

## Fighting the Fire-fighters

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS –

Every March, an annual nuisance arrives from Industry Canada. To renew the VHF radio license for your pleasure boat, send \$40 and change. But this year the little brown envelope reported that marine and aviation radio had been deregulated. No more VHF license fees.

Great stuff, right? Well, not quite. Ground-based radio has not been deregulated. So we who can afford pleasure boats and private planes get to use the airwaves free, while every volunteer fire department across the country continues to pay through the nose – the exact reverse of intelligent policy. The Deep Thinkers of Upper Canada strike again.

Go to Grand River, NS, a village of 70 families, whose fire district includes one of the most sparsely-settled stretches of the Cape Breton coast. Two years ago, the department – which subsists on \$8000 annually from property levies, plus whatever its members can raise themselves – received a radio license bill for nearly \$1200. Grand River VFD belongs to Strait Area Mutual Aid, an alliance of 28 small fire departments on both sides of the Strait of Canso which come to one another's assistance when needed.

"Mutual Aid fought it for us," says fire chief Stewart MacKay, "and they got it down to about \$500." But because the fee for the base station in the fire hall is calculated according to the number of channels on it, the department had to drop several channels. As a result, they can't call the health channel (or even Mutual Aid) from the fire hall, only from the trucks. Yet the department is the community's front-line health emergency service.

"We actually get more calls for heart attacks and asthma attacks than fires," says Malcolm MacLeod, the secretary-treasurer. "Out here we're a long way from the hospital and the ambulances. So if someone has a heart attack and he needs oxygen in a hurry, then it's up to us."

There are 314 fire departments in Nova Scotia, about 4000 in Canada. If their radio fees average \$1000 a year, the total would be in the neighbourhood of \$4 million. The rancid odour of this policy suggests that the feds decided it wasn't cost-effective to chase individual yachtsmen and pilots, but saw the fire departments as a pool of easy money. A rational business decision, but an utterly contemptible public policy choice.

Firefighting is the most dangerous of all occupations, and most firefighters do it for nothing. Of Canada's 125,000 firefighters, says Pete Kehoe, editor of *Firefighting in Canada*, roughly 100,000, or 80%, are volunteers. Even the fire departments of fairly large cities often include volunteer components along with a core of career firefighters. The volunteers may be paid \$25 or \$50 per call-out, but often receive no remuneration at all. In fact, since many have to book off work to respond, it generally costs them money to do it.

Not only is firefighting the most dangerous of careers, it's evidently getting worse. Since 1960, says Catherine "Kitty" Coppin of MLT Mobile Lung Testing Ltd. in North Vancouver, US figures show that the average age of death for career firefighters who develop cancer or heart disease on the job has dropped from 55 to 44. A major reason is the increasing chemical complexity of the fires themselves.

"PVC is the plastic sheathing on electrical wiring," says Coppin, who gives seminars to fire departments on health hazards, "and when it burns it releases 75 toxic chemicals. Fifty new plastics go into production daily. What do they give off when they burn? And who knows what the synergistic effects are? Cars are among the worst risks. I suspect there are chemicals produced in a car fire which are completely unknown to chemists."

The firefighters, especially the volunteers, are the invisible heroes of the nation. They are a cross-section

of the community – cooks, storekeepers, teachers, tradesmen. They respond to all our disasters, from a dry well or a car accident to a lethal chemical spill from a freight train derailment. They are on call all day and all night, all year long. They raise much of their money themselves. Grand River's new \$130,000 fire hall received a \$50,000 government grant, but the department raised the balance through bake sales, bingos, potluck suppers and the like. Grand River's firemen even go into the woods in the winter to cut pulpwood, and put the proceeds into the department.

"You're not a business," notes Malcolm MacLeod. "You're using the radio to save people's property and their lives." And paying a fee to do it, while yachts sail free.

Deregulation, my patootie. Earth to Ottawa: change this odious policy, *now*.

-- 30 --