

WESTERN WILDFIRES – BC UNDER FIRE



Norm Barton, VE7BZC

Water Bombers:
Kelowna's Floating Bridge.
Photo: Vern, VE7ABK

Shortly after we had deployed, I had to call the local radio club Executive (Orchard City ARC) to advise them to go immediately to the well-equipped club site on the mountainside off Chute Lake Road near Kelowna (multiple HF radios, VHF/UHF radios, computers, towers and antennas) to remove the equipment as quickly as possible. The fire had turned and was predicted to sweep through the area, and it did! Happily, the club equipment was removed and saved just before the fire roared through, leaving total devastation in its wake. Serendipitously, four weeks prior to the fire, we had just completed and installed radios in a new radio room onsite at the Emergency Operations Centre, and had held a messaging and logging seminar based upon our newly written communications plan and forms.

Nothing tests an Amateur Radio Emergency Plan better than a real life situation, nothing. The Central Okanagan Regional Emergency Centre in Kelowna was an inspirational place to work during the crisis. The EOC Fire, Police, Ambulance, Forestry, City Officials and personnel, Health, and Emergency Services Personnel worked seamlessly together in an extremely professional manner, using the Incident Command System in all its operations. And we, the Amateur Radio Community, were there at the table, an equal partner, included in the briefings, planning and operations. (Note: The EOC in Kelowna practices often, with a number of different emergency scenarios. The local Amateur Radio Community is included in them. Examples can be seen at www.ocarc.ca/pep.htm).

So many more incidents can be included in this story. Such as, receiving instructions with helicopter blades rotating

THE 2003 OKANAGAN MOUNTAIN PARK FIRE

It is with mixed feelings that I begin this task of reporting for Radio Amateurs of Canada my involvement and the involvement of the other Amateurs in the Central Okanagan during last summer's urban interface forest fire, known as the Okanagan Mountain Park Wildfire 2003. There was very near loss of life, close to 250 homes lost, over 25,000 hectares of forest lost, along with a Provincial Park, historic train trestles, and tens of millions of dollars in total cost. Most of us have moved on and are doing our best not to dwell on it. In fact, reconstruction is taking place at a rapid rate. We are preparing for future disasters by drawing on our experiences, retaining the things that worked very well and modifying procedures where greater efficiency can be obtained.

This fire started on Saturday, August 16, with a lightning strike in Okanagan Mountain Park in the vicinity of Rattlesnake Island, a few kilometres south of the City of Kelowna. Our daughter Lynn and husband Cam from Calgary, Alberta were here on a weekend visit. Betty Ann (my XYL) and I drove them to a lookout point at the edge of Okanagan Lake, near Peachland, where many had

gathered to look with concern at the rapidly growing menace. Smoke was billowing into my home area at Westbank, about halfway between Peachland and Kelowna on Monday, August 18, as they reluctantly left for Calgary, worrying about our safety, with us assuring them that we would be fine.

Our son Bob, VE1NRB, from Nova Scotia and family members from New Brunswick and other family members in Calgary had called to get an update on the fire's proximity to us. The phone lines were starting to buzz with calls from all across the country to Okanagan residents, expressing concern for the safety of family and friends in the area.

The national media was already reporting the fire situation north of the Okanagan in the Kamloops area dubbed the "Barriere Fire" and was soon to be a big player in reporting the Okanagan disaster. Central Okanagan hams had been "on alert" since August 6, in case they were needed in the North Okanagan. Lynn and Cam's car had hardly disappeared from view when my pager came to life and crackled out a crisp call for the Communications Coordinator (me) to report immediately to

the Emergency Operations Centre. For the Central Okanagan hams, the siege had begun.

I immediately telephoned my Alternates, Gord, VE7GFH, Carl, VE7CLC and Ken, VE7KEN, who carried on with our EOC Callout List. I turned on my mobile 2-metre rig and APRS tracker and left for the Emergency Operations Centre at the Main Fire Hall in Kelowna, announcing the upcoming Emergency Net as I drove. In less than half an hour, our Emergency Net was operational on 146.680 and many on the Callout List had already checked into the Net.

Truthfully, much of the first ten days was a blur, a time of high tension, quick decision-making, and long exhausting hours. Thirty thousand people were evacuated from their homes, including some of our Callout Amateurs and their family and friends.

At times during the crisis, the phone lines failed, the Internet went down, and for much of the time cellphones were useless. We were called upon to provide 24-hour communications for Emergency Social Services over the entire period. This involved manning the EOC radio room and five reception, registration and public health locations in Kelowna.