

The Quest for the Peak - A Mountaineering Analogy to Ham Radio

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It was a great weekend. The famous Hillary Step was right before me - meaning I was at the final push for the summit of ham radio.

Every ham's experience in amateur radio is different. We all come from different backgrounds and we all view the adventure of radio from a different perspective. You have your own mountains to climb. But you start on the hills of learning the basic radio skills necessary and progress to the mountain peaks of conquest in the practical application of those skills in a contest or pile-up.

The Journey Begins

My journey through ham radio began at the age of 14 in 1977, with two birthday presents - a model train rectifier and a small toy radio. The radio set had AM radio receive capabilities and a walkie-talkie frequency for transmit using a small hand-held mic. There was a small lever on the right front side to practice sending the tones of Morse code. An alphabet table of Morse characters was printed on the faceplate around the dial used to adjust the frequency.



Humble beginnings were birthed here – from a toy radio to a love for the adventure of amateur radio.

The Hillary Step is a nearly vertical rock face, 40 ft high on Mount Everest, located near the top at approximately 28,840 feet above sea level. It is located on the South East Ridge and is the last technical challenge before reaching the top of the mountain via the South East route.

The Step was named after Sir Edmund Hillary, who was the first person, along with Tenzing Norgay, to scale it on the way to the summit.

I tried to send the “coded messages” to school-aged friends but never could seem to memorize the sequences of Morse code characters. Years later, this condition was exacerbated by a brain problem resulting from the poison of an Okinawan snakebite and the ensuing week of a 106-degree fever. It left my memory jumbled and the ability to recall information crippled. It was a miracle to survive the incident and was an opening for being able to appreciate the miracle of radio.

But a handicap is not an end to the summit dream. Instead, it's just another obstacle to be conquered like the "Hillary Step."

In mountaineering lore, Everest is the pinnacle of mountains, the highest peak on earth at 29,035 feet. This is the corrected height from the long believed 29,028 feet using GPS technology to pinpoint the summit in the late 1990s.

An interesting side note is that the summit actually continues to grow in stature, adding about a 2.4 inches per year due to the sliding of a tectonic plate beneath the Himalayan mountain range, which in turn pushes the peak of Everest ever higher. Likewise, in ham radio, knowledge continues to grow through self-study, technological advancements in radio design and software engineering. New products emerge that also enhance our enjoyment of amateur radio.

A handicap is not an end to the summit dream, but an obstacle to be conquered like the "Hillary Step."

Your Peaks May Differ

Your peaks in ham radio, no doubt, are different from mine. Ham radio presents many challenges, from passing examinations for license class advancement, to technical challenges of building equipment (although it seems a little-practiced art among most hams today), to the challenge of assembling the various components of a radio station and learning how to operate them, to the learning of new modes of communication. There are peaks in abundance for all to climb in this mountain range of radio.

The CW Mode – My Grandest Peak

There are many other peaks in this vast landscape of amateur radio, which I have no desire (presently) to climb. There is satellite communications, ultra high frequency modes of communication in the gigahertz range and various functions that ham radio assists in like search & rescue, storm chasing and other emergency communications endeavors during and after a storm's catastrophe.

I had recently expanded my Ham Radio station capabilities with the addition of an accessory called a Signalink™. It is a radio-to-computer interface, containing its own separate soundcard, which allowed me to expand into various modes of digital communications like PSK31, PSK63, and RTTY.

To me, the CW mode of communications sat there like Mount Everest, the highest and loftiest goal in ham radio, that I hoped one day to climb (assisted) as other handicapped people have accomplished the peak of Mount Everest in recent years.

The mountain peak of CW represented an approximate 1/3 to 1/2 of the amateur radio allotted frequency spectrum, which was being wasted and unused in my shack. Therefore, the quest for the peak had been a long one that had started when I first was licensed as KC5JKJ in 1994 and was only finally completed 10 days before my fiftieth birthday.

Climbers Use Tools

Just as serious mountain climbers use tools like crampons, pitons, ice axes, ropes and ascenders to scale the peaks, great tools are also available to the ham radio enthusiast. I had read that certain tools were available to aid those suffering from a malady. *CW Get* is a wonderful software tool, created by UA9OV

of Russia, to aid in the decoding of received CW signals. It is no replacement for the wonderful filter of the human mind to block out interference and concentrate on a targeted signal in the midst of QRN or competing signals, but for someone without the ability to decode effectively those signals it was a godsend. For me it has effectively decoded all speeds of CW up to 45 wpm. The key is to utilize any tools already in your shack, like increasing signal strength through antenna selection or antenna direction, and using narrow filters as well as other radio features like width control, and IF shift etc. These isolate the signal and allow for the best decoding.

CW Get provided the decoding of the CW signals but a method of *sending* CW was still needed.

Another tool I stumbled across came from an email thread on cables for laptops. Since I had purchased the smallest cheapest laptop (a netbook) with no serial ports, I had to overcome the obstacle of making the computer think that one of the three USB ports was a serial port. A cable from RT Systems™ was just the ticket. This cable plugged directly into my Yaesu FT-950's CAT serial port. Software to run the radio was still another obstacle to overcome and this was solved with the **FREE** Yaesu computer radio control software from their website. I then installed the software, opened the small manual, and saw the CW Memory Keyer feature. At that very moment, I knew I had managed the technical challenge of the Hillary Step and the final summit was attainable.

A little exploration and tinkering with radio controls and software settings produced the sweet sound of CW being sent through the monitor function of the radio to my headphones. I was only one push of a button away from sending CW over the air for the first time.

The Fellow Climbers You Meet on the Mountain

Some tremendous ones in mountaineering have gone before us. There are the purists like Reinhold Messner who was the first to summit all fourteen of the 8,000-meter peaks in the world, and did it without any assistance of Sherpas or the aid of supplemental oxygen. Some of these types of folks are in the ranks of amateur radio enthusiasts. They appear to be naturally gifted at CW, have a keen ear and a sharp mind.

The day I worked through the issues of setting up my station for CW operations just happened to have a lot of CW activity on the bands. It was the weekend of the ARRL International CW DX Contest. During the contest on two separate bands, I ran into one that I would consider a purist of CW. AA5B, a fellow member of the Albuquerque DX Association (ADX), was working hard on his ascent of the contest, working stations as fast as they would come. I worked him quickly at 25 wpm and moved on, wondering if he caught the significance of hearing my call in CW for the first time. On the last day of the contest in the wee hours of the morning at about 3:00 AM, when only the die-hards have committed to keeping their butt in the chair, there he was again, on 40 meters. I worked him one last time and signed GL OM. My contacts for the weekend totaled 118, some at a speed as high as 40 wpm. It was my first attempt at communicating

Reinhold Messner (born 17 September 1944) is a mountaineer, adventurer and explorer from Italy, whose astonishing feats on Everest and on peaks throughout the world have earned him the status of **the greatest climber in history**. He is renowned for making the first solo ascent of Mount Everest without supplemental oxygen and for being the first climber to ascend all fourteen 8,000 meter peaks.

by CW and I was thrilled. The magic of that first radio was there again – the summit had been climbed. It took 19 years but what a weekend, what a view from the summit!

Look – There Are Other Peaks

In my mind, the grandest peak has finally been summited. However, that is not to say that another lesser peak will not catch my attention in the future. At this stage in my life, I can bask in the glow of the view from the grand summit of CW. The view of things I had not seen before - new callsigns, unseen countries, all from *my Everest* summit. So if down the road you catch me working on some new challenge in ham radio like 5 Band DXCC or Worked All Counties (both lofty goals) and you ask “So why are you chasing that?” I will probably respond as George Mallory famously did when asked why he pursued the unsummitted tip of the highest mountain in the world. He said, **“Because it is there!”**

George Herbert Leigh Mallory was the famous English mountaineer who took part in the first three British expeditions to Mount Everest in the early 1920s. He may have summited Mount Everest before Hillary did, but died in the attempt only 800 feet from the summit. His body was discovered May 1, 1999, but his camera with or without evidence of the summit was never recovered.



The author has done some hiking and mountain climbing, but admittedly more reading than climbing. He actively pursues his favorite Ham Radio endeavor – the DXpedition, because he sees the adventure in it!