Marine Communications *by Day Chapin*

Morse Code

Morse code is a series of dots and dashes when strung together emulate spoken or written communication. Our family was up north on *Oceana* one summer and we were keeping in touch with our friends Tony & Coryn Gooch on *Taonui* via Amateur Radio. We would normally use SSB (transmissions resembling a telephone conversation but with associated static and other interesting noises) – until a large storm hit with associated high winds and reception disintegrated. We were in the middle of conversation and could only make out a few words – like "heaved-to" and "breakers." Only by switching to Morse code (or CW – continuous wave) using an old style telegraph key were we able to complete our conversation and determined that they were indeed hove-to in large seas – but ok. One of our members, Laura Cruz, KE7HIP on *Ruddy* Duck shares her insights in learning Morse code.

Morse Code by Laura Cruz

I had no preconceived notion of what I wanted after I passed the Technician exam. But after I received my call sign and my license granting privileges on the VHF and UHF bands, I knew I wanted to experience contacts with hams on the other side of the world. So I am now in pursuit of my next license that will grant privileges to communicate on the HF bands. Moving to the next level, however, will not be easy. It will require a serious commitment of time and effort. It's not the multiple choice test that worry me; it's Morse code or CW. I had hoped that the FCC would abolish the Morse code requirement, but unfortunately it won't happen soon enough for me. I've already bought my HF rig, used and at a good price, so I am prepared to do what has to be done.

My first attempt at Morse code was not successful. I had dutifully studied on the bus to and from work for about a month. Since I took the test, I have done some research on the Internet and have learned of a very useful website to help in preparation at http://ac6v.com. This website has lots of good tips and all sorts of training aids. Had I known then what I know now, the result may have been different. I was under the delusion that the test would be conducted at 5 WPM. For those that have heard code at this speed, this is extremely slow. In the actual test, the characters were being sent at 14 WPM with the spaces between characters being long enough so that the overall speed of characters and spaces averaged to 5 WPM. You can guess my result!

The test was given in what is called the Farnsworth method. I think Farnsworth believed that proficiency was gained by hearing characters at a high speed with long spaces in between and then gradually decreasing the space between characters. This is not a bad way of learning. The Farnsworth method has been used for a long time. After reading what some very knowledgeable people had to say on the subject, it appears that I had fallen into one of the most common traps in learning code. I started learning by using a software program that randomly sends characters. It's not the fault of the program that led to my mistake, but the way I used it. The program has a feature to adjust the speed at which the characters are sent. To begin, I naturally set the speed to the lowest setting. It probably wasn't as slow as 5 WPM, but it was still pretty slow. At the time, I thought it was too fast. What I did was count the dits and dahs, ran every possible combination through my mind until I matched it to the right letter or number, and hopefully was able to type in the character before the next one was sent. But during the test it comes so fast that it becomes difficult to use the matching method, because it is hard to break the character into its component dits and dahs. I was doomed from the beginning. I have come to appreciate that for me, the key in passing the test is getting to the point where upon hearing the character you know instinctively what the character is out of pure reflex.

I think I may have reached this point last week. Even after having practiced for weeks at the slowest speed, I could not see improvement since I still could not get all the characters right. Frustration set in, and I began to think my mind wasn't capable of it. One day, I increased the speed to approximately what the test sounded like. At first I thought, how is it ever going to be possible to count so fast? But I kept listening to individual characters one at a time, hearing them over and over again at a high speed and trying to learn the subtle differences between them. Then one day my fingers knew where to go almost out of reflex. I was getting three, maybe four out of five right!

I am still far from perfect, but the test doesn't require perfection – just one out of five minutes of perfect copy or answering seven out of ten questions. I still need to familiarize myself with the information exchanged in a contact to increase my chances. The test mimics a fictitious QSO. I have to learn what those signal strength reports are, and those Q signs too. But most importantly, I am learning to stop counting the dits and the dahs.

The next Morse code test is about one month away. I'm still not sure if I'll be ready in one month. Perhaps I'll have to start riding the local bus instead of the express!

Fall Radio Rendezvous

Over 35 members and 15 boats attended the first Spring Radio Rendezvous on April 1st. The event included an open boat tour, lots of socializing and discussions, and an evening tech talk. Mark your calendars to attend a Fall Radio Rendezvous on September 16th, at Port Madison. The Open Boat starts at 3pm – then Greenbox – then potluck– then a Tech Talk. You don't need to be a member of the Committee – just interested in radios (marine and/or Amateur). Please register at the Front Desk so we can get an idea of attendance. There is no fee, so plan to bring your favorite munchies and libations for Greenbox and a potluck. Also, starting in September, Committee meetings will be on the second Wednesday of the month starting at 6pm in the Commodores Room. The next Committee meeting will be on September 13th. We are also planning to repeat the Tech Class and FCC Exam we held this past year on January 6th, 2007. All SYC members and guests are welcome at all meetings and events.

W7SYC - For more information about the Seattle Yacht Club Amateur Radio Committee: send an email to chapin@activesoft.net,
73s – Day Chapin, Chair.