

## COMMUNICATIONS ONTARIO (COMSONT)

### HISTORICAL NOTES

Following the end of World War II the Federal Government established a new agency called Emergency Planning Canada, under the guidance of Major General F.F. Worthington at Arnprior to encourage Municipalities and Provincial Governments to develop plans to respond to disasters in the growing Nuclear Age. Initially there was a varied response to this, but the Province of Ontario did create a planning group under the control of the Ministry Of the Solicitor General. One of the major needs was a communications system throughout the Province.

This need was met by encouraging the larger cities and municipalities to establish local emergency planing offices headed by Emergency Planning Officers trained at the EPC training facility in Arnprior, where facilities were set up to simulate various types of disasters and establish standard response for each. Some of this was done in cooperation with the United States in order that standard plans were in affect on both sides of the International Border and that aid could be offered if disasters of greater magnitude should occur.

In Ontario, the communications problem was assigned to the Ontario Provincial Police. This even though Police radios were hopelessly out-moded, to the extent that Patrolling officers were frequently operating outside the range of their base stations. In fact, the newest equipment they had was state-of-the-art, 1953 cumbersome and low powered equipment. It was also soon established that in the event of a major disaster, normal Police duties posed a huge burden to the Police and left no staff or equipment available to provide communications between disaster response command posts and variously located equipment of other facilities (not the least -Hospitals). At first the province supplied the Emergency Planning Officers (EPOs) with base radio stations of their own, but this did not cover the mobile equipment that would have to work close to the site of the emergency. The EPOs established a network between their main offices which at least provided a foundation for intercommunication between them. Then in the mid-seventies, with no warning, the Province stepped out of the whole business, canceling any further funding, and leaving the old radio sets to gradually die from lack of any maintenance.

Several of the municipalities also dropped any support and quite a few EPOs were let go.

Ottawa/Carleton however, being the site of EPC was encouraged to continue and their EPO, Mr. Herve Tremblay in cooperation with the EPOs in Sarnia and Windsor made significant efforts to continue with the program. Meanwhile the OPP were left with the responsibility but no program to follow should a real disaster occur.

Tremblay and his colleagues recognizing the realm need for reliable communication approached the Federal Department of Communications in Ottawa who suggested that an approach to the Radio Amateurs might help establish a volunteer radio support group. This was done with mixed results. True, Amateur operators had taken part in various exercises in emergency situations, but Tremblay's first attempt to hold an exercise (a simulated aircraft crash in the bush near Carp) was a bit of a disaster in itself. The Amateur emergency controller, from a local radio club, rather than find out what it was that Tremblay required, simply told him to just stand aside and he (the Amateur) would run his "little exercise" for him. When the event was over as far as the Amateur was concerned, he took his operators and was not seen again. When Tremblay attempted to hold a critique, the Amateur said it did not appear necessary as everything had gone off quite well. To say that Tremblay was less than enchanted with this performance is an under-statement. However, he did take the time to inform DOC what he thought of their suggestion.

Fortunately, in DOC there was a highly active Amateur (an OPP Reservist) by the name of Joe MacPherson, who got right back to Tremblay and encouraged him not to be put off by his unfortunate experience. In the meantime, Tremblay had informed the Sarnia EPO, who himself contacted some Amateurs and his search led him to VE3AML Rowland Beardow, a retired Royal Navy Radio Operator who listened carefully and then agreed to see if he could get a group together. As the was under way along came the Mississauga Disaster and Beardow and his group waded in and maintained a solid network throughout the four days of the event. During this period, he stayed connected with EPC and with Tremblay through an Amateur operator in Ottawa. It was through that operator and

Joe MacPherson that the basis was founded for COMSONT (Communications Ontario)

One thing that quickly became clear was that COMSONT was not an organization that in the event of an emergency would all arrive in a big van and pour out a collection of radio operators to look after the immediate needs of the municipality concerned. The function of COMSONT was to provide a link between the emergency site and officials in Ottawa and Toronto and cities or organizations who had specialist facilities for dealing with diverse types of problems. For instance, the special group developed in Sarnia for dealing with chemical accidents, which could be alerted and if needed, called upon to provide specialists and special equipment.

Therefore, each municipality that incorporated COMSONT in its emergency planning was encouraged to approach their local Amateur Radio Club to form an EMARG (Emergency Measures Amateur Radio Response Group) A copy of the EMARG in Ottawa/Carleton, devised by Joe MacPherson, was provided as an example. It is interesting to note that through the efforts of EPC Groups like COMSONT (with their spin-off EMARGs) have been developed in British Columbia, Manitoba and Nova Scotia. The latter, under the guidance of Joe MacPherson was in active support during the Swiss Air disaster.

The only difference that appeared after the establishment reflected the unfortunate experience of Herve Tremblay during his first exposure to Amateur Radio Operators. Although there are many other Amateur emergency groups, the EPOs insisted that COMSONT not be required to report to any established Radio Club or organization. Members can also be members of their own Radio clubs as they see fit, BUT when operating with COMSONT; their responsibility is to that Organization alone. That simple restriction has ensured that there has been no infighting or disruptive interference during the 22 years the Net has been in existence. As far as records can be established, in that period there have been only three days when the Net was "off the air" and they were due to solar disturbances.

Bob Campbell VE3KLLK April 10, 2000

## "COMSONT"

### "FOUNDING MEMBERS"

1978

VE3AML (SK)	ROWLAND BEARDOW	(SARNIA)
VE3GR (SK)	JACK STALEY	(GRIMSBY)
VE3CKX (SK)	GEORGE PRINGLE	(WINDSOR)
VE3AUN (SK)	CLARENCE BOLDUC	(WINDSOR)
VE3HFR (SK)	DICK SHUUN	(ORILLIA)
VE3KLLK (SK)	BOB CAMPBELL	(Ottawa) Manager 1981-1997

## NON -AMATEURS

HERVE TREMBLAY R.M.O.C. --E.M.O. + 2 STAFF MEMBERS

## SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS

EMERGENCY PLANNING CANADA (EPC) (FEDERAL GOVERNMENT)

SOLICITOR-GENERAL OF ONTARIO (PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT) (Nuclear Emergency Plan)

## EXAMPLES OF NET ACTIVITIES

During the rail disaster at Mississauga in 1979, the large-scale evacuation from the city created a heavy overload on the local telephone facilities which prompted the activation of Line Load Control. This was done to ensure the emergency organizations would not be crowded out by calls from the general public seeking information as the whereabouts and welfare of relatives effected by the evacuation. COMSONT although in its early stages quickly picked up this task and provided a public welfare service for three days until the restrictions to telephone use were lifted.

2. During the final days of the "Sky Lab" decaying orbit, Emergency Planning Canada, provided the latest forecasts of the possible fall of the satellite into the areas of Northern Ontario just to the north of Timmins. This information was fed by COMSONT through its network of Amateur stations to various municipalities in the areas directly in the satellite's path. The final messages forecast that the satellite would either trip and burn up and crash into that area of Ontario, or,

skip and crash elsewhere. In fact, "Sky Lab" skipped and, to quote the final message sent by COMSONT, burned up and the residue crashed in western Australia, "scaring Hell out of a lot of Kangaroos!!!".

3. During later years, COMSONT through its connection with the Solicitor General of Ontario's Emergency Branch became the main back-up communications facility in the Nuclear Emergency Plan set up with Ontario Hydro. While the Ontario Provincial Police had the prime communications responsibility it was recognized that Police activity in such an emergency would make it almost impossible for the OPP to meet the full demand. This factor had already been fully identified during disaster response in other countries (USA & Mexico). COMSONT took part in all the main exercises at the Nuclear Plants and was recognized by news Media as the best place to find out what was going on.

4. During the Mexico earthquake, four Mexican Officials stationed at the ICAO office in Montreal, unable to make any contact with their families in Mexico City, called on the COMSONT Manager for help. Through contacts with Mexican Amateurs every one of their families was located and it was done in just under eleven hours. That was one of the more gratifying successes of the Net. A letter of gratitude was received from the four men. During that event it was proven that it is not necessary to be in the midst of a disaster to be of help. Rather, it was the remoteness from the events that permitted the Canadian operators to function as relay stations between two points that were unable to communicate with each other although they were not that far apart.

5. COMSONT was able on one occasion to act with the Canadian Coastguard Rescue Station in Trenton improving a message from a supposed sinking yacht off the West Coast of British Columbia was in fact a hoax. It was accomplished by two amateurs with direction finding antennae in cooperation with two Coast Guard DF stations, to locate the culprit in the centre of Vancouver Island

6. On another occasion it was the ability of one of the net's members to relay a message to Saskatchewan via a station in Australia that enabled the recovery of a vehicle stolen in Ottawa and the arrest of the culprit. The arrested man had not shown too great an intelligence when he stole a vehicle loaded with radio gear and antennae and bearing an Amateur Radio License plate

7. During the autumn of 1987, the COMSONT NET was interrupted in its regular morning session by a weak and rather ragged CW (Morse code) signal which seemed to indicate someone in distress. Net activities were stopped, and the daily controller replied to the caller. In rather poorly sent CW the sender identified himself by name and call sign and explained that he was marooned on a small island in Georgian Bay. He had damaged his boat just as he was about to leave the island after locking up his cottage for the coming winter. Two Net members came up and confirmed the identity of the sender and said they would get a rescue boat out to him right away. His story which we got later was as follows. He had taken most of his personal stuff back to Parry Sound the previous weekend and was just doing the final cleanup and cottage closing. He had picked up his radio which was still there but had no auxiliary equipment. He had a toolbox of items he might need in closing the cottage. His boat was a fairly large one powered by a 100-hp outboard motor. As he backed away from the dock he swung too quickly and destroyed his propeller on a rock. Fortunately, he had, as required a paddle, and managed to get himself back to the dock. But as anyone who has ever been among the thirty thousand islands of Georgian Bay he found himself marooned on a tiny island with no way of calling for help. True, he had his radio. But the microphone was in Parry Sound, as was the Morse Key. His antenna was still on the island, but his gas-powered generator was at home. He did not even have a sandwich to munch on. All he had was his box of tools. On the plus side, he had the starter battery for the boat. So, he took it and the radio back to the cottage and connected it to the antenna. He could now hear but sending was what he wanted to do. Certainly, he could not, with the things he had, construct a microphone, but could he somehow devise a key. Taking a hacksaw blade, some nails, a bit of antenna lead-in cable and a plug,

which fortunately fitted into the CW jack. He created a sort of key using the saw blade as the spring. Gingerly he plugged it into the radio and made a tentative contact. The power meter jumped to show he had sent out something. So, he tuned around and found COMSONT just starting its morning session. He said he called at least six times before he made any contact. When he was reassured that help was on the way he shut down after arranging a series of contacts later in the day. The next day he checked into COMSONT and told us all the above details. MORAL: never go boating on Georgian Bay without a hacksaw blade and be sure to know where in the Amateur Radio bands COMSONT works every day of the year.