

## Learning Morse in the US Navy

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**I** LEARNED MORSE BY MYSELF as a kid, trying to decipher all that “secret” stuff between the Short Wave broadcast stations on the farm radio and didn’t get a ham license till years later.

When I joined the Navy in the late 50’s, already knowing Morse, I was automatically plugged into the Radioman rate and sent to radio school. In that era the Navy had three radio “A” schools, at Bainbridge, San Diego, and Orlando. All were run the same, and each graduated about 50 new radiomen every 2 weeks.

The course was nominally 12 weeks long, and you needed 22 wpm to graduate. Four hours of each day were spent on Morse training, (three hours receiving, and one hour on a “net” so you also practiced your sending) the rest on procedures, equipment tuning and operation, voice procedures, teletype, security stuff, etc.

Morse training started out with learning the alphabet and numerals, which were introduced to you in related groups, like EISH5, AUV4, NDB6, TMO0, etc. This was a rate of 4 wpm, and took you about a week or two usually. Training code was sent by paper-tape machines, similar to a Boehme keyer, and speed was increased (or decreased) by changing the capstan pulley on the machine, in two-WPM increments.

Military communications only used two punctuation marks at the time — the slant sign and the hyphen — so we

were not taught periods, commas, or question marks. In fact, in military comms., there was a prosign “IMI”, which meant “repeat”. Sounds just like a “?” on the air, but was used completely differently. For example, if I were sending a really oddball word like “XYGGISTROM” I would make sure you copied it correctly by sending “XYGGISTROM IMI XYGGISTROM”. The prosign for a question was “INT” - for example if I wanted to ask my signal strength I would send “INT QSA” rather than “QSA?”.

But I digress! Back to how we were taught Morse - The students sat at a desk with a communications typewriter (“mill”), a key, and a jackbox with several jacks for headphones. In another room were several tape machines, each running at a different speed, and connected to the jackboxes at the students desks. The students would plug into whatever speed they were pursuing at the time, and it was all “straight speed”, not Farnsworth.

All copying was on a mill, not by pencil. For the first 10 weeks, all copying was 5-character coded groups, not plain text. This made it impossible to “think” about what you were hearing, and trying to anticipate the next character. After a

while you got in a “zone” and the code went directly from your eardrums to the keyboard as a completely automatic subconscious response, without any action by your conscious brain. Very few students got stuck at any “plateau” like you hear hams talk about, and when it did happen it was almost always at 18 wpm.

While it was some advantage to already know the code, coming into the school, it was really kind of difficult to re-learn to copy on the mill, as opposed to “head copying” and just jotting down pencil notes as I had as a ham. Many experienced hams simply couldn’t make that transition, as military operating was not “conversational” like ham radio, and the copying techniques were so completely different.

At the end of 4 weeks came the first speed test. At that point you had learned the characters and had been practice copying for quite awhile. The first test at 4 weeks was 6 wpm. Then every week you were expected to be at least 2WPM better. Copying tests were 10 minutes in duration, and you were allowed 2 errors for a passing grade. Sending tests were 5 minutes in duration, and you were allowed no uncorrected errors (you could make an error, but had to catch it yourself, and go back and correct it using proper procedures). If you failed a given speed you were dropped

back one week in training to the class behind you. If you failed two weeks in a row, you were washed out and sent to the fleet, probably to become a deck hand, although a lot of guys who dropped out of radio school found their way up to the Signal gang using flashing light and yardarm flashers at about 10 wpm.

You could “test out” at any higher speed, up to the final 22 wpm requirement, but still stayed in school to learn the other things. Students who completed their 22 wpm early got extra study time for other subjects during code-practice hours, or acted as “junior instructors” to help out the staff.

When you got into the fleet your first duties were probably copying the “fox” broadcast. This was a real confidence builder, because it normally only ran at about 16 or 18 WPM, so was really easy to handle, and perfect machine code. You sat an eight hour shift, just typing 5-letter coded groups, and really got into a “zone”.

The tales you hear about copying 20-30 seconds behind, drinking a cup of coffee, and carrying on a conversation all at the same time are absolutely true. Then just when you were getting cocky about your skills and felt like a “real” radioman, they stuck you on the ship-to-shore circuit to send outgoing traffic but that can be the subject of another tale! **MM**



### **THE MORSE ENTHUSIASTS GROUP SCOTLAND**

MEGS was formed in 1991 to encourage the use of Morse, especially by newcomers. Regular skeds are held using our callsign 'GMØRSE' each Monday and Thursday from 7 until 9 p.m. (local time) around 3.530MHz. Among other services, we offer Morse practice tapes free of charge, other than postage. This offer is now also available to *MM* readers. Membership is open worldwide, the 'Scotland' in our title simply shows place of origin. Lifetime membership £1.00. Details from Secretary: G.M. Allan GM4HYF, 22 Tynwald Avenue, Rutherglen, Glasgow G73 4RN, Scotland.