

## CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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In last month's story, one of the club's new members at a meeting asked a basic question concerning what the difference is between a contester and a DXer since to the casual observer, they appear identical. The discussion ended with the questioner meeting up with a member who asked a similar question a couple of years ago and learned by experience what the differences are. Charlie and his friend Mike asked if they could join their conversation and the QRPer, not being a fool, quickly said that they'd be very welcome. Charlie's real reason for tagging along was because, although he was most willing to help, Louie, the fellow offering help is quite new to ham radio himself and despite his great intentions, may not be able to provide the best advice to the others. His depth of experience may simply be too limited.

Charlie suggested that they adjourn to a nearby all night diner on the interstate where truckers routinely stop for meatloaf, beef stew, or turkey dinner or pecan pie along with a mug of hot fresh coffee. Other than its "good buddy" and "10-4" customers, Charlie and Mike like the place for its congenial atmosphere. Food is always good and very fresh. The counter staff always knows your name and what you want before you sit down.

Once they were seated in a booth with its well worn Formica table top and plastic padded benches, Mitch restated his question from the meeting, why are DXers and contesters different when they seem to have the same kind of station equipment, capabilities, etc. but seem to follow entirely different interests? Louie told him that he had felt the same way but learned since then that he didn't know enough initially to properly understand what became obvious after he had a little experience. The conversation was interesting and casual. Mike and Charlie offered some experiences they have had that showed that they understood the effects of propagation on different bands and different times of day.

Mitch said, "Now that's something I just don't get. I've tried several times to understand propagation theory. I've looked on the Internet but I can't visualize a bit of what they're saying. Could you give me a few tips so I can just do better when I turn on my rig? When I do it now, it's just a roll of the dice. I don't know the best band to use or the direction signals are coming from. I always feel like I'm standing in the middle of a busy intersection with traffic whizzing by me from all directions. I just feel helpless."

Charlie smiled and said, "Oh sure, I can help you with propagation tips. But, I can show you how to figure out what to do for yourself. It's not magic." Mike stepped in and reminded the group that they met to discuss the difference if any between a contester and a DXer and we should try to stay on that topic for the present. Charlie nodded and added, "That's why he's such a good friend. He saves me from getting sidetracked."

Then Charlie reminded the small group of the comment that was made at the meeting, "That a DXer will patiently (maybe not so patiently) wait for hours, days, weeks or even years for the right conditions to be available on a certain band or mode to permit a

contact with some remote and usually rare country, remote island or rock far away. The result may be only a single line entry in his logbook. He normally isn't interested in making more than one contact a few seconds in length with that place. Some other hams consider that to be silly or worse. But, another DXer understands."

Charlie continued, "A serious contester is mainly looking to maintain a high QSO rate from start to finish in a contest. He or she is also interested in logging as many multipliers as possible such as prefixes, countries, states, etc to multiply the QSO count and achieve a much higher score. The contester's simple goal is to make as many contacts with as many different places as possible during the contest period, 24 or 48 hours or whatever it is in the particular contest. We DXers sometimes say that contesters look for quantity but DXers strive for quality. Of course, that's a biased viewpoint." Charlie smiled but Mitch either didn't see the joke or was thinking of something else.

He was quiet and sipped some coffee. Then he said, "OK, I think I see. But I think I want to be a DXer and contact all those far away places like Charlie does." Mike added, "You know that's the beauty of it. One doesn't exclude the other. Charlie here prefers DX but he has run up some high scores in a few DX contests, haven't you, my friend?" Charlie had to agree but he emphasized that it was only for the club's aggregate score. Mitch sat up straight and asked, "Aggregate score? What's that?"

Mike grinned and looked at Charlie, "Looks like you've opened Pandora's Box. Better sign this fellow up for the next club competition and let him learn." Charlie agreed and explained patiently, "Members of a club may participate in most contests as individuals, submit their score under their own call but also have their score added with those of other registered club members to create a club score. That way, clubs can compete with one another. It's really a lot of fun."

Mitch agreed and thanked Mike and Charlie for their help. He said, "Golly, I have to pick up the tab for this visit to the diner. I certainly learned plenty. Thanks an awful lot." Charlie reached for his wallet and Mitch tried to stop him. "I'd really prefer to pay, Charlie." Charlie grinned and said, "Oh that's fine. Thank you. I just wanted this little card with the Internet addresses of some very good propagation information pages." He handed it to Mitch and Louie took a napkin to write the addresses for himself. One of Charlie's favorites is <http://www.radio-electronics.com/info/propagation/index.php> as well as one of its chapters, <http://www.radio-electronics.com/info/propagation/ionospheric/hf-propagation-basics.php> . These pages explain things quite nicely for hams who are not engineers.

Mitch seemed pleased and relieved that someone of Charlie's standing in the DX world actually understood his problem and wasn't dismissive of it in the way some old timers can be. Then he pulled out his Blackberry, checked his calendar and said, "Say Charlie, would you mind if I telephoned you sometime two or three weeks from now with a list of questions? Maybe you could straighten me out." Typical of the kind old DXer, he graciously and immediately agreed and suggested that instead of calling, Mitch and Louie come over for dinner with their wives or girlfriends. They grinned and Mitch said, "Say,

maybe we could convince my wife that hams aren't all crazy." Mike had been sitting quietly until that point but when he heard Mitch's comment, he burst out laughing nearly choking himself on coffee in the process. He coughed out, "now, just a dog-gone minute, Mitch. I'm afraid that too many people already know that all hams have to be a bit around the corner to do the things we do. After visiting DX Hill and seeing Charlie's tower and ham shack, at least you'll be able to convince her that your station isn't so bad and not as far out as some are." Charlie laughed and said, "Aw come on, Mike. Of all people, look who's talking... You with a barn full of radio gear and three separate hundred foot towers."

Mitch wasn't sure that these old friends were really kidding and he apologized. Mike became serious and said, "Mitch, Charlie and I are best friends and have been for many years. We ride one another all the time. Bring your better half to Signal Hill, trust me. After meeting Charlie's better half, your problems will be over. There's not a soul on earth who doesn't love Mary...or her blueberry pies and muffins."

Mitch was quite pleased to hear that. He added, "Martha hasn't really accepted this thing that makes me get up at 4 AM and go into the back room of the house to listen to strange sounds on my radio before going to work or get so excited when someone actually answers my call. I got my ticket in college and we were married just after graduation, let's see... nearly ten years ago. Martha feels that ham radio came first and she's always in second place even though I've assured her that she's always #1". Charlie replied, "I completely understand. Mary isn't a ham but accepts ham radio and my ham friends quite sincerely and in her own way, she actually likes most of my ham friends." With that comment, he emphasized "most" and gave Mike a gentle poke in his ribs. They all laughed. Actually, Mike and his wife are very close friends. Charlie added, "I believe that Mary will set Martha straight on ham radio. After all, she's a veteran after all these years."

Louie also thanked Charlie and said that he'd be in touch to join in. He isn't married and said that he'd probably come alone. Mike added, "Well, I guess that we shouldn't miss one of Mary's dinners either. We'll resume this discussion over dinner."

With that, they all got up and headed home after another rewarding club meeting. Most active hams are members of some club. Some actually belong to and support several clubs. Not every club has a "Charlie" but you'd be surprised at how much depth of knowledge is contained among the membership. Simply access to the available resources and knowledge is well worth the cost of membership.

See you at the next club meeting...