

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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During the coffee-muffin-pie chat session that normally follows Charlie's club meetings, one of the new members said to Charlie, "I'm Greg. I got my General ticket six months ago. My friends say that you're on every morning chasing DX. But, I tried and I can't find any stations at all, let alone DX when I try. How do you find all this DX?"

It's against Charlie's nature to be condescending to anyone, so he didn't reply in the manner in which some other experienced Amateurs, aka old timers, might have. After asking some questions, Charlie learned that this new ham, as expected, doesn't understand much about propagation, how sunspots can affect band openings or even how to use his own listening skills or those of his radio. So he asked him what he was doing the following morning before heading off to work. The new fellow replied, "Well, after showering and shaving, I sometimes spin the dial of my radio across 20 or 17 meters but never hear much of anything." Charlie asked, "So you don't spend any time slowly listening for weak signals on any band before heading out?" He shook his head saying every time he has listened early in the morning, all the bands were dead. Charlie assured him that they weren't but he had to have a better understanding of how to listen and when different bands might be open.

The new fellow thought about Charlie's offer for a very early morning DX session the next day. He asked if he could postpone it one day because the next morning, he had to leave early to attend a staff meeting at a facility 75 miles north. He'd have to be on the road at five or so. But, the following day looked more civilized and he agreed to that one. He promised to be knocking on Charlie's door at 4:30 in the AM. Actually, Charlie admitted that the following day might be better since it would provide some time for Mary to be prepared for early visitors. Mary loves to serve fresh muffins to the DXers who visit DX Hill.

On the second day, Charlie rose at his usual time of 4 AM along with Rufus, his senior citizen Basset Hound who slowly waddled his way to the door to be let out. Charlie took a detour through the kitchen to pick up a cup of coffee, just freshly brewed by their timer controlled coffee maker. Armed with his large coffee mug, he opened the door for Rufus to perform his morning ritual. It was well before sunrise and fortunately, Rufus was all business. Within a few minutes, Rufus was finished and heading back to the door before he woke up too much.

So by 4:15, Charlie was sitting in his comfortable shack chair, carefully tuning through the low end of 40 CW and Rufus had curled up on the den couch to resume his morning nap. By the time 4:30 rolled around, Charlie had wished a good evening to a friend in the Solomon Islands and exchanged reports with four JA stations. The new ham from the club hadn't arrived yet and Charlie wondered if he would be a no-show. After all, this is a very early hour and ordinarily hardly an hour to drop in for a visit. But we all know that DXers are an unusual bunch. Charlie continued cruising the lower 40 kHz of the band and occasionally called someone and offered greetings. The "dawn patrol" folks were mostly the same DXers every day but occasionally, when band conditions were above average, a pleasant surprise with a new one from a totally unexpected place was the reward for this loyal crew.

At nearly 5AM, a car drove up the long driveway and Rufus announced the arrival of the visitor with a couple of deep woofs. Charlie heard him and removed his headphones to go out and greet his early morning guest. Mary heard the announcement as well and quickly went to the kitchen to do her part in helping Charlie and his guest. Actually, as she was uncovering the muffins that she had baked last evening and clicked on her warming oven, she thought of how many hams, both brand new and seasoned that they have hosted over the many years that they have lived on DX Hill. She actually keeps records of the people Charlie has "Elmered". It's in the hundreds.

Charlie went into the front yard to greet Greg. "Sorry for being late, Charlie. I misjudged how far this was from my home and got a late start anyway. It's not a good start for me, is it?" Charlie smiled and waved his arm gesturing to brush it aside as he replied, "Think nothing of it Greg. The sky is just lightening up, some of the

best time of day for a DXer.” Then, he pointed out the tower and his yagis, barely visible against the slightly illuminated sky. He said that there is a fair opening to the Far East on 40 meters and led Greg to the house, opening the door for him. The aroma of fresh blueberry muffins nearly knocked him over and he reacted to it, “Wow! You surely know how to greet a morning visitor.” Charlie asked if he wanted coffee and Greg nodded saying, “Oh yes please, thank you very much.”

They walked into the small a cozy kitchen where Charlie introduced Mary. With a mug of coffee in one hand and a small plate of three warm muffins with butter in the other, Greg followed Charlie into the ham shack. Mary said she’d be along in a minute with refills.

When Greg entered the well used shack and looked around, Charlie could see awe in Greg’s expression that the new ham couldn’t restrain. His jaw dropped as he looked at each piece of gear, not knowing what everything was but instantly knowing that he was somewhere he had never been before. All he knew is that he hadn’t ever seen a collection of radio equipment like this. He just shook his head saying, “Oh My God!” Charlie kicked up the receiver audio and rocked the main tuning dial slightly. He found a JE1 station calling CQ NA on 7.008 MHz. Charlie unconsciously pointed to the operator’s chair and said, “Go work him, Greg.” Greg nervously replied, “But, uhh, I don’t do CW. I’m a no code General.” Charlie realized his mistake and said, “Oh please forgive me. I know that. It’s just automatic. That fellow is in Japan and calling CQ. Watch...” Charlie sat and batted his well worn paddles. Greg watched several meters jumping in the power amplifier, power supply, master antenna selection switch and of course, the transceiver when Charlie sent the CW. He heard the soft hum of the transformers as well in synch with the CW. Even though he couldn’t copy any of the code being sent by Charlie or the other fellow in Japan, he suddenly knew what ham radio was going to mean to him. He also knew immediately that he wanted to learn code. That was so darned cool that he could hardly contain his feelings. What proficiency! It was as though he was watching a maestro conducting a symphony orchestra, a treat to his ears and eyes.

In a few seconds, Charlie looked up and said, “This was Taki from Chiba, a little northeast of Tokyo. He was fairly weak but not bad for 50 watts to a vertical.” Greg was amazed at hearing that. Such a simple station and it could reach around the world. Of course, he knew that Charlie’s station was surely not a simple station but the Japanese station was less complex than he had at home. Charlie could hear Mary heading toward the shack and made some room on a small table covered with QSTs. Mary brought in a full tray with enough food to feed half of the club along with a large thermos carafe of coffee. Greg was very surprised and reacted again, “Wow, this wonderful. I may be late for work today.” Charlie and Mary both smiled and said they’d write a note for him.

After refilling their coffee mugs and selecting a warm scone, Charlie demonstrated to Greg how to listen deep, as he describes it. He explained, “When you’re looking for DX, you mustn’t expect a loud signal to blast in and knock you over. You must tune very slowly and listen carefully or you’ll run right past the DX while he’s taking a breath or between a dit and a dah. Some stations send quite slowly. Remember, you aren’t looking for an AM carrier as you would be if you were looking for a broadcast station. You’d hear a swish as you went past that station, so you could swing back and see who it was. There’s no constant carrier in sideband or CW so unless the station is actually saying something, nothing is transmitted and of course, you’ll hear nothing. So, you must tune slowly.”

Greg nodded that he understood and leaned forward. The body language told Charlie that he had captured Greg’s attention. Charlie continued, “you need to listen for weak, fluttery signals and you’ll only hear them if you tune very slowly over the portion of the band where you feel DX may be lurking about. I like to tune between 7.005 and 7.035 every morning.

I make slow sweeps over that segment from an hour before sunrise until an hour after. That’s when our location is positioned most favorably to serve as the near terminator in something called gray line propagation. The far terminator is on the opposite side of the world where sunset is approaching. Often signals will peak for a few minutes at grayline time, but it’s dependent upon many variables that will affect the signals, such as what the intervening E and F layer is doing. It’s also the time of day when something called sunrise enhancement comes into play when we’re working signals coming from the west, the direction away from the approaching sunrise.

Also at our sunset, we may experience something called sunset enhancement. It works the same way but in the easterly direction.”

Charlie had completely lost Greg with that but his tuning produced a weak slow CQ. He signed and told Greg that it was an HL station in Korea. Charlie looked out the window and saw about 10% daylight had illuminated DX Hill. He then looked at the clock and said, “We’re about 14 minutes from sunrise. This may be the peak of signal strength for this morning.” Charlie slowly called the HL station and gave him a 549 report. In reply, Charlie received a 579 report. Greg asked, “Was he in south or north Korea?” Charlie grinned and asked, “Do you know how rare North Korea is? If he was in the north, there would be a huge pileup calling him right now. No, it was South Korea.” He signed with the HL and tuned slowly up the band looking for more Far East.

Greg was finishing his third blueberry muffin and second cup of coffee. Charlie swung his beam a few degrees south, then back north and back south again. Greg asked what he was doing and Charlie said he wanted to know if he was receiving some crooked path propagated signals from Asia. Greg smiled, shook his head and thought, “Gosh, I’ve got so much to learn about DXing... Why did I ask such a stupid question at the club?” He waited for Charlie to reach the end of his sweep and as he spun the dial back to 7.001, Greg apologized for asking Charlie such a dumb question. Charlie looked over at him and asked, “What stupid question? I haven’t heard one of those from you yet.” Charlie explained, “Greg, you asked a perfectly legitimate question. You’re a new ham and you need to learn from having the experience you had this morning, seeing how ordinary day to day DXing is done. You cannot learn that by reading a book. You should see a big DXpedition in action. It gets wild.”

Greg admitted that he had a lot to learn and looked at his watch. He knew that he soon had to leave for work. So, he thanked Charlie for showing him what he needed to strive to grow into. It will take some time but he learned an awful lot this morning. One thing he learned loudly was to not jump to hasty conclusions and say something like ‘there’s no DX because I can’t hear any after spinning the dial’, as he did at the club meeting.

Charlie explained more that this new DXer must realize, such as the fact that he had a two element Yagi on 40 meters at 90 feet high. He had more than fifty 100 ft. long ground radials spread out around the tower base. That makes a large difference in comparing the performance at Charlie’s hill top location. Greg realized that those factors certainly make a difference between chasing 40 meter DX at Charlie’s place and chasing it at his place in the valley where he uses a 50 ft high dipole and has no ground radials. Yes, there will be plenty of DX every day that Charlie would routinely work and Greg wouldn’t even hear. It’s understandable as to why he thinks the bands are dead.

An old DXer like Charlie developed a sixth sense long ago about DXing. He always seems to know where and when some choice DX might turn up and be there waiting for it. Even he can’t tell you exactly how he does it although with little doubt, he must know. Charlie doesn’t use Packet Cluster or any signaling method to find DX. He finds his DX by knowing where and when to look and hopefully, before his contemporaries. A DXer in Charlie’s league has learned a great deal about propagation and the ways bands behave. With more than five decades of experience, his intuitive senses are as valuable as any other tool available to him.

There’s not much that can surprise Charlie. Like any seasoned professional, he can instinctively assess the bands and is usually able to judge conditions well enough to tell whether a fluttery signal he hears tuning up is multiple hop and something to dwell upon for a few seconds to hear an ID or simply give a blind call. This simple action only takes a few seconds of time and when the bands are stretching open just before dawn, can land a prized contact for Charlie, well ahead of others who wait to be told who is on the air and where to listen. That’s one good reason why Charlie has worked everything and sits atop the DXCC Honor Roll. It requires experience and skill that doesn’t come in a package, out of a book via Internet or through some computer program. Skill and accomplishment such as Charlie’s comes only after investment of time and lots of study. There’s no easy way to do it ethically. Of course, Charlie doesn’t believe in using any of the various DX nets at all. He calls them “DX by appointment”. He sees them as methods for someone with inferior equipment and operating ability to work DX that he couldn’t do on his own. With the net control and others offering help in

completing the contact exchange, the so-called DXer is served the contact on a platter. That isn't Charlie's method at all. In fact, he criticizes the philosophy of DX nets at every opportunity.

Many readers of this column know that Charlie's students appreciate the value of Charlie's keen ear and DX senses. You may have "Charlies" in your club and among your friends. Usually, they are friendly and unassuming older guys who are happy to answer your questions and help you to build your repertoire of knowledge so that one day, you'll be a DX authority also. Best of luck, see in the pile-ups.