

## CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

Bob Beudet, W1YRC

Charlie's Whistle has covered the topic of good operating practices and procedures in the past. But, then again as we enter our thirteenth year of stories, it would be hard for any of us to expect something entirely new in every story. Some topics will be revisited, at least in part but this one will take a new and unexpected turn. This month, Charlie has become concerned once again about some poor and unskilled operating practices that he has witnessed, especially in the last 16 months since FCC dropped any code test from their exams and nearly 6,000 new Extra and 12,000 new General class hams have gotten HF privileges without reading the owner's manual for their new tickets. Many of these 18,000 have become active in our HF bands using newly obtained high power amplifiers and expensive radios. The result of what eventually happened was predictable. Sure enough, there has been a noticeable increase in poor operating practices on our HF bands and to some extent, even on VHF bands. But Charlie would be the first one to tell you not to make a connection with simply dropping the code test as the knee jerk cause of these problems. Obviously, simply knowing Morse code well enough to pass a simple proficiency test cannot suggest that anyone might be a better operator than one who doesn't know any code. There's absolutely no connection. So, how does it follow that general operating proficiency has taken a noticeable tumble in the last year?

There are different opinions about this in the Amateur world but our beloved old mentor Charlie believes that the problem is the result of a combination of some issues that were influenced by the recent rush of new upgrades. It may have been little more than the sudden flood of VHF repeater operators onto the HF bands without proper "Elmering" and preparation.

Charlie does most of his day to day operating on CW, of course and wasn't immediately aware that anything was changing on the phone bands. That is until some of his friends in the club contacted him as well as some other hams from outside the valley who knew that Charlie was the old timer in their territory and could probably speak with some clarity and perspective. It became clear that the HF phone bands were really being invaded. Charlie spent time listening to confirm what had been reported and sat quietly in his shack operating chair just thinking. He did this for many days, thinking about what if anything could possibly be done.

He made a list of the call signs that were somewhat nearby and called them by telephone. After speaking with each of these recently upgraded hams, Charlie realized that a common thread existed with all of the new hams he had reached. It was most obvious to understand, once he saw the problem. None of the new Amateurs he spoke with even knew what an Elmer was; let alone having the benefit of one of their own. Nearly all of them had become Amateurs as Technicians after the code requirement was dropped in 1991 for that class. They and many others who had been waiting on the sidelines upgraded after February, 2007 when FCC once again took action to drop code, this time from Amateur examination for any class license. The rush to HF SSB was on. But not to HF CW because near no one of this group ever learned code.

Therefore, life continued without any change on the CW bands at least for the last 16 months. But on the phone bands, the sudden opening of the gate to HF with high end and powerful equipment have been coincidental with some chaotic DX pileups, unexpected net activity and a higher than normal incidence of whistlers, hecklers, blank carriers and unidentified transmissions from irresponsible individuals who are actually crying out for attention in their own way. The Wild West has come to the 75, 40, 20 and 17 meter phone bands.

The missing ingredient that was screaming out to be included with the 18,000 new upgrades was the noticeable lack of mentors or “Elmers” as they are called in ham radio. Of course, our friend, Charlie has been an Elmer to literally hundreds of Amateurs over his ham career. In fact, many of Charlie’s “graduates” have become Elmers themselves as well as those Amateurs that they have taught. Charlie’s and many other clubs make a deliberate effort to reach out to new members as well as all new amateurs in their region to help them assimilate into the general Amateur population seamlessly. However, after his most recent wake up call, punctuated by some alarming statistics regarding the large upswing in new HF privileged Amateurs, Charlie called his club president and made arrangements for new classes starting at their next meeting to address the issues.

How are conditions in your area? Are you helping our new upgrades? Your help has never been more urgently needed as an experienced Elmer. Please consider reaching out and helping your fellow hams. They are our future and it is our responsibility to assure that they are prepared to represent us well.

At least one blog writer with a flair for being provocative, Tom Barlow N8NLO has suggested in a blog published July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008, <http://www.walletpop.com/blog/2008/07/17/top-25-things-vanishing-from-america-16-ham-radio/> as #16 under the title, “Top 25 things vanishing from America”, “As cell phones and the Internet siphon off much of what once attracted people to amateur radio, the [nation's ham radio population is graying rapidly](#). Given the cash value of the radio bands allocated to amateur radio, there will be [relentless pressure on the government to take back those bands](#) so they can be sold. All these elements speak to a long, slow diminishment of a pastime that began with Marconi. When amateur radio as we know it disappears, it won't be the radios we'll miss. We'll miss the operators. 73's to a national treasure.”

Well, this is a fairly grim assessment being made by a Technician class Amateur who may be deliberately overstating an issue to gain discussion and national attention with his provocative statement. We recognize that bloggers and talk-show hosts must provoke their audiences to elicit commentary from them. Some may use extreme views to elicit responses from their audiences. Mr. Barlow may have provoked us too far. In the week following his blog, 67 responses were posted, nearly all rebuking Mr. Barlow’s conclusions with various facts that Mr. Barlow had misquoted or misused. Charlie recognized many of the respondent’s names as national leaders in Amateur radio who are very well informed and have nothing to gain by being overly provocative. No, ham radio is certainly not one of our nation’s disappearing treasures. Instead, it is an existing and growing treasure that is going through changes and will continue to do so. That’s where we come in as mentors and Elmers.

Our help has never been more greatly needed by our fraternity. Listen to our floundering new HF operators for proof. They are literally asking for our help! Please contact your clubs and work with them to develop programs to help our new brethren assimilate. Take action on your own to bring these new hams and newly upgraded General and Extra class folks up to par with proper standards. If you have the experience, you should share it with new Amateurs. Charlie is conducting an initial three week class himself in September and is urging his friends to do the same in the future months. The future will be produced by these new hams and these new hams need us desperately to help them be prepared. Don't let them and Amateur radio down. Do your part, please. Thanks very much!