

Enriching Your World of Ham Radio

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I could have called this article “What’s Wrong with Ham Radio Today” but that gets into the “is your glass half full or is it half empty” argument.

Before I obtained my amateur radio license, I had always expressed an interest in radio, and as a young teenager in rural southern Alberta, had already “butchered” the family five-tube AM radio so as to modify it to pick up the police dispatch from Vancouver B.C. Back then (am I dating myself?), the police dispatch operated just above the AM broadcast band, while the police cars responded on some higher shortwave frequency. In the evenings when the AM band was full of faraway stations from the U.S., I would be out in the garage listening to “all” the crime in Vancouver (murder or even the firing of a gun was pretty rare back then).

In 1969 I joined the Canadian Forces and served my twenty years in the communications and electronics trades (one of which required that I learn morse code). It wasn’t until 1983 as a military radio technician that, after being posted to Gander Newfoundland, I decided to write the exam and get my ham radio certificate. I can still remember the long three hour drive to St. John’s to the DOC office and the lengthy exam consisting of both written and multiple choice questions. Then came the CW receiving test (sending morse had already been removed as a requirement), and the half dozen perspective hams in the room straining to copy the sounds of 12 words-per-minute CW played through the speaker of an old tape recorder.

So there I was, a newly licensed amateur radio operator with the call VO1RD, and morse code privileges on HF – it was an exciting time (even if I didn’t own any radio equipment). A short time later I was posted to the pilot training base at Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. I bought my first 2m and HF transceivers, and hung onto my VO1 call for as long as I was allowed (two years) signing VO1RD mobile VE4; then obtaining the Manitoba call VE4AOA. Back then you had to give up your old call (to be reissued) when you changed provinces, and couldn’t collect them like you can today (of course you also had to pay about \$20 every year to the DOC for your callsign).

To get back to the subject of this article, I like to think of ham radio as not just one thing, but many different things; like a fairly large jigsaw puzzle with many different pieces, some related in that they go together to form a tree or a mountain or a house. Some pieces are more mundane, fitting together to only form the blue sky or the expanse of grassland. When a typical ham first gets his license, he usually buys a VHF/UHF transceiver to get on the air. Getting on the air, actually talking to others via ham radio, is a major piece (a corner piece) of my puzzle concept. Later he may add other pieces such as buying a mobile rig (if his first radio was a handheld), or purchasing a better (higher gain antenna), or joining a ham club.

Therein lies a potential problem; the new ham’s perspective of “what is ham radio”, is based only on the couple of pieces of the big puzzle that he has. The definition of a ham club might be a gathering of individuals with similar interests, but there is not a lot to talk about when your “ham radio world” only consists of rag chewing with some buddies on a 2m repeater. I have seen a few newer hams gathered together at a club meeting, not to talk about what they are doing as a ham (that conversation ran out before I listened in), but to discuss their shared interests – golfing or fishing or what bars had the best entertainment.

Of course, it is the job of the ham club to involve the new class of “here I am – entertain me” hams that are all too common today. But a more important job of the club and its members is to help the newer hams (and some of the older ones) discover “new pieces” to add to their “ham radio puzzle”.

So what puzzle pieces can be added by the new ham with only a 2m handheld transceiver? Well how about IRLP, checking into a net or becoming involved in local public service functions or larger groups like ARES and CANWARN.

That's a start, but how about adding a slightly larger, more important piece to his ham radio jigsaw puzzle like HF. Now he can discover a number of associated puzzle pieces such as DXing, collecting QSL cards, collecting various certificates like "worked all provinces", or "worked all continents" and about a hundred other certificates that can be obtained. Other pieces include working various digital modes on HF such as PSK-31, learning morse code to operate CW, contesting (contests occur every month), and with some of the new HF rigs that include 6, 2 and 70cm he can explore using SSB or CW on VHF/UHF. There are so many different things like APRS, SSTV, WinLink2000, QRP and portable HF etc. How about building his HF antenna, dipoles are easy; and then there is understanding radio wave propagation. How about a membership in RAC.

So now our new ham's "world", his ham radio puzzle has grown and he will start to find that others want to hear about some of his discoveries, not just exchange banalities about what equipment they have purchased at the local ham store, hoping to invoke "equipment envy".

The new ham starts to feel good about ham radio and hopefully this will lead him to discover another major puzzle piece – the camaraderie found when taking part in a group as one of the "DOers". Having new members take part in running the ham club and its various activities is a desired goal, and having members want to form and take part in new groups within the club is even better. These groups could include emergency communications, packet radio, contesting and building kits to name a few.

Many of today's hams tend to want to explore ham radio by themselves, and never discover the good times of getting together with other hams and doing something as a group of peers. This could be one of the reasons why membership in ham clubs appears to be declining.

Another important piece of the "what ham radio is" puzzle is building things. Building a kit can be a very rewarding experience and can lead to other aspects such as an understanding of how some of the circuits work. Other associated puzzle pieces include being able to modify the kit to work even better, or eventually being able to build a project from scratch using nothing but a circuit diagram.

Wow, my description on how to enrich ones "ham radio world" has allowed the new ham to almost reach the high levels found in our hobby back in the 60's, 70's and 80's! Maybe I'm onto something here. With hams like this, we can go back to an old definition of a ham club – a gathering of "DOers" getting together to share their discoveries and experiences with each other.

In our local club, the Barrie Amateur Radio Club <http://www.barriearc.com/> we have tried many methods to attract the interest of the ham population in our area. We have had our successes and failures, but one of the most recent ideas is The Wireless Amateur Experimenter Group http://www.barriearc.com/WAX_Group.htm which has had good success. Most of the members of the group are building RockMite40 CW transceivers from Small Wonder Labs <http://www.smallwonderlabs.com/> and another good source of kits is Hendricks QRP Kits <http://www.qrpkits.com/index.html> . We meet every Thursday evening in the basement ham shack of one of the club members for "build sessions", and from what I have seen, everyone is having a good time with lots of smiles and joking. They might not have noticed, but the camaraderie aspect is definitely there, with members helping each other count turns on a toroid, or install a part that just doesn't want to fit.

Just think about all the skills and knowledge a ham learns in the course of building and using an HF CW transceiver kit, even one as simple as the QRP RockMite. In my opinion, the concepts contained in The Wireless Amateur Experimenter Group are a good chunk of what amateur radio is all about.

What is your concept of what ham radio is – how many pieces does your ham radio jigsaw puzzle contain?

About the Author

After 20 years with the Canadian Forces in the communications and Radio Technician trades from 1969 to 1989, serving in locations like Alert N.W.T, Bermuda and the second Diefenbunker near Perth Ontario; Al retired from the military and was hired by Bell Mobility as an RF Field Maintenance Technician in the Barrie Ontario region (1989 – 2008). On retiring from his second career, he finds more time for Ham Radio and other interests such as digital photography and Tai Chi. First licensed in 1983, Al now enjoys ham club activities, teaches the basic amateur radio course, publishes the club newsletter, is involved in ARES and has recently organized The Wireless Amateur Experimenter Group. Although his shack is equipped with an Icom IC-7000 transceiver, he is currently finding more enjoyment from building and using QRP equipment.