

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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All of Charlie's regular readers know that springtime is when he carefully checks all of his antennas and repairs any damage inflicted over the winter. DX Hill has enjoyed some very warm weather this spring and that made Charlie and Mary quite happy. It isn't every year that they can work outdoors in late March and early April, dressed in summer clothes. But, in 2010 they surely could and could hardly believe that DX Hill was covered in snow just a few weeks earlier.

As they have done in past years, Mary helps Charlie pull wires, tie ropes and send tools up the tower to Charlie who is working 80, 90 or 100 feet above the ground. He's getting a little old for doing this climbing and has promised Mary that he will get one of the younger club members to climb next time. But, he never seems to do it. Maybe it's foolish pride or just being stubborn. But, he admits that his knees cannot take the climbing much longer and maybe by next year, he will be forced into letting younger knees make the climb to do antenna work.

In return for Mary's help in doing antenna work, nothing that she is especially fond of doing, Charlie has agreed to help her with gardening. He digs up weeds, spreads top soil, mulch and fertilizer and makes runs to the nursery to pick up supplies and flats of flowers. It's funny how it works out but Charlie's antenna work is usually finished in one or two nice days but Mary's gardening takes several times more days. Mary certainly has negotiated favorable terms. Charlie realizes that but doesn't mind a bit. He loves to help Mary regardless of any terms of equality.

In all, Charlie spent about four hours at the top of his tower. He found an old wasp nest in his balun junction box and some impacted soil and grass left behind by a large family of red ants between and under all the terminals on two terminal strips. How ants find their way to a junction box one hundred feet above the ground at the top of a tower to build a family winter home is impossible to understand but the little critters really do it. This dirt and other material shorts out the rotator and switch control connections and must be removed. His rotator was still functioning properly but obviously was about to fail because of his resident ant colony. This is why Charlie and all good engineers believe in regularly doing preventative maintenance like this before a problem occurs. He had to dismantle and clean the terminals with denatured alcohol and then reassemble and test everything. It's a tedious job but one that must be done carefully. Experience has taught Charlie how to perform this sort of work without causing any damage or degrading of the connections.

While working alone up the tower, Charlie had time to reflect on what he did in the club last month. The last Charlie's Whistle article detailed an instructional program for newer hams and not so new hams who realize that they failed to learn very much when they studied material in preparation for their licenses. They learned how to recognize the correct answers in the multiple choice exam but acknowledge now that they don't

understand a great deal of fundamental material about antennas, transmission lines, propagation, transmitters and even simple power supplies. Some of the packaged training material that promises that you will earn your license in a weekend are built on teaching people how to pass the tests but very little on understanding anything. This is why we find hams in all license classes who cannot tell you what a dipole antenna is or what an antenna tuner's function really is. Charlie has found that most new hams either have no idea what the answers are or they are completely misinformed.

While working alone, Charlie had quiet time to recognize how much a new ham could learn if he or she were working with him atop the tower. Understanding the need for normal preventative maintenance like cleaning out the wasp nest and ant remnants is very basic to maintaining outdoor antennas. Students could learn by the practical application of an old timer's experience and guidance. Actually doing the work with their own hands while listening to countless stories about what happens when such preventative measures are not taken is something that cannot be taught in a classroom. Nearly everyone will admit that "on the job training", better known as OJT, will deliver the knowledge when it is being administered by a friendly old mentor like Charlie.

Tied to his tower, one hundred feet above his back yard, Charlie thought about how the club could deliver an OJT program that would drive home knowledge about all sorts of basic material such as antennas, transmission lines, tuners, power supplies, controls, and even best practices in operating their stations. While he worked on his cleaning and checking, he wished that he had a recorder so that he could dictate his thoughts. Years before as a working engineering manager, he could easily remember dozens of things every day while carrying out his duties but aging has taken its toll and he must now resort to making lists and making reminders, otherwise he'll forget things. Mary could tell from the ground that Charlie was mentally preoccupied and called up to him, "Do you need a notepad, dear?"

Charlie realized that he did but had no spare hands to take notes, so he replied, "No thanks Mary, but could you please remind me later to make up an outline for a hands-on class to cover antenna maintenance?" Mary called back that she would do so.

Charlie smiled and called, "Thank you dear. I really appreciate that". Yes, that's the ticket, he thought. Book learning is only marginally useful doing this tower work. They actually have to get their hands dirty to learn. How much can they learn in a classroom? Of course, talking to himself and silently asking rhetorical questions are strange in anyone's book but Charlie realized a large fact concerning why new hams don't seem to be learning very much basic knowledge without a hands-on training session. That leads one to wonder how many "Elmers" or mentors are picking up the duty. The answer is almost obvious.....not nearly enough.

Some of the 20 and 30 something folks do not have much respect for older gray headed hams. That's some of the problem because the younger crowd is denying themselves of a treasure trove of practical hands-on knowledge. Surely, no one reading this column is

among the company of these 20 and 30 something hams but I'm sure that we all can name a few of them.

As Charlie slowly climbed down his hundred foot tower, he was making plans for setting up a workshop series of sessions and invite the new hams around DX Hill and from the valley. He discovered that some older hams never learned the correct way to solder a coax connector. They need to learn the correct way to solder a coax connector also and should be invited. Only the bravest of the lot will come of course but that's OK. We want the bravest in the crowd to advance.

When he finally reached the ground, Mary had a comfortable chair waiting for him along with a cup of fresh coffee and a generous wedge of blueberry pie with vanilla ice cream. Charlie just smiled and gave Mary a kiss on her cheek. "Thanks sweetheart. I need this." Then Mary picked up her note pad with all the things that Charlie asked to be reminded of. Mary asked, "Don't I make a good secretary, Charlie?" Charlie admitted that she would be a great secretary but that made him worry. Hopefully, she was kidding.

Learning practical, hands-on skills is essential for new hams to acquire. Many of them learned enough to pass their exams with Gordon West programs. Gordo's material is designed to guarantee that people will pass the FCC tests but not to teach any of them the skills or basic knowledge that they will need when they try to build upon what they know.

It is something that club programs must address. Start with the most general and obvious like the correct way to solder a PL-259 connector on small, medium and large coaxial cable. Then, consider building a small QRP rig or 2 meter Yagi antenna, explaining the half wave driven element and how parasitic elements focus the signal and provide gain and rejection to its rear. The need is there. The new hams really want to learn. It's the job that old timers, yes the gray heads, must face and carry out. The older hams have the knowledge and in most cases, the time. They only need to be asked. Please set up a program before we lose more of our resources. Don't wait for someone else to do it.

See you next month....