

YIPPEE-KI-YAY:

**THE ROLE
OF RADIO IN
*DIE HARD***



Jen Glifort

In July 1988, *Die Hard* was released in theaters. Although it received mixed reviews at the time, it has quickly become a classic of the action genre. Thirty years and four sequels later (with another in the works), it's clear that the legacy endures. By now, the films follow a tried-and-true formula, and radio is a crucial part of it.

For those unfamiliar with the film, *Die Hard*'s protagonist, displaced NYPD officer John McClane, is in Los Angeles visiting his wife, Holly, at her office Christmas party. Things take a decidedly unfestive turn when a group of robbers masquerading as terrorists (led by the main villain, Hans Gruber) take over the building. Only McClane manages to slip away before the hostages are rounded up. He's left to save the day with only his wits and a few select tools, including a handheld radio.

The Radio as a Tool

Die Hard is very much a product of its time. The boxy cars, smoking in public buildings, and bad guys sporting lustrous, Fabio-length hair all firmly place the plot in the 1980s. But perhaps the most important of its dated details are the '80s-era computers. "Cute toy," McClane says of the pixelated computer directory in Nakatomi Tower, the office building where the action takes place.

This distrust of (at the time) newer technologies continues throughout the film, as the group of terrorists use the building's computer system to their advantage — canceling the emergency alarms McClane pulls to summon help, locking the elevators and parking garage gates, and hacking through digital locks to reach the vault they're after. The film is showing that modern technologies placed in the wrong hands can be manipulated and used against innocent people. With the computer and security systems compromised, McClane is forced to turn to an old standby for backup: the radio.

Before getting hold of a radio, McClane is lost, running around the building after the first hostage is killed. He paces, arguing with himself, cut off from human contact. Once he has the radio, however, he's restored to feeling some sense of control. He may not know how to stop the terrorists from hacking the computer system, but radios are equal in everyone's hands, and now McClane feels like he stands a chance.

Much like Makers and homebrewers, McClane is resourceful, crafting solutions from the materials in his environment (i.e., at one point he ties a fire hose around his waist so he can jump off the roof). McClane takes a handheld transceiver from the first terrorist he faces off with. He uses the radio to listen in on terrorist leader Gruber's conversations with his team around the building. McClane gathers information, keeping track of how many

A look at how handheld radios affected the plot of this classic movie, on its 30th anniversary.

terrorists there are and where. He also takes the radio to the roof to call for help with a clearer signal — although, he's immediately threatened with being reported to the FCC for broadcasting on an emergency channel. (His response to the operator is not fit to appear in print.)

When he finally does manage to convince emergency responders to send a police officer on a drive-by, the officer, Al Powell, soon talks to McClane via radio, setting him up as McClane's connection to the outside world. They try to keep each other informed, and provide encouragement during stressful moments. After another hostage is killed, McClane gets on the air. "Hey, pal, you out there?" he asks. "You've gotta believe me. There was nothing I could do." This moment contrasts with McClane's frantic self-talk after the death of the first hostage. He's no longer alone, and reaches out via radio for some reassurance. The radio is also a way of sharing what he's thinking with the audience and helps establish McClane's character.

McClane vs. Gruber

The dynamic between *Die Hard*'s hero and villain is so unique because their character development and interactions rely on the radios. They don't even meet face to face until late in the movie. They get to know each other by listening to, and occasionally taunting, each other on the air. In their first contact, McClane intrudes when Gruber has called for radio silence. He tries to rattle Gruber and draw information out of him. Gruber returns the gesture, attempting to learn who McClane is, comparing him to a cowboy, to which McClane tosses back his trademark "yippee-ki-yay" catchphrase.



The Kenwood TH-31BT was possibly the model used in the movie. [Photo courtesy of Kenwood]

Gruber is an unusual villain; he has no political or personal motive for his crimes, other than profit. He wears a suit and quotes classical literature. McClane is a gruff, no-frills police officer in a white undershirt, and has no shoes on (it's a long story). They're opposites — McClane takes big risks, improvising as he goes, and Gruber has plans and

specifications in some shots and narrow down the possibilities (see www.originalprop.com/blog/movie-guns/die-hard for more details).

The radios used by McClane and Gruber appear slightly different, but Gruber's is certainly a Kenwood handheld transceiver. ARRL Assistant Lab Manager Bob Allison, WB1GCM, believes it's possibly the Kenwood model TH-21BT or TH-31BT, but is most likely a TH-41BT, due to the very short antenna. The TH-41BT was designed for use on 144, 220, and 440 MHz. It was produced in the mid-'80s and, as Bob said, "was one of the best of its time."

There are a few issues radio operators have with the film. For instance, there are several incidents when one character is transmitting on his handheld and is interrupted by another character breaking in. This isn't possible, due to the nature of two-way radio. Bob explained, "A two-way radio has a push-to-talk (PTT) button. When pressed, the radio transmits, but doesn't receive at the same time." While it's entertaining to watch McClane and Gruber cut each other off at key moments, that would not have been possible with these radios.

McClane is chastised for using channel 9 for what seems like a prank or non-emergency transmission. Bob agreed that channel 9 was the emergency channel on the citizens band (CB). However, he said, "In real life, the Kenwood TH-41BT uses Amateur Radio. The Kenwood radio is not a police radio or a CB radio."

While the filmmakers may not have gotten all the details right, it's worth noting that the nature of the movie is a bit over the top and requires some willful suspension of disbelief. Bob added, "Only us radio nerds think about these facts while watching the movie."

The Magic of Radio

Radios have been featured in every *Die Hard* film, not just because it's an element of the formula at this point, but because it's part of what makes these movies special. These films are based on the idea of an isolated situation that one person alone can fix, saving the day with the tools at hand, skillfully wielded. Radios are part of that toolkit. They're useful in their own unique way and aren't subject to the same weaknesses as some newer technologies. For McClane (and for radio operators around the world), there's something magical about being able to pick up a radio in even the darkest of circumstances, call out to the universe, and get a response.

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Ham Radio in Contemporary Pop Culture

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Ham radio continues to have cameos in today's popular TV shows and movies. One of the most prominent and most recent examples is the 2018 movie, *A Quiet Place*. Early in the film, the main character sends an SOS using the Morse code keyer in his ham shack.

The film also showcases the familiar resourceful attitude of homebrewers and Makers when the main character uses amplifiers and stereo parts to create a hearing aid for his hearing-impaired daughter. The characters are being hunted by monsters who are drawn to sound, and quickly learn to use bursts of high-frequency sound to defend themselves from the audio-sensitive creatures.

Radio is so integrated into our everyday lives that it's no wonder it comes up so often in pop culture. Whether it's characters who are Amateur Radio operators, Morse code being used to save the day, or even the influence of the Maker movement on builders posting videos online, you don't have to look far to see radio's legacy reflected in the art of our time.

backup plans for every situation. Gruber rarely loses his composure, while McClane swears and shouts.

They both use their handhelds to try to one-up each other. McClane shares details with law enforcement outside the building, and Gruber broadcasts the killing of a hostage to upset and bait McClane. In a way, they recognize in each other a kindred spirit, and a sense of wary respect builds as they size each other up.

When Gruber figures out that one of the hostages is McClane's wife, he stops to gloat over the radio as he drags her along. McClane's handheld has been smashed at this point, so Gruber calls for him repeatedly, looking almost disappointed when there is no answer. After all their back and forth, the lack of communication hollows his victory.

The Famous Handhelds

For such instrumental props, it's not always clear exactly what kind of radios are used in the film. There is some debate amongst fans online as to what brand and model the handhelds are. However, after the Blu-ray release of *Die Hard*, it was easier to make out the