

The Great Tavern Caper

By

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The following is a true story, only the names have been omitted to protect the guilty!

It was in the fall of 1960 (maybe early winter of 1961, I don't remember exactly the dates), when a certain local amateur in LaPorte, Indiana, came up with what he thought would be "the" event of the year. Now, although the first few days of this "caper" were accomplished by that particular individual alone, he did invite me along for the great "finale". As such, I can truthfully relate the story for all to know.

This amateur had obtained a military surplus TBY transceiver that he had converted to 6-meter operation. The TBY was notorious for causing TVI (I think they even caused TVI when turned off, disconnected from the antenna, and put in your attic - at least it seemed like this!). Because we lived in a Channel 2 fringe area (LaPorte is about 60 miles east of Chicago) the amateur only ran his TBY mobile in his 1951 Plymouth sedan. Since he was never in one location very long, no one really had to suffer from the TVI which this rig caused (and it "did" cause TVI!).

At that time, in the State of Indiana, all bars, taverns, etc., places that sold beer, wine, and liquor for on-premises consumption, had to have a large picture window on the front of the building. This was to allow any law enforcement officer the ability to drive by the establishment and see into the building. The bar itself had to be visible from this window.

On the eastside of downtown was a local "hangout" called, if I remember correctly (this has been over 40 years and sometimes I do forget) the East Lincolnway Inn. It was on the north side of the street, which, it just so happens, was East Lincolnway (being the main "drag" of LaPorte) and also being State Highway 2 (the road to South Bend). The building was located approximately at a "five points" (two cross streets with a third street coming in at an angle making a total of five streets intersecting). Across East Lincolnway from the bar was an abandoned small building which had housed a Frozen Custard stand for many years. Although the building was abandoned, there was still a small parking lot that a number of the patrons of the bar used when the bar's main parking lot became full.

The East Lincolnway Inn was a favorite neighborhood "watering hole" for a number of workers at the Allis-Chalmers plant a few blocks away. At this time the plant was manufacturing things like corn "pickers", wheat-harvesting machines, and for the United States Marine Corps a little tank destroyer called the M-50 "Ontos". Now the "Ontos" was a "sweet" little machine. It was about the size of a Volkswagen "beetle" and had six 106 mm recoilless rifles plus two 50 calibre spotting rifles installed (three 106s installed on each side of the vehicle). The three-man crew would fire the spotting rifles until a round hit the opposing tank (or other target) and then the 106 mm rifles would fire as one, two, four, or all six at one time (now that was a sight to see!).

To reload the rifles required getting out of the vehicle. The crew was protected by two large steel doors that opened wide of the rear of the rifles, which allowed them to be reloaded while protecting the crew. Of course when the rifles were fired, the flames shot out both ends of them and you definitely did not want to be on either the front or the back of the destroyer when the rifles were fired. The US Army only bought 12 of these units but the Marine Corps bought several hundred, some of which were used in Vietnam.

Anyway, I digress!

As I said above, a number of the workers at Allis-Chalmers would stop by the bar for a couple of beers on their way home. Since their shift ended at 4:30 PM, they just had time to get to the bar and be about halfway through their first beer when the 5:00 PM news came on Channel 2 out of Chicago (most news in the Eastern and Pacific time zones comes on at 6:00 PM, but in the Central time zone 5:00 PM was most prevalent back then and, in many areas, is still so today). Most of them ordered another beer sometime during the half-hour broadcast and went home soon after 5:30. This was a nightly ritual for quite a number of employees.

Now, Friday was "payday" and the patrons usually made a quick dash to the bank before dropping by the bar. Also, since it was payday, they usually bought a few more drinks before going home. Unless the person got to the bank immediately, he was often a few minutes late and therefore missed the first few minutes of the news broadcast, but since they were there for the fellowship, etc., they really didn't seem to mind.

The television set was a 21 inch (largest normally available at that time) black and white set that sat over the bar and was quite visible from the street. You could see the program reasonably well from the parking lot across the street (at least well enough to tell what was going on). Since the patrons liked watching the Channel 2 news, the television set was always tuned to Channel 2 during that time frame.

Well, now that I have set the physical parameters I'll get on with the story.

Since his TBY was "notorious" for causing TVI, the amateur involved decided to play a "prank" on these bar patrons. Starting on one Monday afternoon, he parked his Plymouth sedan where he could easily see the television set. After about 10 minutes into the news broadcast the amateur would "key up" the TBY. Of course the television set went "bananas". Whenever the bartender would reach up to try to adjust the set the amateur would then release the push-to-talk on the transmitter. The immediate result was that the interference immediately would go away. Every 30 to 60 seconds the amateur would key the transmitter, the bartender would reach up to adjust the set, and then the amateur would release the PTT. This would go on for about 15 minutes and then the amateur drove away.

The amateur came back to the parking lot on Tuesday, then Wednesday, and then Thursday, repeating the same thing that he had done on Monday. Of course the bartender and the patrons were obviously upset. But, no one really knew what was going on.

Finally, on Friday, payday, the particular amateur invited me to come along. I was just starting my junior year in high school and was, at that time, at bit of a "smart alec" who did enjoy playing a joke or two on people.

We pulled into the parking lot a little after 5:00 PM and the routine was started. However, unlike previous times the amateur keyed the transmitter at least once every 30 seconds and sometimes with even less time interval in between. Also, instead of only doing this for about 10 to 15 minutes, the amateur continued for almost all of the news broadcast. The bartender was getting frustrated, a

good number of the patrons were getting frustrated. Frankly, I think that they were just about ready to "chuck" the television set.

Finally, the amateur made a final transmission. As the bartender reached up to adjust the television for the "umpteenth" time, the amateur said into the microphone "just leave me alone for a couple of minutes and I'll be OK"! The bartender jumped back. The patrons who had not been paying any attention to the television looked up. Of those who had been paying attention a number of them jumped up and looked at the television. The place was chaos!

This was before CB radio was really popular and many people had no idea as to what TVI really was. The television set had received the AM from the TBY and it sounded just like the set was really talking to them.

As for us across the street, we were laughing our heads off. It was all that we could do to put the car in gear and get away from the tavern as fast as possible.

I "heard through the grapevine" that number of patrons at the bar that day swore off ever drinking again! I also heard that it was several weeks before some of the others that had been there that day came back. Myself, I was "sworn to secrecy" and it was several years before I told anyone about the incident.

The particular amateur involved passed away in the mid-1970s from cancer. But, his family still lives in the same hometown. Therefore, when I tell the tale I conveniently leave out just who this really was. As I said at the beginning, "the names have been omitted to protect the guilty"!