How do I?

An occasional series

This week: What do I do next?

So...you got your tech license. You came here and joined the Cumberland Amateur Radio Club (CARC)-the friendliest group of hams north of the Mason-Dixon line. You joined the ARRL. You have acquired a *ARRL Handbook* and some other books. *QST* is showing up in your mailbox every month. You want to get on the air. What do you do and how do you go about it?

Start simple! Patience! Sure you want to get started in the magical world of amateur radio, but do some homework. Odds are you may not know what you want to do. Funds may be limited. The various amateur radio suppliers sent catalogs to you, full of good stuff! Where do you start?

The classic approach for new tech's is to buy a simple handheld "HT" and start on local repeaters. That works, especially if you don't really know folks. Part of radio is about meeting new people, but it is always easier to dip in a toe before diving into the pool.

I suggest starting with a fairly simple HT from one of the "Big 3": Kenwood, Icom, Yaesu, or maybe Alinco. Someone may have told you to get one of the "$30 radios" imported from China and sold by Amazon. Those cheap "$30 radios" are more like $60 at most retailers. The "Big 3" have been forced to compete and prices for much better radios have come down a bit. Keep in mind price is also affected by currency exchange rates. Why buy a "name brand"? The quality is definitely better. Programming is usually simpler. Customer support may be a lot better, especially if you buy from one of the folks that sent you a catalog. You can buy a "name brand" HT for about $90 to $125 that could last a life time.

What do I mean by fairly simple? After all the manual may be more than fifty pages. Many HT's have learned new tricks. They may be APRS ᵗᵐ capable with no add on equipment needed. They may support D-STAR or C4FM or one of the other digital voice/data modes. I think all HT's made in the last decade support memory programming via computer and many are "internet ready" meaning that you push one or two buttons to initiate an EchoLink or another VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) that allows two distant users to communicate with each other via internet based nodes.

If you know you want or need APRS or D-STAR or C4FM, it is fine to start with a radio

with more bells and whistles. They will be more expensive, sometimes into several hundred dollars. If your primary interest is emergency communications or providing support for the many public service events around, see what features that group deems necessary. If you are not sure what your interests are, especially if funds are tight, a simple 2 meter HT is all you need.   Please do yourself a favor and acquire the memory programming software and cable needed for you radio. It makes data entry so much easier. The "$30" radios are notorious for being very hard to program by hand and the instructions may not be very clear. The "Big 3" are usually capable of being programmed by hand, and if not the manufacturers either supply software or you can use the excellent software and cables provided by RT Systems. The RT Systems software simply works.

Before buying, ask around. Your fellow club members may have suggestions. Web sites such as eham.net feature product reviews. Like any reviews created by the community, you have to take them with a grain of salt. But if a radio has a decent number of reviews over a fairly long period of time (many reviewers do an initial review then come back in months or years to provide updates), you can get an accurate opinion of it. The ARRL reviews equipment and publishes very comprehensive technical reviews. Because the ARRL has a limited staff and limited magazine space as well as the reviewed products are provided by the manufacturers, ARRL does not review everything.

Once you have a radio, and perhaps programmed some frequencies for local nets and repeaters (club web sites and repeater directories are great information sources), lets get started. Keep it simple. Stage fright is common. You are not alone. It is like public speaking but no one sees you. Start by asking a friend or club member to be your first contact (QSO) and mentor (elmer).   Try to have a simplex conversation and learn the nuances of your radio. After your first QSO (feels good right?) Find a local simplex net you can check into. If you don't know anyone, the CARC 2m net at 1900 Eastern on Sunday's welcomes visitors and we have had a few who say they first QSO was during the net.

Start listening "monitoring" to one or more local repeaters. Listen to the conversations. To listen you don't have to worry about input frequencies and CTCSS tones, but to talk you need to have the proper frequencies and tones programmed. When you feel ready either politely throw out your call sign when there is a break or the users ask if anyone else is around. If you hear no one, simply say your call sign and "listening". There is a pretty good chance someone will come back to you. If not wait 30 seconds or so and try again. The person hearing you may not have understood your call, or wants to be sure they got it right or simply be beyond arms length of the microphone. Give them a chance to reply.

Once you have made a few contacts, step up the game! Your local club participates in public service events. The Cumberland Amateur Radio Club supplies operators to sup-

port the Fantastic Parade ᵗᵐ the second saturday in October in Dillsburg, PA. Other local clubs support various races and emergency communications activities.   Come out and give back to the community while having fun.

Catch ya on the air!