My Way to Morse

By Philip Lazar, K9PL

Philip, K9PL (left) demonstrating code to Steve, KB9YPC

The yearning Morse acolyte often finds the way to CW enlightenment beset by twists, diversions and precipices. Midway in their quest they may find themselves confounded to the point of paralysis by the many opinions and dogma directed their way. Paralysis soon leads to atrophy and abandonment of their pursuit of what is for many hams the skill that generates their greatest sense of personal pride and achievement in the amateur radio service. No one Morse learning technique is best; pick and choose your own style from the many suggested to you. Listen to others' experiences and read from the wide variety of literature on the subject. Those daring to explore and pioneer their own course to the CW art will eventually be rewarded by their first CW QSO -- a major milestone in anyone's ham radio career.

So, there are many paths to Morse, this is my story.

In the mid-1970s I was on my way to becoming a shortwave listener (SWL). I had a 1930s-vintage Hallicrafters, SX-9, Super Skyrider receiver that rewarded my attempts to tune the bands with mild, but alarming, electrical shocks courtesy of its failing oatmeal-box-size condensers (capacitors). Due to time and space restraints, a rebuild was not on the agenda.

During this period while reading the catalogs and checking the specs on new communications receivers I was also, very gingerly, listening to the 40-meter CW Novice subband on the tempting, functioning, but punishing SX-9. I wanted to know what these hams were discussing, to that end I made a trip to Olson Electronics to pick up the ARRL's "Gateway to Amateur Radio" package. It contained, in addition to other books on theory and licensing, a slim volume titled *Learning the Radiotelegraph Code*, a Hallicrafters code oscillator and a very rudimentary telegraph key. I was not looking to become a ham at that point, but simply to learn to copy the code, of amateur and commercial origin, I was hearing all over the shortwave bands.

Following the instructions in the aforementioned book (highly recommended if you can find one), I started learning as the book succinctly puts it, " . . . a new language -- the language of code" and its alphabet, numbers and punctuation. I used the key and oscillator to send each character while looking at it on the printed page as part of my learning process. This way its particular "sound" was integral to its associated character so that I never fell prey to the malady of counting "dots" and "dashes." Rather, I learned to recognize the melodic synthesis of "dits" and "dahs" that comprise every character, and, eventually, every word, Q signal, abbreviation and pro-sign.

Now that I "had" the code, it was time to advance my copying speed from 0 wpm to some practical figure; after all, I still had to know what those hams were discussing. I bought the available Ameco code records (yes, records) and Howard K. Sams tape cassettes that soon helped me copy 5 wpm, and more, at least on the pre-recordings. The recordings were a nice

bridge to real on-the-air copying, but soon lost their utility as I memorized their texts and letter groups.

As I faithfully listened to the receiver from 30 to 45 minutes a day, the "philosopher's stone" of code acquisition was revealed, to wit, lots of practice listening to, and copying, real-life, on-air CW transmissions. There, you will experience copying perfect, and not so perfect, fists; learn to compensate for your receiver's shortcomings; encounter fading signals (QSB); man-made noise (QRM); natural noise (QRN); broadcast station interference (BCI); and everything else the electromagnetic spectrum pits against you. This baptism of hissing, popping and shrieking (in my opinion) will advance your code copying comprehension and speed like no other method. Not only that, but by copying real QSOs you will be learning operating protocols, gaining experience with your transceiver's or receiver's controls to best realize optimal reception under less than optimum conditions and getting an "ears-on" experience of real-world CW operation. That is a priceless experience that no computer program or recording can offer.

Ten Tec Argonaut 509

Now that I was regularly copying ("reading the mail") Novice QSOs, I learned that they, too, were honing their CW skills by copying through the ear-splitting racket of the Russian "Woodpecker," or over-the-horizon radar system. This Cold War device regularly blanketed much of the shortwave spectrum while emitting its characteristic "THACK--THACK--THACK" like a monstrous bird hammering away at the planet itself.

With the security born of copying Novice signals, I tuned to the General portion and sought operators sending just a little too fast for me to copy easily, so as to challenge and improve my existing abilities. I avoided the temptation and ultimate frustration of attempting to copy the speed demons at the low end of the 40-meter band. This is another "secret" in your acquisition of Morse skills, do it incrementally, don't attempt any "quantum leaps," it's one step at a time while keeping perplexity to a minimum.
By now I was comfortable copying about 15 wpm and got serious about buying a receiver. While reading through a bunch of electronics magazines to check out product reviews and retailers, I saw an ad for the Ten-Tec Argonaut 509, a 5 watt QRP transceiver. Although it didn't provide general frequency coverage, it did offer the pre-WARC 80-10 meter amateur bands. That was the pivotal moment in my ham radio career. Now my focus shifted from listener to communicator as I headed to the local Heathkit store for the General Class study guide.

Twenty-five years later I daily ply the CW portion of my favorite bands and am never disappointed by the rich variety of individuals I meet and the stories revealed during every operating session. This was all made possible by learning another language, the native language of the ether.