



The response to the Amateur Radio class has been great. One big news item has been a notice from the FCC that the code requirement for licensing will be removed for all licenses. This will likely take effect around March – but check the FCC or ARRL site for updated information. Our regular

monthly meetings have been well attended with topics including “Passage Making Communications” and “Radio Show & Tell.” The winter programs are focused on learning how to use radios. The next Radio Rendezvous is fast approaching – a leisurely cruise for power & sail over to Port Madison for radio activities. This year we are planning to have some diagnostic equipment so you can do simple things – like check the SWR (Standing Wave Ratio) on your Amateur and Marine antenna and feed line systems. Mark your calendar for April 14th & 15th.

Morse code -.-. --- -.-. --- -.-. ---

CQ CQ CQ is one of the most popular Morse code sounds heard on the Amateur Bands. CQ means “calling all stations.” When the vanity call signs were introduced many operators selected their vanity call sign based on the sound and length of their call sign in Morse code. Another infamous Morse code sound is ... --- ... or dit-dit-dit dah-dah-dah dit-dit-dit which means SOS. There are many stories of operators sending out this international distress signal from not only boats – but also stranded automobiles and airplanes. I remember a number of the old war movies with scenes depicting brave scouts behind enemy lines reporting in with encrypted Morse code over a radio from a Morse code key.

A few years ago the path to Amateur Radio started with a Novice license and Morse code. After learning the theory and FCC regulations, an applicant would take a written and five words per minute code test proctored by an experienced operator. After about a year of practice on CW (Continuous Wave) used for Morse code – you worked your speed up to be able to pass the General Exam. The General Exam not only included additional radio theory but required 13 wpm at an FCC office (only available in large cities). Passing the exam was a major achievement and often took more than one attempt. The Extra Class required 20 wpm – but since the band privileges did not significantly increase after the general license – many amateurs stopped with a general license. Over the years the code requirement was reduced down to 5 wpm for general and above – until the FCC decision on December 15, 2006.

Internationally the trend has been to remove Morse code requirements from Amateur Radio, e.g., Canada has not had a Morse code requirement of many years even for the highest class of license. The FCC has been studying the issue and had

a number of hearings and many citizens wrote opinions to the FCC. On the FCC or ARRL website you can find the ruling “FCC-06-178A1.doc, http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-06-178A1.pdf It is called a Report and Order and will be effective 30 days after publication in the Federal Register – which is likely to happen in February. The Report and Order is interesting reading in that it goes into some of the history of Morse code communications and how the FCC came to the decision. I thought one of the more interesting arguments was that CW is actually a mode of communication, much like SSB, TTY, PSK31, and not having the ability to communicate in a particular mode of communication should not be a barrier to licensing, i.e.,

“...we (the FCC) believe that because the international requirement for telegraphy proficiency has been eliminated, we should treat Morse code telegraphy as we do other communications techniques. In this connection, we note that our Rules do not require individuals to pass a practical examination to demonstrate some degree of proficiency in non-telegraphy communications techniques. Rather, individuals demonstrate knowledge of other communication techniques and technical qualifications by passing written examinations composed of questions that prove that the examinee possesses the operational and technical qualifications required for the privileges authorized by the operator license. We believe, therefore, that written examinations are sufficient to determine whether a person is qualified to be issued an amateur radio operator license (p.7).”

So what does this mean for boaters? There may be increased interest in a General License. The General License is what is required to transmit using voice below 30 MHz (megahertz in frequency). The popular summer (and all year long range) boating nets all work below 30 MHz for propagation (the signals travel farther and are not limited to “line of sight” as compared to traditional Amateur radio 2 meter equipment or Marine VHF). Amateurs have been extending VHF communication with repeaters, but Marine VHF has a very short range – comparatively. Most of the nets use SSB (Single Side Band) below 30 MHz. However, SSB can be difficult to copy and Morse code can be a good back-up if communications are difficult.

Meetings & Puget Sound Boaters Net

The Amateur Radio Committee February meeting will give attendees help actually designing a coordinated radio system for both power and sail boats. This will include information on VHF (including new DSC), amateur radios, SSB marine systems including HF DSC and e-mail capability, AIS and other related matters. A focus will be on combined use of antennas, coordinating backup systems for safety,