



## Second Century

# NCIS Newington: The Willing Suspension of Disbelief

*“We all know that Peter Pan can’t fly but, suspending disbelief, we enjoy the spectacle.”*

The only thing worse than people talking about you is when they are not, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde. We should probably keep that thought in mind as we deconstruct the *NCIS* episode “Trapped,” which aired on CBS Television on October 31, 2017. This television series has survived 15 seasons, and it is watched by 14 million viewers. This is big; this is a success. Frankly, we ought to be grateful for the exposure. At the very outset, the program was kind to us. Timothy McGee, a regular character on *NCIS*, responds to a derisive comment about radio equipment with, “It’s ham radio...it’s social media before there was social media,” and reveals that he used to be a ham. McGee is a highly sympathetic character — a bit geeky, but very solid. Coming from him, the endorsement means a lot. He mentions that hams often assist in disasters like 9/11 and Katrina, a comment that resonates with the non-hams who observed us recently in Florida, the US Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Although the timing of this episode appearing on the heels of the hurricane response was probably coincidental, the larger public is more likely to remember the connection between ham radio and public service because of that coincidence.

But then the situation devolved.

Before I proceed, I want to emphasize that ARRL was not in any way involved with the episode. We were not asked, as in the case of *Last Man Standing*, the ABC network program featuring Tim Allen, KK6OTD, to provide technical review or input to the portrayal of Amateur Radio in *NCIS* “Trapped.” We were fortunate to have an ARRL member, a two-time Emmy award-winning filmmaker, intercede on our behalf — but after the fact.

Doesn’t the term *handle* just set your teeth on edge? It makes mine grind. It’s on my top-ten list with “good buddy,” and it conjures up visions of bears and green stamps. With a mailbag full of complaints from a number of you in mind, I wrote to the technical advisors and the producers of *NCIS* shortly after the program aired, telling them that, to a ham radio operator, *handle* is an odious term because, not only do hams not use “handles,” we also regard the term and the practice as belonging to lesser practitioners than ourselves. To ham radio operators, there’s a real distinction between the great mass of the unlicensed and those who have passed a series of examinations to earn their privileges. That distinction — I pointed out — had escaped the epi-

sode’s writers’ notice and caused pain in our community. Did us an injustice.

And speaking of injustice, how is it possible to characterize, as the program did, an entire community as “socially awkward” when the scions of the community include an eloquent Nobel Laureate, two kings, a US Senator, a US Congressman, three successful actors, three A-list musicians, and a cofounder of Apple, as well as one of its later CEOs? Not one of them a wallflower. Many of them extraordinarily socially accomplished individuals. And another thing: we know that RF can propagate beyond 80 miles. I understand 80 miles as a construct represents a *dramatic device* to carry the plot. But must it be so transparent, even so clumsy?

I recall, from long ago, the premise that all drama requires the “willing suspension of disbelief,” the sacrifice of realism for enjoyment. We accept the premise each time we flip on the television, enter a motion picture theatre, or watch the lights come up on Broadway. We all know that Peter Pan can’t *really* fly but, suspending disbelief, we enjoy the spectacle. Perhaps, we can put the technical shortcomings of *NCIS* “Trapped” in perspective by recognizing that its flaws are most obvious to our crowd, but they are hardly noticeable to the uninitiated or the public at large. The public saw ham radio. They missed the distractions. Maybe that’s a good thing. If we don’t enjoy it, then let’s appreciate the spectacle.

Finally, it’s worth reflecting for a moment on just why we feel so much better when we disparage folks who do not carry the same credentials as Amateur Radio operators. Why, exactly, are we enlarged at their expense, portraying them as smaller than we are? We’re all very proud to be hams. But does the “better than you” attitude serve a purpose? Out there are thousands of people who enjoy, in their own way, the art and science of radio. Some of them have kindred interests, even if they are not yet kindred spirits. Raw material for our community.

And, to whichever of the pundits in the crowd coined the phrase “*NCIS Newington*,” I say thank you. I liked it.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Gallagher NY2RF". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.