

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Winter hasn't descended upon DX Hill yet this season but without much doubt, it is right around the corner. With any sort of luck, there're still a few weeks left to get the last of the antenna tasks done. Charlie still has a few small things to finish but the most important task, his seasonal preventative maintenance on his tower and beams, was finished in September, so he should be all set for the bad weather ahead.

Charlie's wife Mary loves to go shopping during the few nice weather days that usually come along in November. This one was no exception and with so many sunny and warm days we have had this October and November, Mary was raring to go. She asked Charlie one Monday morning recently to go shopping with her at the big mega mall across the valley. Of course, Charlie agreed and immediately went looking for his shoes to take Rufus out for a walk so that he could last until they return home several hours from now.

After Rufus returned from his tour, he went straight to Charlie's big chair and curled up for a good nap. Without being told, the good old boy could sense that he would soon have an empty house to watch over, perfect for a long quality power nap. Mary and Charlie headed out to the truck, chatting about where they should go first, second, where they will stop for lunch, etc. Mary normally shops at this time of year for gifts for their grandchildren and of course, their grown children. Charlie's job is to carry everything back to the truck and into the house.

They reached the mall and found a parking place close to the entrance at about 10:00 AM. Mary knew the layout of the stores very well, so Charlie simply followed and carried. Early on their venture, they ran into their friends, Jack and his wife, Mandy who were doing the same thing, shopping for gifts. Being a Monday, of course the crowds were much lighter than they would be over the weekend. Shopping minus the crowds was wonderful. Being able to do their shopping during the week is one of the major perks earned by being retired. Jack is also a DXer, although a fairly new one. But he is a phone operator. Charlie is almost exclusively a CW operator, so he rarely even listens to the phone bands. In fact, despite being DXers in the area, Jack and Charlie likely wouldn't know one another if not for the fact that they are both members of the same club.

Despite their differing interests in operating mode, chasing DXpeditions presents a great deal of common ground for them and while Mary and Mandy intently cruised between one shop and another, the "boys" discussed the latest DX operations, comparing what bands they had them worked. Mary and Mandy walked a few steps ahead, carrying their sales flyers and lists, intent on getting to their next store and finding their special item. Watching these two ladies leading the way with purpose, being followed by two fellows talking about something that only they could understand probably looked and sounded awfully strange to other shoppers but no one seemed to care. The sales were enough diversion, it seems.

Jack had worked the latest expeditions to Easter Island, Midway, Ghana, West Kiribati and Senegal but hadn't managed to log TX3A in the Chesterfields, T88AA in Palau or all of the European vacationers to VP2V that have been appearing. He blames that on the fact that they operate a great deal of their time on CW where he does not go and not on SSB. Everyone reading this can predict Charlie's reaction. But actually, Charlie was quite impressed that Jack had logged most of the recent DXpeditions. It demonstrates some very good operating, indeed, very good work for a fairly new ham. He then said, "Well, what's stopping you, Jack. Go work them on CW. You know the code, don't you?" Jack somewhat sheepishly responded that he really didn't and had been trying to use a software package to decode on-air transmissions and send the code for him. Once again, you probably all know what Charlie was thinking about that. Of course, he's much too polite to say all of what he was thinking. Instead, he replied, "Jack, why don't you spend the effort to learn the code yourself. It's a lot more honorable than using a computer and more fun too. If you need help, come on over to our place and I'll get you set up."

The boys were still tagging along behind Mary and Mandy who had become thoroughly engrossed by the shopping fever of chasing the sales. The ladies were buying and handing the bags back to the boys who continued their DX talk. Jack went on, "Charlie, I've tried to learn code and failed. I just can't get it. That's why I was so glad when FCC dropped the code from the tests in 2007. If not for that, I'd never have gotten my Extra and still be wasting time on the repeaters."

Charlie smiled and said, "Yes, I can understand your point. But, if you're serious about chasing DX, you must be ready to capture the contact anyway that you can. Like a good catcher in baseball, you have to be prepared to catch whatever is thrown at you. Of course, I prefer to work DX on CW, but to work a new entity, I don't care if the DX station is using smoke signals, semaphore or banging on a hollow log. If the DXCC desk will accept it, I will try to work it. I've made some RTTY and PSK contacts as well as some on SSB and it was only to log stations who didn't operate on CW at all or at a time when we had propagation between us on those modes. For mixed DXCC, all modes are acceptable, so it doesn't matter at all which mode we use."

Jack had taken on a few new bags from Mandy and was starting to look more like a pack mule. Charlie had also picked up a couple of bags but they were smaller ones. He looked at his watch and saw that it was getting close to noon. He broke into Mary's and Mandy's chatting, "Say, it's close to lunch time. How about taking a break for lunch? It's my treat. The food court is at the end of this row of stores." Mandy looked at Mary and asked, "OK?" Mary nodded her approval. Jack added, "How about letting Charlie and me make a trip to the car first to unload these bags, OK?"

Charlie nodded his agreement and Mary cast her vote, "I like the plan. We need to let the charge card cool down for a while anyway." Actually, she laughed at her own comment because she really hadn't spent that much at all. But it was nearly 12 and smelling the different scents from the food court made them all quite hungry. So, the boys headed for the car to unload while the ladies headed for the food court to scout it out. As luck might have it, they had parked close to one another, so they could walk together.

While on their walk to their cars, of course, they continued talking about DX which is their favorite interest in ham radio, despite their different views on which mode to use. Charlie sensed that Jack's only problem was his mental block against CW. He had no doubt that if he could get through his own feelings and learn how to copy and send code, he would enjoy DXing a great deal more. There was little doubt about it. While walking, Charlie pointed out that during his chase of countries up the DXCC ladder; he often worked a new one on CW before also working it on phone or RTTY later on. In fact, when he reached the DXCC Honor Roll on mixed mode, he still needed about 40 more confirmations on phone to also qualify for the DXCC Phone Honor Roll. It took him five more years to back fill all of those. When he worked them initially, often he had no opportunity to also make a phone contact because he was still working and had very limited time in which to make the contact. He couldn't be there later when the DX was on phone.

The best reason and one that many phone operators aren't aware of is that it is clearly easier to work DX on CW than on phone. It requires less work, less power, fewer calls and less time. All this adds up to a major benefit for CW ops. Operators are more courteous, there are fewer malicious jammers on CW DX frequencies, the smaller bandwidth that a CW signal requires is able to get through QRM more easily, and a weak CW signal can be copied in band conditions where an equal strength phone signal won't get through. Bottom line is that by insisting on only using phone, a DXer is denying him or herself from working a number of rare DX stations. These days, most all sponsored DXpeditions operate on phone, CW and often RTTY. It is correct as well as good business to avoid offending supporters, who share interests between all modes.

Charlie would be the first to point out however, that regardless of the advantages of CW over phone in getting the contact logged, either operator would have to be a skilled operator. There's not much that the mode selection can do that will benefit an unskilled operator. Whether using phone, CW, RTTY or any other mode, learning and following the best practices developed over the years by predecessors will pay handsome dividends. Owning a copy and studying thoroughly the ARRL Operating Manual will set any new operator on the right path.

Charlie mentioned all of this to Jack as they were returning from their cars. He said, "You know, I've heard some guys on the air who call DX when the DX is plainly calling a different station. I've heard some guys who call the DX with a report before the DX has even acknowledged their call. I've heard some who come back to the DX when the call of station being called didn't even remotely resemble their own call. I assume that some of this is simply over aggressive behavior by inexperienced operators but with the increased number of "no code operators in the pile-ups, I must think that some just cannot copy well enough to know what the DX station is saying. The DX often is sending at 30-40 wpm and sometimes, even these new hams using code software cannot capture what is being sent. They make themselves look like very poor operators by their inability to copy what is being sent. Faking it doesn't work. That's why I think that it's so important for a good DX operator to be able to copy and send code properly."

Jack understood but once again said, "Yeah, I get it but dog gone it, I have really tried and I just can't copy the darned code." Charlie asked him, "Have you ever worked with someone to learn it or tried by yourself? Have you ever worked with me?" "Well, no," was all that Jack could reply. Charlie promised, "Look Jack, give me some time to work with you and you'll be on top of this and be working on other phone operators to come along to CW also." That sounded fine and they shook hands on that.

They got to the food court and found the ladies, who had already filled a tray with a variety of Chinese, Italian and German food along with a diet Coke and piece of peach pie. Mary told Charlie where the best food was and what they were selling. Charlie learned long ago to never dispute Mary on the subject of food. "Thank you, dear," was all he replied as Jack and he started through the different venues.

All in all, they ate enough to sustain them through at least 8 PM of the following day. Then, after having some coffee to help them stay awake, they struggled up to continue their shopping. After another couple of hours, they were all getting tired and agreed to call it quits. They returned to their cars and returned home. Jack promised Charlie that they would get together during the coming week, just to get things started. Jack wanted to try to become the DXer that Charlie was and knowing CW was a sure way to make it happen.

Charlie and all the folks on DX Hill want to wish you all a very happy beginning of the Holiday Season. We'll all return next month. In the meanwhile, go work the rare DX that comes along. It could be years until someone else visits these places again.