



My Road to Ham Radio

My first introduction to radio came in 1941. I had joined the Coast Guard after graduating from high school and, after boot camp, was assigned to a cutter in San Pedro, California. It was small, so as seamen we were allowed, or told, to do many things.

In boot camp we had been taught semaphore and, of course, blinker light using the Morse code. I liked it and kept practicing on the cutter. The anchored Navy ships or those coming in would use their blinkers (light guns) to signal back and forth to one another and also to a tower on a hill above San Pedro. I used to copy it all the time and eventually became proficient. The chief made me the acting signalman along with being an acting gunner's mate, as well as a myriad of other duties.

From Cooking to Code

The chief would not allow our cook to go on leave unless he had a replacement, which was me. One rough day at sea, I was down in the galley cooking when the odors became overpowering. I felt awful and chow was delayed until we reached calmer weather. That experience quashed my "culinary" ambitions and I decided to go to radio school, since that might prove the most productive after the war.

I spent the first three months in radio training as a striker (i.e., learning the code) at NMQ Los Angeles Coast Guard (CG) Radio. I was there when World War II broke out and several of us were sent to the radio school at New London, Connecticut to complete the course. While in New London, we had to copy from 25 to 30 WPM and it was pounded into us four hours or more each day. At night, we went to training positions that were mock-ups of CG radio stations.

This was in the spring of 1942, and one could not sit down for five minutes without copying an SOS or an SSS (submarine sighted), ships sinking reports, torpedoing, etc., 24 hours a day. The North Atlantic was swarming with U-boats and we listened to all the traffic. We did not handle any traffic there, of course, but copied it for practice.

I will never forget one merchant ship in particular. First, we received an SSS report, with his latitude and longitude. Then came a report of being shelled. The ship was then reported to be on fire and, tragically, sinking when the order to abandon ship was given. We then heard a cheery sign-off: "Signing off and hope we work with you again!" All without one single mistake in his operating!

North to Alaska

Not long after, I was sent to Alaska to copy Fox (a method of receiving code from shore radio stations addressed to ships at sea or land stations, but we could not answer back) for a few months and was then transferred to an observation post at Hidden Inlet, Alaska. I was totally isolated except for the cannery crew. I sent

in radio reports of ships, aircraft, etc., using the cannery commercial radio shack. At the ripe old age of 19, I was captain of the port, customs and immigration officer, acting naval intelligence officer, and marriage counselor to some Canadian natives... but that's another story!

Next I went to a communication center in Ketchikan, Alaska for a year and then to Prince of Wales Island in SE Alaska where they had three cutters. This was a shore radio station where we were radio guard for Navy Patrol planes, so we handled a lot of code traffic.

I then went to CG radio south of San Francisco where our traffic was mostly working commercial and military ships entering the Golden Gate. They wanted DF (direction finding) bearings and position reports from a net we controlled so, again, we performed a lot of code.

AFTER THE WAR, I SECURED A JOB with the old Civil Aeronautics Administration as an Aircraft Communicator at Sheep Mountain, Alaska, which is about 100 miles east of Anchorage and above the Matanuska Glacier. We worked a lot of aircraft and submitted weather observations, position reports, flight plans and so on, by Morse code.



Gordon, after over 60 years as a Ham, sits comfortably at his station in Redmond, Oregon.

Sitka, Alaska was my next station, which was much bigger. We handled a lot of aircraft and took weather observations, using manual code plus high-speed Boehme equipment. (For the younger generation, this is code copied on a tape and then transcribed by the operator at a much slower speed.) It came in at 80-120 WPM and we transcribed at whatever our typing speed was. The code characters appeared on tape as dots and dashes and static, which did get a bit complicated.

I was then transferred to Anchorage, Alaska which was an Interstate and Overseas aeronautical communication station. There we did everything connected with radio, including air,

ground, marine broadcasts, teletype, Boehme, etc. I subsequently became a station manager at Kotzebue, Alaska which is an Eskimo village and station north of the Arctic Circle. In this assignment, we copied Russian weather using Boehme equipment, which was then sent by radio teletype to Nome where it was entered on the national weather circuits. Weather moves from west to east so our intercept of the Russian sequences got to the weather bureau forecast centers much quicker than those coming across the Atlantic and across the United States.

Code Training Pays Off

While at Kotzebue, I happened to look out the window one night and saw an SOS signal by flashlight. I grabbed a flashlight and answered. Using code, I determined the boat was in big trouble and the occupants needed help. The boat was just off the end of one of our runways, so I grabbed a couple of guys and we were able to help save the boat, the man and his wife and three children. Without code, that would have been impossible.

Ham Radio Sidestep

Now this is where I parted company with ham radio. We had to send perfect code and, to obtain a speed key certification, we had to send plain language, and five-letter code groups at 20, 25, and 30 WPM. One then received a numbered certificate. If anyone sent “sloppy code” when actually on a circuit, an official could ask for his number, report that person and he/she had to go back to a hand key until getting re-certified. I have heard some of the worst code in my life on ham radio! I have no problem working with slow operators. Each person works at his speed but, PRACTICE sending, copy yourself on tape and see if YOU can read it. I have also worked with very good ham operators, many of whom can snow me.

I eventually transferred into Air Traffic Control and code was mostly a mute subject. However, I still copied code and press reports occasionally on my short-wave radio just “for fun.” My brother-in-law always told me to get a ham license but after talking on the radio all day, the last thing I wanted to do was get on a radio at home.

Back On the “Bug”

(A “Bug” is a semi-automatic hand key for sending morse code.) Ten years after my retirement, a friend encouraged me to get my license. The code was no problem, but the theory was. I mastered it, though, and received my general license eleven years ago. I still work it on occasion and it is still enjoyable. I know from my years of experience that often one can work stations on continuous wave (CW) when voice cannot be used.

There are a lot of good operators out there: FISTS (members of the International Morse Preservation Society), the Society of

Wireless Pioneers, etc., and they have schedules. This is a great opportunity to meet some super people and lots of “old-timers,” some of whom are in their late 80s and early 90s and are still good code operators. Many hams I have talked to say they have a hard time learning code but on further query, they admit they only practice a few minutes a week. I don’t think it is possible to learn code that way – unless one is a genius. It takes time and a lot of practice, but once mastered, it is never forgotten.



“I hope to keep my hand on the mike button or the bug until I go to that “big radio station in the sky.”

A Life-Long Advocate of Amateur Radio

At 80 years of age, I’m probably not too different from a lot of hams in my age group. When I began as an air traffic controller, many changes were occurring, such as the SOS’s becoming “Maydays.” There were still a lot of aircraft “in trouble” (lost, low on fuel, and so on) and getting them to an airport and a safe landing was exciting and worthwhile.

Although I am no longer in the business of saving lives, ham radio is an extension of communications and a delightful hobby. Yes, I am “pro-CW.” Hey, it was a big part of my life! I also enjoy working sideband and have worked on all continents except Africa. There was even a Russian expedition at the North Pole. Fun? You bet. And I hope to keep my hand on the mike button or the bug until I go to that “big radio station in the sky.” Ω

Mr. Halston, as depicted in this short historical perspective, has had a full life so far, and we wish him the best of success for many years to come. He graciously met with Ms. Pat Davis, Assistant Editor for this issue, to further discuss his article, clarify terms, and to take the pictures used herein. He is a true gentleman, and may be willing to share more of his experiences if you Hams out there are in position to contact him. (Ed)



EMC Post Cards —From the Wireless Side

David A. Case, NCE

From a quick review of the conference agenda it should be a very busy four weeks.

Satellite Use Tax

It seems that Ohio, New York, Nevada and several other states are trying to pass a special tax on satellite TV viewers. This tax, which amounts to 5 or 6% of the bill, is above the current sales tax already billed and is basically a satellite use tax by the state. Needless to say the satellite users in my state are up in arms and fighting to stop the tax.

FCC Activities

The FCC announced the release of a Notice of Proposed Rule Making on opening up the 5.4 GHz band for RLAN. In part, this was done to bolster the U.S position in the WRC now underway, and in part because of the USG – Industry deal on Dynamic

Frequency Selection criteria for the 5.4 GHz band. This NPRM will give us an additional 255 MHz of spectrum.

The FCC dismissed the petition for RF lighting in the 2.4 GHz band. This effort was supported by the RLAN industry who was concerned these devices would interfere with our devices in the 2450 MHz band.

The FCC also released a Notice of Inquiry (NOI) on Power Line Communication. This NOI should generate some interesting responses from across the industry.

I’m Staying Home This Year

For those looking for me at this year’s IEEE EMC Symposium in Boston, I will save you the trouble, since I will not be there. Between conflicting meetings, my long absence from home because of WRC 2003 and the general need to relax a little, I am not planning to attend this year. I am sure, as in the past, the show will be a success and I hope to see everyone the year after. Ω

Please send comments, thoughts, or opinions to me at davecase@cisco.com.