could work out surprisingly well indeed. Let's hope the early signs are indicators of things to come.