

Robert Mitchel – Radio Man

By Stan Pennington

Robert H. Mitchel – Radio Man

My friend Bob Mitchel (W2CSL) grew up in Kennebunkport, Maine, far up the East Coast of the United States. His upbringing was in a land of ocean views, lighthouses and thoughts about distant shores. He was raised near foggy coasts and shipbuilding. Old tall houses with balconies that gave sea captains wives and families places for heart felt anticipation. Where Bob came from there was salt air and ocean noise. Quiet sometimes and noisy with sea birds and waves and horns other times. His life wasn't a book it was a gently told story. He told the story in bits and pieces and I always wanted to hear more.

He had a lifetime of memories about radios and adventures and far away places. I loved talking to Bob. His body was getting old but his mind worked overtime. He gave attention to the important things in life. He talked about Virginia, his wife (KA2QHE) and how special she was to him. His son and daughter in law and the kids, that lived right up the hill from him. His son was a airplane pilot and was restoring old planes in his workshop right next door to his house. Like a lot of these old timers my generation could understand some things about his generation. Like looking out to the ocean we could see the surface but we could only know a few things about the depth. I didn't learn all about Bob. I learned what he taught me for just a little while.

We met and spent time together as voices on the Ham Radio. He was a member of what I called the morning show. That was a group of guys that took turns talking about anything at all around 6:30 AM most mornings. Most of these guys had known each other for several years and some for fifteen years or more. The group was something like a bunch of older guys that meet at the same McDonald in a neighborhood or small town. The thing that we all had in common was that we had tested to prove our skill with radio equipment and had earned a right to be on the ham radio and used our trained skill to practice what could turn into a community service group if emergencies had occurred. We were all licensed ham radio operators.

Most of the guys were associated with the Broken Arrow Ham Radio Club and the club provided repeater radios to increase our range of coverage. We had other radios and modes of operation that would allow for worldwide radio activity.

New radio operators were frequently helped by mentors that had been operating and setting up permanent and mobile radios for years. These mentors are called Elmer's in ham radio talk. The older Elmer's had all been required to test and prove their ability to send Morse Code or CW traffic messages at about 13 words per minute. Bob was able to do that in his late teen years even before World War II. Some of these men could transmit 30 or 40 Words per minute. CW is the short abbreviation for Continuous Wave transmission (Like telegraph).

The morning show was well established and I was allowed my turn in the group. Bob (W2CSL), VJ, Bill (K5BRR), Butch (KD5RSS), Ron (KB5VDB), Ray (KE5WGA), Stan (KE5LEP)

and a few others talked almost every morning. Each man would identify who he was, every ten minutes, by giving his call sign. The conversation was informal but the rules of radio were important to each of us.

We sometimes had little to say and sometimes shared significant information. I remember the morning when Bob said, "VJ" is now a silent key. We all had a quiet moment to respect the fact that he was gone. Silent Key is our way of saying he was not going to be around to speak or send a message by any mode, Morse Code, or digital. He had told all of the stories he was going to tell in this world.

Some of us younger guys began to speak freely about what we wanted to know from these men who had lived through so much. They helped from time to time with useless stuff that we wouldn't even know about. Stan, "Have you ever drank a Moxie Soda?" No, Bob. You can only get it in a few places near Maine. A few weeks later he gave me a bottle of Moxie Soda. It had been sent to him from Kennebunkport.

During World War II, Bob had been on a ship that was sent to help the Russians. They were our allies against the German Army and the Italians and Japanese. Bob was a decorated war hero and was even given a special medal by the Russian Government. Bob was at the Radio for the entire war.

We all owed these men our respect and we gave it gladly.

I remember a few small things that Bob ask me to do. Stan, "can you come over and look at my radio." I think it's the antenna. I did look at his radio. His small dog had bit into the antenna wire and the wire was ruined. Bob's eyes didn't see the problem and his body didn't let him lean over his chair to take a closer look. I was his eyes and ears. Bob was still the officer of the deck, or whatever real military men are called. Together we got it fixed.

Stan, " The cable guy came out and messed up my TV". Can you give it a try...I think he is an idiot... Bob had some military words that idiot's never want to hear. Yep... the cable guy was an idiot. He left one of Bob's walking contraptions in front of the cable box. The remote control couldn't see the control box. Bob treated me as an expert. I think he was building up my confidence for heavier work that lay ahead.

I really enjoyed the morning show group. Butch was a professional electrician. Ron was a former cop and security expert. Ray was a UPS driver and another good-hearted helper for Bob and his wife Virginia. We all looked out for one another. Bill was still driving his own car and doing fine. He talked to Bob about many interesting things including Ham Radio. Bill also talked about China from time to time. I contributed to the group with my background in office machine repair and thirty years as a computer engineer.

Sometimes Bob needed to go to the doctor. I remember taking his electric wheel chair out to the car and loading Bob inside. The wheel chair had a ramp and a attachment to the back of the car. I drove their car and had thoughts about movies like "Driving Ms. Daisy." It amused me. I thought it was going to be light duty until I found out that Bob needed me to go inside with him to the Urologist. This doctor was not the kind that I expected; he was

more of a plumber for parts of Bob that I had no interest in seeing. Getting old was beginning to look like an uphill journey. I didn't want to go with Bob and really didn't want to think about getting old. I thought about that old prayer. "Oh! God. If you get me out of this mess I will get out of the next one all by myself." God answered my prayer and I owe him one.

I was on the radio and headed to work. The morning show was interesting and my trip was just starting. Then It became Bob's time to talk. Stan, "call me on the phone." He never said that before.

I called Bob – and then the hair on my neck stood up and adrenalin began to flow. "Stan, Bob said, "can you come over – I can't move... I'm in my chair, I can hardly move and Virginia has gone shopping." "I called my son Pete's wife, but she hasn't come up from their house on the north side of our property." "I don't want you to call an ambulance."

On the way over I thought about what might happen when I got there. Is he having a stroke, would I need to break in to his house to help him. Was he clear enough in his head not to shoot me with the little 22 revolver pistol that he kept on the table next to his chair. Lot's of questions without answers raced inside of me as went to help my friend.

I got to Bob's house about the same time as Bob's daughter in law. She was on the phone with 911 and an ambulance was coming. I was thankful that she also had a key and we didn't have to break the window or door. Bob lived and recovered and had a good two more years to enjoy with Virginia and his kids and grandkids.

Two years after his recovery Bob heard a call on his radio. He knew the voice and it was strong and clear. God called – Bob Answered. This military man had been selected for a new assignment. Something he had been training for all of his life.

I found out about Bob's passing from one of the morning show guys.

"Did you hear that Bob Mitchel just became a Silent Key?"

No, I hadn't but I knew it was coming.

Rest in peace, Bob Mitchel. I wasn't a military guy but I had the same feeling that you have when taps is played. The kind of feeling that makes you cover your heart with your hand.

Here is one of Bob's favorite stories that he told me (twice at least):

Bob was seated with a few hundred of his war buddies in Las Vegas Nevada at a big convention event for veterans. It was a time that they would be honored for their service to the country. These men were all World War II radio operators – heroes.

Bob sat with Virginia and they made a lovely couple. Bob was with his war buddies; they filled the place. The event began this way.

The room was completely quiet. Everyone listened and waited.

Morse Code was sounded, no other sound at all. It went on for just a moment. Then every Radio Operator in the room rose to their feet quickly and saluted.

Why?

It was simple. In a language that they all understood the message said. If you can copy this message, please rise. The message was for them alone. Their response was quick.

I like to think that Bob's final message was something like that day.

For Bob it was:

God and Country and Family.

Then God called Bob's name and he rose quickly ready to serve.