

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Despite quiet band conditions, Charlie is in the shack most every morning tuning the low end of 40 meters before dawn. Many days, he only hears the soft rushing sound of his IF stages being processed by his audio stage. On at least half of the mornings in the last month, he has been rewarded with hearing a warbly CQ or tuner-upper. Usually, it's a JA but now and then, someone in SE Asia sneaks through. Last week, Charlie worked XU7MDY and gave him an honest RST of 589. What a surprise. At any point in the sunspot cycle, the band provides excitement. By sipping his first cup of coffee before dawn while slowly tuning the band, he feels that he properly starts his day. Charlie has been doing this for many decades. He got into the habit during his working years as an engineering manager when he had to carve out an hour before dawn before getting ready for his work day. Of course, he has grown quite fond of the band's exciting propagation and steady performance over the years and has kept his operating habit into retirement.

Despite conditions which most newly minted hams don't relish or even understand, true DXers like Charlie appreciate every band opening, regardless of weak signals or low MUF reports by the scientists. Charlie believes that some of his greatest DX fun has taken place during the "inactive" parts of the eleven year cycle. Only dyed-in-the-wool DX nuts like Charlie are in the chase, reducing competition significantly. The rest of fair weather DXers around the world are talking on 2 meter repeaters, 75 meter round tables or making out QSL cards from the last cycle.

As I said, Charlie enjoys the time he spends alone sipping his coffee with Rufus sleeping at his feet and slowly tuning the bands listening for some weak sound coming from the other side of the world. The time just before dawn is a very exciting window for serious DXers like him. Propagation often rewards listeners with a sudden burst of DX, a path between DX Hill sunrise and sunset on the opposite side of the earth. This opening, generally known as gray line propagation, doesn't present workable conditions for more than a few minutes, but surely enough for an operator like Charlie. One never knows what will innocently pop above the noise floor without warning and be heard long enough for a quick QSO. As any skilled hunter would do, Charlie is sitting there waiting.

On one weekend afternoon recently, Mary and Charlie received a phone call from their son, Jack out at the University of Illinois where Jack is a professor. Mary and Charlie pick up separate phones when the kids call so they don't miss anything. It seems that Jack and his family were thinking about coming to DX Hill for Thanksgiving and wanted to be sure that mom and dad weren't going to be on the beach in Cancun over the holiday weekend. Mary laughed at that possibility and said, "No dear, we're not going to be on the beach sipping Pina Coladas. We'd be delighted to have you all come out. We haven't seen any of you in a while. How are the kids?" Before Jack could respond, Charlie added "How long will you be able to stay, Jack?"

Mary and Charlie's grandchildren, named Jack and Mary are the apples of their grandparent's eyes and the thought that they were coming to visit was very exciting indeed. Being untenured college professors, Jack and his wife, Jen live a fairly frugal life and cannot travel very much. With gas at \$3 a gallon, they stay pretty close to their quarters near campus. Jen is also a professor. She and Jack met in grad school and were married after graduation back in 1993. The last time they came out was a few years ago. Jack Jr. who is ten now can remember most details about DX Hill and grandma and grandpa. Little Mary who is only five, cannot remember much of anything. Jack said, "Dad, you asked how long we could stay and I hope that doesn't present a problem. We've arranged our schedules so that we can take the week after Thanksgiving off as well. So, we can come out the day before and leave a week after Thanksgiving if that's OK with you."

Mary jumped right in, "Well of course that's OK. It's terrific! Oh my! I'll be able to spoil those kids the way I'd like to. You'll all put on ten pounds with some good old country cooking." Charlie added that he couldn't be happier.

Jack mentioned, "That's great! Say dad, Jack asked me this week if I knew anyone who could teach him Morse code. When we come out, do you think you could help him with that problem?" Charlie was surprised and actually choked up a little but managed to reply quickly, "Why of course, I'd be delighted. Is he near the phone right now, Jack?" Jack replied that he was at the campus library with Jen and Mary. They're working on a school project for young Jack. Charlie asked why Jack doesn't just go over to the ham club on campus and take code classes there. What he was told shocked even an old DXer like Charlie. Jack said that he had made a call over to the club but was told that they stopped giving code classes when FCC dropped code as a license requirement. Charlie's heart sank upon hearing that. Jack said that they have classes for their contest group to teach members to recognize the club call and exchanges in very fast code but they don't teach beginning code any longer. How sad.

Charlie asked Jack to have young Jack give grandpa a call when he gets home from the library so he could ask him a few questions. Then Mary talked about their Thanksgiving visit and what they would cook for dinner and make craft things with little Mary and other grandmother things like working with little Mary preparing dinner and some delicious cookies and pies.

Later that day, just before 7 PM, young Jack called and said in his most grown-up voice, "Hello grandpa, this is Jack." Charlie was excited as he said, "So, I heard that you want to learn code. Is that so?" Jack answered, "Yes, grandpa. I know that you know everything about Morse code. Well, I'm studying about Samuel Morse in school and my teacher said that she'd give an A to anyone who could learn Morse code and send a message to her in code. Anyone who cannot do it would have to write a 500 word composition. We have until we return to class in January. I think I can learn it on my own but I know that it's a sure thing if you teach me."

Charlie felt a lump in his throat. Of course, he'd be proud to help his grandson under any circumstances. "Sure thing Jack. We can do it while you're here over Thanksgiving." Jack asked, "Gee, is that enough time?" Charlie replied, "For a smart kid like you, sure it is. Say, what grades are you carrying now? Aren't they pretty high?" Jack was sort of shy and said, "Yes grandpa, I'm doing pretty well." Charlie replied, "I think you're doing very well. Your dad told me that you're a straight A student. You're really are a smart kid, aren't you?" Jack said, "I guess, maybe, but learning code might be tough. I tried to learn Latin last summer on my own and I had some trouble." Charlie coughed to keep from choking and then said, "Latin, huh? On your own? Why were you learning Latin?" Jack replied, "Oh, I don't know. I was thinking it might come in handy if I decide to become a doctor." My Gosh, Charlie thought. He's only ten and listen to him. He sounds like a college undergrad. Charlie asked how far he managed to learn in Latin. Jack indicated that he studied the common pronouns, pronunciation guide and some other stuff and was studying the history of Trojan War in Latin by the end of summer. Clearly, Charlie thought, a student of Jack's learning capability won't have any trouble with code.

Charlie reassured Jack, "Well son, when you come out here, we'll sit right down and by the time you head back to Illinois, you'll know Morse code and that's a promise." Young Jack was very pleased and reassured that his goal was going to be attained. He and Charlie chatted a bit further about his school work and what he wants to do in college. Charlie had never gone into such depth with young Jack and was completely taken aback by how maturely he was viewing his career plans at the ripe old age of ten.

After the phone call, Charlie went into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee to enjoy with a fresh blueberry muffin or two. Mary had just baked a batch and Charlie could smell them the entire time that he was on the phone. Native blueberries are in season now and are plentiful. Yum, yum. He told Mary what Jack wants to do when he comes out to visit. Mary smiled and rolled her eyes saying, "Good Lord! Another ham in the family?" Charlie smiled and said, "Maybe Mary, but were you aware that he was studying Latin last summer on his own?" Mary responded, "Gracious sakes, no! I didn't. Why did he do that, I wonder?" Charlie told her what young Jack said, that he's thinking about becoming a doctor and knowing Latin might be useful in understanding the names of medicines. Mary simply shook her head and said, "Oh my Goodness. That boy is only ten years old! He's amazing!"

Well, Thanksgiving came and the family had a wonderful time together. Mary, the elder, was in her glory working in the kitchen and in her tiny crafts room with her precious little grand daughter. Their small house on DX Hill was a bit stuffed with four extra people in it but it was filled with joy. It's been a few years since Jack and the family have been able to arrange their schedules to get away for a long enough time span to make the trip do-able. At Thanksgiving dinner and for that matter, on every day of their visit, everyone ate too much. With an oven that never cools down, Mary kept delicious baked goodies flowing out of the kitchen. It's unbelievable how much can be consumed by her grandchildren alone. It seems that they're grazing from morning until night. Mary was so happy. She was feeding them as a grandmother should.

Charlie kept his promise to young Jack, who also kept his word to study hard and spend the time needed to learn the code. They had started on Thanksgiving morning with Charlie putting Jack through the T-M-O and E-I-S-H-5 drills. By dinner time, they had made it to N-D-B-6 and by evening, they reached A-U-V-4. They spent four to five half hour sessions every day of their stay sending and receiving code. By Tuesday evening, Jack was copying a solid and error free six to seven words per minute and could send about ten words per minute with an occasional error. Charlie was very pleased with his student. With regular practice, Jack will become very proficient. "I guess it runs in the genes", Charlie thought.

There's very little that compares with family bonds. When three generations can spend quality time together, there's nothing that can adequately describe the love, satisfaction and reward that grandparents like Mary and Charlie can feel. Now that his grandson has learned Morse code, the skill will be carried on for another generation. Charlie is a very proud grandpa this Thanksgiving. In addition to being blessed with a wonderful family, he has one extra reason to give thanks. Now, He'll have to work on young Jack to study for his license. Do you think ARRL has thought about publishing a license study manual in Latin?