

# Smoke On The Water

By Ryan Gallant  
Reporter

A fire on one of Canada's four submarines last week and the resulting death of a Canadian submariner has sparked national debate on the state of Canada's Military.

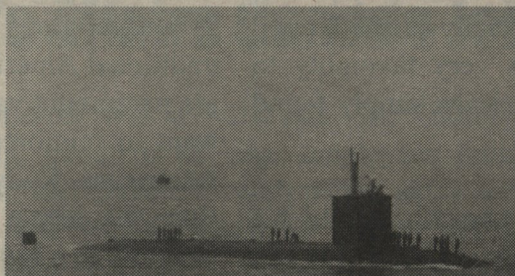
On October 2nd, the Canadian Navy took possession of the HMCS Chicoutimi, formerly the HMS Upholder of the British Navy, in an official ceremony at Faslane, Scotland. The Chicoutimi was the fourth and final Upholder Class diesel sub purchased from the British Navy by Canada on a \$750 million "lease-to-own" contract.

Built between 1990 and 1993, the subs were laid up in 1994 when the British Navy decided to focus on its nuclear submarine fleet. They were re-activated beginning in 1998 for Canada, and were slated to be completely operational by 2010. The Chicoutimi was on its way to join its three sister ships, the Windsor, the Corner Brook and the Victoria, in Canada, when fire broke out onboard, leaving the submarine stranded without power off the coast of Ireland.

"I will say that in a very short period of time, probably within two to three seconds the submarine was...totally black." Stated the Chicoutimi's captain Commander Luc Pelletier. As the deck filled with smoke, it was difficult for the men onboard to perform necessary duties to assess the situation as they were overcome by smoke. Nine submariners would later be treated for smoke inhalation, including Lieutenant Chris Saunders. "Lieutenant Saunders was in one of the compartments where we had a fire, and he was overtaken initially by that cloud of smoke...at that point, he did the best to be able to do the things he needed to do." Commander Pelletier said later.

The sub had been scheduled to dive later that afternoon, in which case the fire could've been much more severe. The men on watch on the conning tower were the only sailors onboard who were free of smoke and when the hatches were opened, the tower became a smokestack as smoke billowed from the compartments below. Lieutenant Sebastien Latulippe, who was assigned to the tower that day, saw the smoke and the radios go silent. "The silence was very frightening because my first impression was that everybody in the control room was dead," said Latulippe. "I was on the bridge waiting for instruction...and it came later, thank God."

The first rescue ship to arrive on the scene was the British rescue frigate, HMS Montrose, which dropped a doctor and medical technician aboard the Chicoutimi. By this point, three hours after the fire, those injured during the incident were showing signs of improvement and the Canadian crew was assessing casualty clearance. Three men were airlifted by British helicopter to a base in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, however enroute, Lieutenant Chris Saunders became seriously ill and was diverted to a hospital in Sligo, Republic of



<http://members.tripod.com/Hunt1611/hunt5.seadevil.html>

Ireland. It was announced later in the House of Commons by Paul Martin that Lieutenant Saunders died during that flight.

By the next morning the Chicoutimi was undertow of the British Coast Guard tug the Anglia Prince, on their way back to Faslane.

There has been no definitive answer as to what started the fire, however investigators have confirmed that the Chicoutimi did take on salt water during its voyage on rough seas, a factor that could seriously hinder the electrical system on board. "Salt water is conductive, the salinity induced conductivity, so it is a problem, said Commander Luc Cassivi, captain of the HMCS Victoria. "It depends on what equipment is affected."

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Besides leakage, there has been widespread concern about the former Upholder Class subs in both Canada and abroad. An Australian parliamentary research branch released a report stating that design flaws delayed the Upholder program. "The British suffered a three-year delay, largely due to faulty torpedo tube hatches and safety concerns with the power plant," the committee reported. The subs have been plagued with problems since Canada began working with them in 1998, including cracked valves on the Chicoutimi and a dent that was found in the HMCS Victoria. This has sparked questions as to whether Canada will pursue legal action for compensation in this matter. After taking a tour of the damaged sub, Defence Minister Bill Graham was careful not to comment directly on possible legal action saying "We will work this out as allies and friends have always worked out all issues...This is just speculation."

Prime Minister Paul Martin however, used his meeting with British PM Tony Blair as an opportunity to bring up this very issue. "I pointed out to Tony Blair that there were costs, liabilities that could obviously arise, but that in fact we should await the results of the inquiry."

Reportedly Blair agreed. Martin also expressed concern with Britain's Defence Minister Geoffrey Hoon telling the BBC that it was a case of "buyer beware" and suggesting that Canadian officials had more than enough time to assess the seaworthiness of the subs, and that Britain was not in any way responsible. "This is not the time for intemperate or unfortunate remarks," Martin said. "I certainly don't think that they were the kind of remarks that should have been made under these particular circumstances."

Back home in Canada, the opposition was quick to jump on this hot topic in the House of Commons. Conservative Deputy Leader Peter MacKay attacked the government saying "As we have seen repeatedly from the government, when it comes to our military spending, doing things on the cheap has its costs."

Indeed lack of funding to Canadian Forces has long been an issue for many Canadians. Most recently, the government has been criticized for its delay in replacing the Sea Kings, the support and defence helicopters for the Canadian Navy. Four fatal crashes have occurred with the 41-year-old helicopters in the past decade, and it has been reported that for each hour of flight, they require 30 hours of maintenance.

Beginning after the Second World War, and particularly since the end of the Cold War, the Canadian Forces have fallen into a state of severe disrepair as a result of doing things "on the cheap." Canada has the 56th largest military in the world with 60,500 members of the regular forces and contributes about \$10 billion a year to the armed forces, an amount that puts Canada 134th in the world in terms of military spending relative to the GDP. This puts Canada behind many other NATO countries, including Poland, Hungary and Portugal, and while Canada boasts itself as a "peace-keeping" nation, in recent years the UN has seen more considerable contributions from the governments of nations such as Bangladesh and Nigeria.

As for Canada's submarine fleet, the remaining three have been ordered to dock in Canada while awaiting further word on the cause of the fire on the HMCS Chicoutimi. The Canadian Forces have opened an inquiry into the incident and a federal defence committee is set to vote on opening a public inquiry into the affair.

Lieutenant Chris Saunders was buried with full military honours after services in Faslane and his hometown of Halifax on October 13th. Two Canadian submariners remain in hospital, being treated for injuries sustained during the fire.