

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

Bob Beudet, W1YRC

Nearly every single morning, Charlie rises very early from his warm and comfortable bed to quietly stumble his way into the kitchen to find a clean cup to pour himself a hot cup of coffee and head to the shack. Of course, either he or Mary take a minute or two before bedtime every evening to set up the timed coffee pot with water and ground coffee. With the timer set to turn on at 4:15 AM, Charlie will have a fresh pot prepared for his pre dawn DX work. For Heaven's sake, he wouldn't want to be fumbling around measuring water or coffee with one eye still closed. So, armed with his coffee mug and still in his PJs, Charlie finds the shack and slips into his well broken in swivel chair, trying to keep its loud squeak from being too loud. He hardly ever misses a morning, even if he only checks the bands and returns to bed. The hour before sunrise is a very exciting time for a DXer, especially on 40, 80 and 160 meters. Charlie's daily routine is to carefully scan 40 CW for unusual signals. Why not 20 meters or 80 or 160 meters? Well, simply because at this time in the cycle, 20 meters isn't open yet and the noise level on 80 meters is annoyingly high. Charlie doesn't normally scan 160 because he doesn't have an effective antenna for that band but some of his friends are devoted top banders and are spending their pre dawn time there while Charlie is warming the ether at 7 MHz. However, their reasoning for early morning attention is the same on any "low band" of 7 MHz and lower.

The default band for the old time DXer's, night or day and at any time during the sunspot cycle is 40 meters. It's a dependable work horse band, always being prowled by the world's DXers. During his predawn operating, Charlie generally is looking for signals from the opposite side of the world where the sun is about to set. This propagation path is commonly referred to as grey line. It's a phenomenon which shows itself twice daily just about everywhere on earth that experiences a sunrise and sunset. During grey line periods, the ionosphere's D layer, which absorbs HF signals, disappears rapidly on the sunset side of the grey line and it has not yet built upon the sunrise side of the line. During sunrise and sunset, paths open up for a short period of time to other areas along this grey line or twilight zone, most often to the area on the opposite side of earth where the opposite daily solar event is taking place.

Grey line work is great fun because of the remarkable and often unexpected QSOs that develop. This nearly magical propagation has been the facilitator of some truly remarkable QSOs logged in Charlie's records. The one that Charlie most keenly recalls was the time he heard H40V in the Solomon Islands running an endless string of JA stations on about 7.010 MHz. Charlie knew that H40V was being operated by JA1PBV because he had just read it in one of the DX Bulletins. Naturally, he wanted to work many of his brethren from JA. It was about 45 minutes before sunrise on DX Hill and just about 45 minutes before sunset in JA land. However, it was about an hour and a half after sunset in H40 land, about 17 degrees east longitude from Tokyo. The direct path distance between JA and H40V is about 3400 miles and the distance between DX Hill and H40V

is more than 8600 miles. You can imagine that the JA crowd must have been super strong in this early evening pile-up.

Charlie was hearing the H40 station quite strong, a solid S9 on the meter. He fired up his big amp and timed his call carefully... one quick call...didn't get him. Called again... no luck... called a third time. H40V responded with a snappy "W1?" Charlie sent his call once more and the H40V replied giving Charlie a 599 report, adding "twenty over". Then, the Solomon station sent "QRX JA, QRX JA. QRZ NA QRZ NA". Dozens of 4s, 5s, 8s and VEs called but the H40 transmitted again "QRZ NA?" The pile called again but once more, H40V responded that he didn't hear any of them, "SRI NIL NA, NIL NA... QRZ JA, QRZ JA." The JA dog pile resumed.

Charlie sat there smiling and sipping his coffee trying to understand what he had just witnessed. Despite the fact that he was able to break what had to be a strong JA pile-up in H40 land, no one else from the eastern half of North America could be heard, even when the station was actually listening just for them. Why was Charlie's signal able to crack the JA wall? Why couldn't the others' make it? Surely many of the others were running power and had serious antennas, similar to Charlie's 1500 watts and 100 foot high beam. It's essentially the same path for everyone, isn't it? Or is it? Charlie thought about the path and his radiation angle. DX Hill has a long down sloping terrain away from the tower. The terrain slopes downward for several miles. From the west through north and to east, DX Hill has no obstacles on the horizon for at least 30 miles, just open valley and in the opposite direction, the terrain is essentially flat.

In a situation which was probably unique, Charlie's angle of radiation may very well be extremely low, possibly less than 10 degrees, as a result of his antenna height and optimum antenna terrain. Other stations calling at that pre-dawn hour may not have enjoyed such conditions and at grey line time, the optimum path was a narrow sliver of possible angles. Never the less, it surely made Charlie's day. After that QSO, he went back to the kitchen for a refill of coffee. As he was doing that, his pal Rufus was stretching and scratching on the floor while looking up at Charlie. "OK, old boy. Let's go outside and see if any of your friends are awake."

Charlie opened the door and Rufus, the old hound that he is, waddled outdoors and down the steps toward the gate. Charlie, still in PJs and carrying his full coffee mug, followed behind, thinking about the QSO he just had. By Golly! He cracked a JA pile-up with a station in the Solomon Islands! That's amazing, he thought. Well, maybe it is but then again after nearly 60 years as a ham, something like this is no less amazing and awesome than it was in 1950. The magic that initially attracted him to Amateur Radio is still very much alive and well. Charlie knows that many modern day teen agers turn away from Amateur Radio because they feel that they can communicate very effectively on the Internet and question why they need to become a ham. These young folks will never experience the kind of excitement that he just did before dawn on this beautiful morning on DX Hill. What a shame!

Charlie continued to think about what we could do to share this kind of excitement with the new generation of potential DXers as he walked along with his faithful friend, Rufus. Daybreak was just taking place and the sky started to give up its maroon and orange colors and paint sunlight on another gorgeous landscape masterpiece in the valley below. Rufus was satisfied that the day on DX Hill had been properly launched after seeing and hearing his bird and squirrel friends, so he turned to the house and plopped his way toward the steps with Charlie close behind. Indeed, Charlie agreed with his four legged pal. Another terrific day has begun.