

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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The weather around DX Hill has been cold lately; windy, snowy with ice covering most everything. It's been just plain nasty outdoors. Even old Rufus spends as little time out there as necessary before hustling his 'ole hound body back onto his nice warm pillow. Clearly, springtime seems far away. Mary and Charlie had decided before Christmas to spend a little time in the sun this winter. They settled on going to Orlando and visiting Epcot Center after being away from there for more than twenty years. Lots of things have changed and this would be a good time to see it for themselves.

Of course, the Orlando HamCation takes place February 9 through the 11th. Charlie would really enjoy going to that event with his DXing pals in central Florida. He's never been to HamCation. For years, they've been after him to come down and take it in but he's always had something interfering but this year, the schedule is clear and there's no excuse. Mary isn't a ham but she doesn't mind a bit seeing Charlie spend a day or two at the hamfest. She and the wives of Charlie's buddies are long standing friends and she welcomes the idea of being able to spend some unhurried "girl time" together doing their favorite things like visiting craft shows and sampling some southern cooking like hush puppies, peach cobbler, crackling cornbread, and of course sweet potato pie as well as her two favorites of all time, pecan pie and bourbon pecan cookies. Incidentally, did you know that you can tell a Texan from a Georgian by how they pronounce pecan?

Charlie loves the results of all that cooking but he'd rather not sit around watching it all take place. Going to Orlando HamCation seems like the only thing he could do while waiting for all those great foods to come out of the kitchen, wouldn't you agree?

They had booked a direct flight to Orlando out of their regional airport on February 1st, taking advantage of mid week fares and somewhat more relaxed business travel, hoping that it made their trip a bit less of a hassle. Charlie's friend Mike, the valley's Collins collector, agreed to take Rufus in while his humans were away. Mike has a couple of large dogs and Rufus gets along famously with them, so it would not be any problem. In fact, Rufus would have his own vacation and thoroughly enjoy the week.

Since 9/11, air travel has become much more challenging than it was before that terrible date. Mary and Charlie arrived two hours before flight time, a bit more than is suggested. Twenty minutes after being dropped off at the terminal, they had received their boarding passes, checked their baggage, cleared security and made their way to the gate. Now, with an hour and forty minutes until flight time, they looked around for a coffee stand or something that passes for an eating place with chairs. They did manage to find a news stand that sold some barely drinkable coffee and prepackaged cookies, not exactly what they would have chosen but along with reading the morning newspaper, time passed quickly and soon they were aboard their silver bird and pushing back from the gate. The outdoor temperature upon departure was a toasty nine above zero and when they reached

10,000 feet, the captain welcomed his passengers and told them that they should all expect a smooth flight and arrival temperature in Orlando should be about 65 degrees. A cheer went up at that news. They could hardly wait to land and get warm.

As predicted, the flight was very smooth and uneventful all the way through landing and taxi to the gate. Mary and Charlie were quite excited about actually taking a nice warm vacation for the first time in many years. Sure enough, as soon as they stepped from the aircraft onto the jet way, they could feel the warm sun heated air and it felt wonderful.

They stayed in a very nice hotel about a half hour from Epcot and near their friends for easy visiting for the first week. It was great fun. Mary was as busy with her friends as anyone could be. It seems she and her friends were exchanging recipes and baking everything they learned about from the other. The “boys” loved that since it provided a nearly endless supply of pies, cakes and cookies while they spent time on the air and just rag chewing in person.

But, Charlie had his eye on the Orlando Hamcation, a very large event drawing up to ten thousand hams and people trying to sell their newest products. He hadn't ever attended this event but had heard plenty about it. Many favor it above Dayton because it isn't so huge. Of course, there's only one Dayton Hamvention and it draws twenty thousand enthusiastic hams. It's definitely an event that every ham should attend at least once.

Charlie and two of his Florida DXer friends, Harold and Willy met on Friday morning for breakfast before heading to the fairgrounds. It was the first day of HamCation and was an unusually warm day. Charlie loved it after leaving the cold weather of DX Hill behind. They arrived and parked in the huge parking area at the Central Florida Fairgrounds and made their way to the flea market area. Charlie's friends told him not to be afraid to buy something and not be able to get it into the plane. With a wide grin, they said they would gladly store anything for him until Mary and he decide that they need to sell their northern home and move to the area. No boat anchor is too large for them to hold, they stipulated. Who knows? Maybe they'll find a BC-610 transmitter.

They spent the rest of the morning cruising through the flea market. Charlie's two friends bought a few junk box treasure and took them back to the car. Charlie picked up some coax connectors and some coax sealing compound for his spring antenna work. He could carry these things easily. But, after seeing just too much computer junk that has managed to find its way into the ham flea market, they decided to head indoors and inspect the new radios. That's where the serious threat to their plastic money card lies.

The exhibit area of HamCation is gigantic. Charlie could hardly see the far end of the hall. Before attempting to see everything at once, they laid out a plan. Each of them brought an HT. They set their radios on an odd frequency where they heard no one else. This took a few minutes because clearly, others had the same idea. Finally, they found a quiet spot on 147.975 that wasn't a repeater's input or output and no other hamfest guests had settled in there. With a repeater in their pocket, they could stay in touch even if one left the group to study or buy something. Harold and Willy saw the Icom booth and made

a bee line for it. Charlie followed along because he was fairly sure his buds wanted to see the four year old IC-7800. Sure enough there it was, surrounded by dozens of envious guys. At over \$10,000, Charlie just shook his head and asked his friends if the thing could work DX all by itself?

Willy spotted the Kenwood booth and headed that way, leaving Harold to admire the IC-7800 a little longer. Sure enough, the Kenwood people were showing off their TS-2000, a bargain at about \$2300. It did all modes from 160 through 23 cm. It seems to be the answer for an all purpose affordable rig that will do CW or SSB DXing on any band or FM repeaters on 144, 440 or 1200 MHz. It's the Swiss Army Knife of HF radios. The fear Charlie would have with something like this kind of radio is that it does a wide variety of things, it may not do any one of them terribly well. I.E., wide scope of features doesn't necessarily equal depth of performance.

Charlie wanted to see the Yaesu booth and their new products; the FT-2000D and the FT_{DX}-9000D. As far as he could tell from reading the ads and review in QST, these puppies seem to be what the wealthy DXer for whom price is no object, might go for, at least until he or she checks the reviews written by the first buyers. The FT-2000D sells for \$3400 and the FT_{DX}-9000D is only asking its customers to pay \$11,500.

Charlie called on the HT and told His two friends to meet him at the Yaesu booth. He had read some fairly unfavorable reviews written by some first buyers of the 9000 series of radios. In on-line reviews, many extremely disappointed early serial number buyers listed the problems they had, running from blown output modules to floating grounds to flickering displays and a wide variety of other issues. But those who waited and bought their unit a year into the production run report much higher and more complete satisfaction. Harold and Willy fell in love with the FT_{DX}-9000D immediately and started figuring how they could justify spending \$11,500 for a single radio. Charlie looked at them and just shook his head. He couldn't begin to understand why most any of these high end HF radios have the price tags that they have on them. It makes no sense to him.

Charlie's entire ham shack, tower, rotator and two beam antennas didn't cost him \$11,500 and he has two full featured transceivers, three legal limit linear amps, several VHF transceivers and a couple of computers. It's true that two of his three amplifiers were military surplus and obtained for nearly nothing through his friend Mike, the flea market dealer and he bought both of the HF radios he currently uses every day from hams who broke them and didn't want to get them repaired. Charlie found the problems and easily repaired both them, hence his Icom IC-765 and his Ten-Tec Omni VI+. In both cases, the radios sort of came to him. Ten years ago, a fellow club member called Charlie to ask if he knew anyone who would want to buy his non working IC-765 for \$250. It didn't work at all and the fellow just wanted the thing out of his shack because he had a new radio and badly needed the space. Without a second thought, Charlie asked for directions to his home and drove over with some cash to get the 765. The problem turned out to be nothing more than a shorted cooling fan and a blown fuse. The IC-765 was on the air, good as new the following morning chasing pre-dawn DX on 40 CW.

Years ago, Charlie owned a TS-930 and a Collins military unit similar to a KWM-2A before obtaining his current line up. He gave the TS-930 to a new ham in the club who couldn't afford to buy one and he still has the Collins unit. A year after obtaining the Icom, he happened to be in his friend Mike's barn looking over a truckload of his latest boat anchors, picked up from a wholesaler in Pennsylvania. Mike mentioned that the Omni VI+ came along with a large load of Collins, Drake and National gear. He tried plugging it in and found that it was totally dead. He figured that he'd hold it for a rainy Sunday and try to fix it. Charlie had always wanted an Omni 6 because it's such a great CW radio. The filters and skirt selectivity and adjacent frequency rejection is superb and as good as any radio on the market. So, he offered Mike \$1000 for it. Mike looked at his friend and said, "Charlie, you must be soft. I won't sell you this gorgeous radio for a thousand. This beauty doesn't even work. But, I'll tell you what I would do. How about buying lunch down at the Valley Diner and we'll call it square?" Mike explained that the guy selling the Collins gear didn't even know what this Ten-Tec radio was. He explained, "It was in the contents of a government warehouse that he had bid on and won. He mainly wanted the Collins gear and a hundred steel desks and chairs in the old plain gray building in Gettysburg. He just knew the Ten-Tec wasn't Collins and figured it was just a piece of junk. He threw it in after I paid him a ten thousand for all these Collins S Line units, Drake C Line and some National amplifiers." Oh, Charlie found the problem in the Omni VI+ was a shorted bridge rectifier in the power supply and a few shorted and open diodes in the auto tune antenna tuner.

Back to the HamCation in Orlando.... Charlie watched Harold and Willy looking at everything they could in and outside of the FTDX-9000D. They were drooling as each of them took a slick brochure to make plans of how they would manage to pick up one of these units. They offered one to Charlie but he declined. After walking around and looking over many of the other vendors' booths as well as each spending a few hundred bucks on different accessories, they headed toward the car. Charlie bought a new Gap "Hear-it" noise eliminating module to plug between his radio and headphones. A friend in the UK has been raving about how terrific it is in eliminating noise on 160 meter CW.

On the drive back, they were wondering what the "girls" had prepared for dinner. Charlie knew it would be something wonderful. He has learned to always expect terrific meals from Mary. Willy asked Charlie why he wasn't interested in any of these wonderful new radios. "Being the big DXer that you are, why wouldn't you want the newest and best equipment?" Charlie thought for a moment, not wanting to disrespect his friends' decisions to want them. Charlie replied, "Well fellas, I don't see it as the radio working the DX. In fact, a good DXer can work the world with most any fairly good radio. It doesn't have to be a premium gold plated new unit like the ones we just saw. It's the operator sitting in front of the radio that works the key or talks into the mike. It's the skill of the operator that makes the difference. The radio alone can't do anything but sit there, burn electricity and look pretty."

Harold was driving and didn't say anything. Willy thought for a minute and then said, "Well of course Charlie, but the DXer can't work DX by shouting out the window, can he? He needs a good radio, doesn't he?" Charlie hoped that Willy was just having fun

with him. He replied, "Yes, right Willy. A good radio is needed but it doesn't need to be the latest, greatest and cost as much as Mary and I spent on our first home." Charlie realizes that some hams must always have the latest radio on the market, whether a 2 meter FM unit, a pocket size HT, HF radio or the latest shiniest SWR meter from MFJ. He hoped that he hadn't offended his Florida friends, but he truly believes what he said and cannot say otherwise.

The car was awkwardly quiet for a while. Then, Harold pointed out something that needed saying. "You know, fellas. A DX master once told me that it is far more important that an operator concentrate on improving efficiency in himself rather than being concerned about having the tallest tower, biggest beam or biggest radio. It's like the Tom Sawyer-Huckleberry Finn story where a piece of store string and a safety pin catches the fish when used by someone skilled in fishing." Willy smiled and agreed, "Charlie, you have the right idea and you probably saved me a lot of money. Thanks."

They all enjoyed a great dinner of fried chicken, biscuits and gravy and pecan pie that evening along with a large pitcher full of sweet tea. Enjoying it with good friends and loved ones makes it all even better. It's a powerful remedy for many things in life. We ought to try doing it more often.