

We have one more setting...

When something unbelievable happens, it's perhaps best to not talk too much about it. People won't believe you anyway. Some people might think you're crazy. Maybe they're right. Maybe this didn't happen. Maybe I am crazy. After all, this was all a long time ago, just after the FCC stopped giving the amateur exams and the VECs took over. Still, I know that those who were there will never forget this one particular day.

We had not really expected much of a turn-out for our regular Sunday afternoon VE testing session. It was Halloween, after all, and many folks were home setting up for the trick-or-treaters. Still, as Bob, Murray, and I finished the paperwork for our VEC, we agreed that having ten candidates on a night like tonight was a good haul. And they had done well, too. We did the five word-per-minute code test for four novices, and the rest tested 13 WPM for the General Class. Of those, eight passed. Only two students went away disappointed and they were both so close that I was sure we would see them again next month.

It was with some surprise, therefore, when we all three happened to look up and notice an elderly gentleman sitting quietly at one of the desks in the back of the room. I certainly had not heard the door open, and from the expressions on the faces of my fellow examiners I could tell they were equally surprised. The old fellow was not one of our examinees. I briefly thought that he might be disoriented and had simply entered the room by accident. We administer our tests in the community room of the public library. Perhaps he was looking for the reading room.

"May I help you?" I said.

"Is this where you administer that Morse code test," he replied.

"It is. Are you here to test for an amateur radio license? If so, you'll need to fill out some paperwork and there's an exam fee. By the way, what's your name?"

"I'm Buck, just Buck. But people call me Sparks. Before we start fiddling with a bunch of papers can't you just crank up some Morse. I want to see if I still have the touch."

I looked at Murray and Bob, and we all kind of shrugged at the same time, as if to silently agree to a "well, why not. Let's humor this old guy along and see what happens."

Murray passed Buck a few sheets of paper and two sharpened pencils, and Bob fired up the Morse program on our fancy new TRS-80 Color Computer. That computer sure was a lot better than having to deal with the old paper code tapes.

Buck gave us a nod. Bob selected the option on the screen for five words-per-minute and started the program. We all stared at Buck; couldn't help it.

Buck had the pencil in hand as if about to copy the code but otherwise didn't move or even show that he heard a thing.

"Is that what you call Morse code?" he asked.

"Yes, Morse is a language of dits & dahs..." I started to explain, before he cut me off.

"It's going so slow that I can hardly make out the letters. Will that contraption of yours go any faster?"

"Well, okay," I said. "The General test calls for 13 words-per-minute. Do you want to try that?"

"It's got to be better than whatever that was."

I gave Bob a nod and he selected the next option on the code program. Again, the beautiful sound of Morse filled the room. Buck, however, didn't seem pleased. He gave us the same kind of look as before, as if he felt sorry for us.

"That's better," Buck interrupted, "but it's still going so slow that I can barely make out the words."

At this point, Murray, Bob, and I had a little whispered conference. We decided this old guy was playing us and didn't know code at all. But we agreed to play along to see if we could get his goat as well.

"Well," I lied, "we have *one more setting* that might be more to your taste."

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MORSE CODE PRACTICE MODULE FOR AMATEUR RADIO OPERATION
*****
*   SELECT TEXT FILE TO SEND   *
*   1 - RANDOM CALL SIGNS     *
*   2 - RANDOM LETTERS, NUMBERS, & PUNCTUATION *
*   3 - SAMPLE DOMESTIC QSO    *
*   4 - SAMPLE CONTEST QSO    *
*   5 - SAMPLE DX-PEDITION CONTACTS *
*****
OPTION SELECTED: 3

*****
*   SELECT WORDS PER MINUTE SENDING SPEED *
*   1 - 5 WPM                       *
*   2 - 10 WPM                      *
*   3 - 13 WPM                      *
*   4 - 15 WPM                      *
*   5 - 22 WPM                      *
*   6 - 50 WPM                     *
*****
OPTION SELECTED: 6

*****
*   TEXT BEING SENT:             *
*   ===== *
*   W1AW DE N4TRB FB UR SIGNAL ONE CX11A ES YAGI AT 90. RST 599 QT *
*   H ATLANTA GA RUNNING TEN TEC PM1 2W ANT HYGAIN 18AVT MOUNTED L *
*   AKESIDE. WX IS PARTLY CLOUDY ES 71F. MUST QRT. XYL IS CALLING *
*   ===== *
*****
OPTIONS SELECTED: 3 AND 6.
PRESS ENTER TO START _
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Bob stopped the 13 WPM test and selected the max, 50 WPM.

"You ready," I asked.

"I've been ready for a hundred years," Buck replied.

Bob started the program and Buck leaned back in his chair, looking at the ceiling, but we could see that his eyes were closed. "I hope he doesn't fall asleep," I whispered to Murray.

At the end of the test, Buck came back to life. With pencil in hand, he wrote like a demon possessed, filling an entire page of the scratch paper. Then he walked up to our table, handed in his work, and returned to his desk in the back row. It was perfect. He copied the whole five minutes in his head at 50 WPM. To say we were stunned would be an understatement. Neither Bob, nor Murray, nor I could come close to copying 50 WPM. In truth, we were all a little choked up. Finally, Murray suggested we give him the theory exam, speculating that he might not have any trouble with that either.

That's when we noticed that Buck was gone. Gone. Like, not there. Just like his entrance, we never heard the door open or close. Finally, Bob said, "Did that really happen?"

Maybe it didn't happen all those years ago. Maybe I don't believe it myself. Maybe we three all imagined it. But I still have Buck's scratch paper with five minutes of perfect copy. And our next test session this year also falls on Halloween.