

Professors happy renting brains to military

For Canadian University Press
by Patti Flather and Jacquie Charlton

In Bill Emery's new office at the University of B.C., photos of loved ones and a child's artwork are displayed on the wall. Surrounded by these pictures, the boyish oceanography professor appears as friendly as any UBC professor as he casually sits down to talk about his latest research project.

But his projects are different than most — they are funded by the Canadian national defence department and the U.S. Navy.

One of a handful of UBC professors engaged in military related research, Emery has no qualms about using military money.

"We're doing basic research that I can see military applications for, but applications aren't my business," he says.

Emery studies temperature structures in the oceans. Using Canadian and American military ships to collect data, he creates an overall picture of upper ocean structure, information that is useful in the detection of submarines.

The professor says temperature structures affect the vibration of sound waves in the ocean.

"The propagation of sound has to do with the detection of submarines, depending on whether you are looking for them or trying to hide them," he explains.

He claims the military benefits him more than he helps it.

"If I can contribute to understanding the ocean, that's fine," he adds.

... "I think it's pretty silly ..."

Emery's project is one of 12 at UNB funded by the Canadian Department of National Defense to a total of \$650,000. Further grant money comes from the United States Navy.

The Canadian government's defense department puts more than \$5 million into research activities, most of them at universities. Students at several Canadian campuses this year are opposing the channelling of scientific expertise into military applications, but the professors involved aren't too concerned.

A UBC student referendum calling for a ban on military research during the last week in January passed by 58 per cent, but failed to receive the necessary 10 per cent voter turnout for quorum. The ballot also endorsed the creation of

an ethics committee to screen research applications.

Emery heard little about the vote, and took the whole issue lightly. "I think it's pretty silly," he said.

Other professors at UBC conducting defense research say the benefits of their work far outweigh any possible destructive uses the Canadian or American defense establishment may have for them.

Civil engineering professor Mervyn Olson commented on his work designing naval ships that can withstand bomb blasts. "No, I don't see this research as helping the arms race. It is improving Canadian expertise in structural dynamics."

At Concordia University in Montreal, a student group is leading a campaign to get a similar referendum question to UBC's on a ballot. Quebec Public Interest Research Group member John Kinloch claims the civilian benefits of such research are "totally, academically, intellectually dishonest."

Concordia professor Fred Knelman concurred, pointing to the larger implications of accepting work for the defense establishment.

"The very fact is that it's funded by the military and we cannot control its use and abuse," said the science and human affairs professor. Seemingly innocent research put in the wrong hands can have more sinister applications, Knelman said. He refers to a skin cream absorption experiment 10 years ago at McGill University that turned out to be part of a study on nerve gases commissioned by the Pentagon.

"When you have a military industrial complex, the military affects everything. When universities become part of the military industrial complex, then the universities are destroyed."

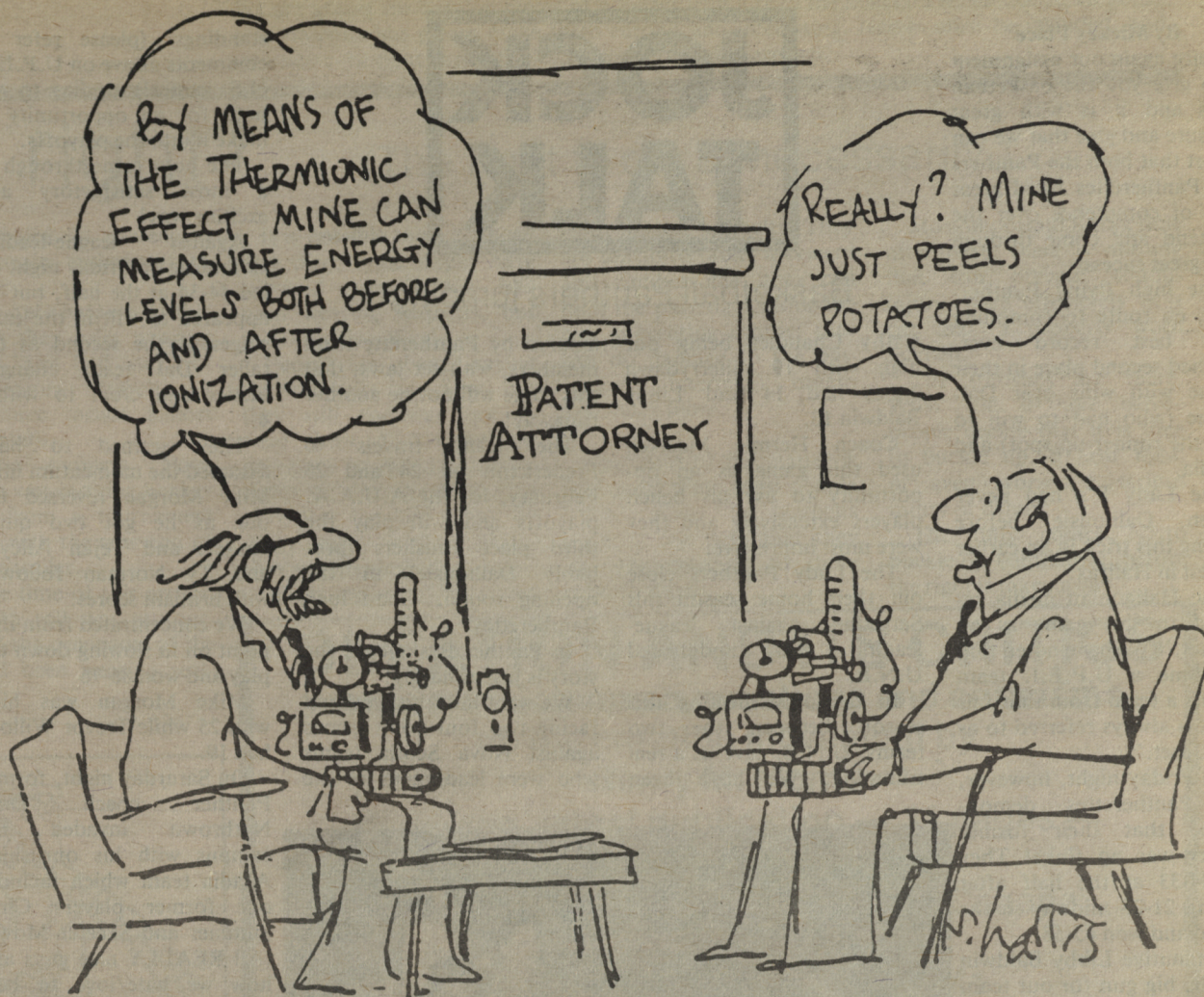
Military funded projects at Canadian universities range from improving heat retention of sleeping bags at Hamilton's McMaster University to others with a more direct application to military hardware. The University of Toronto's aerospace studies program receives a large proportion of Canadian defense department grants. One project is the design and development of a low cost rocket boost glide target.

While professors emphasize the acquisition of knowledge made possible by military grants, they have no knowledge of its ultimate use. Much of Canadian research and development, both in the public and private sector, goes toward American military industrial projects, according to a bilateral sharing agreement between the two countries.

A Concordia administrator countered the anti-military arguments saying universities should accept all funds directed into military research as a matter of principle.

"If an elected government ... is contracting out (military) research through one of its agencies ... I don't think we would refuse it," said John Daniel, Concordia's vice rector academic.

Daniel would "be delighted" to accept research from Paramex, a Montreal firm that in a few months time will develop electronic weapons control systems in ships.



Philip Auerbach, the president of Paramex, has already voiced hopes that his firm will develop an excellent rapport with Montreal universities.

UBC's research services director Richard Sprately isn't sure how useful certain research is to the military anyhow. Sprately says UBC's policy of only allowing publishable research already lessens its potential military application.

"Let's face it, anything publishable is not going to be interesting to the military," Sprately said. He did agree with the concept of a screening committee to consider the ethics of accepting certain kinds of research.

But George Spiegelmann, B.C.'s president of Science for Peace, says he mistrusts some of the justifications offered by researchers for taking the Pentagon's money.

"If you're taking the military's money that's because they want to fund you. They're not dumb."

The federal and U.S. government should use military funds for peace research and should prohibit directly applicable military research on campuses, he said.

"The university is a place where we should solve human problems," he says.

"I don't think the military can do that."

