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Chair

The Honourable Maxime Bernier

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● (1545)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Maxime Bernier (Beauce, CPC)): Hello. *Bonjour.*

We will continue our meeting. This is now meeting 42.

I'm pleased to welcome our new witnesses.

Ms. Boutcher, thank you for being with us.

Mr. Feltham, welcome.

Ms. Ryan Guy, thank you.

Mr. Bartlett, thank you for being with us.

Mr. O'Callaghan, thank you.

You each have five to seven minutes. I don't know who's going to start.

Maybe you can start, Ms. Boutcher.

Ms. Priscilla Boutcher (As an Individual): Thank you.

Mr. Chair; board members; Mr. Jack Harris, MP; Scott Simms, MP; other government officials; and special guests, my name is Priscilla Boutcher. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear here today.

For a good many years in my life, I guess like most people who are not directly affected, I did not pay close attention to search and rescue for Newfoundland and Labrador, or how it worked. Sure, each time there was an accident or a disaster, and particularly with loss of life, everyone was touched in some way. It would always be talked about whether or not something more could have been done. Even though I always felt for those victims and families of the tragedy, I was nonetheless removed from it.

That all changed on February 15, 1982, when the *Ocean Ranger* sank. My son David was one of the 84 who lost their lives. Now I was directly impacted and involved.

We learned of the tragedy on the news. David was being listed as among those missing, but we had not been contacted. Once we became aware through the media, we could not get in contact with anyone to find out what was happening. I tried calling search and rescue in Halifax, but did not get any clear confirmation. It was over 12 hours before anyone contacted us, and by that time we were frantic. I saw his name roll up on the TV screen.

My life has never been the same, and it never will be. David's body has never been recovered, and I have no closure. I wanted to know why the rig could not be searched. I was told it was too dangerous. I have never been given a satisfactory answer. Even today I am still not convinced that searching the rig is not possible.

I knew that there was some risk involved in the job that my son had chosen, working on a drilling rig on the offshore in the middle of the Atlantic, but I was naive enough to believe that safety measures were in place and every precaution was being taken to protect the workers.

It's not in my report, but I just want to mention that several years before that, after my father passed away, I lost a brother, 26 years old, who was with the air force on a search and rescue in Holyrood. He and his co-worker were drowned. At that time, so many years earlier, we had better communication. The clergyman was at our door. They found my brother's body four days after. We were in tune, and had better communication than we received when I lost my son.

I guess through my personal experience, any topic with search and rescue is so important to me, in any phase. I learned the hard way how relaxed the regulations were and just how little emphasis was placed on safety. It was all about production.

It has been 29 years now, and I sit here in amazement that another study is taking place to look at search and rescue response times. Over the years, I have been involved in numerous hearings, interviews, and anniversaries of the *Ocean Ranger* tragedy, and always the discussion is centred on response times for search and rescue and safety in the offshore, land-based to a somewhat lesser degree. There probably has been enough money spent on the issue over the past years to have funded proper search and rescue bases with fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters in both Gander and St. John's.

In the wake of the deadly Cougar helicopter crash, in which 17 people were killed, I noticed two things in particular that truly astounded me.

First, retired Chief Justice Alex Hickman, who was chair of the royal commission on the 1982 *Ocean Ranger* disaster, inquired as to why the recommendations that had been made were never implemented: it was 24 years. That was on CBC news on March 16, 2009.

At the time of the Cougar helicopter crash, all of the province's search and rescue helicopters were in Nova Scotia on training exercises. Had the helicopters been in the province, they would have been on standby in Gander. He questioned why at least one helicopter had not remained at the station while the exercises were being carried out.

Furthermore, Chief Justice Hickman maintained that even with search crews in Gander, there should still be dedicated search and rescue capacity in St. John's, closest to the offshore industry, as was the recommendation of the royal commission report.

I'm not making these assertions; I'm merely reiterating the concerns of the chair of the royal commission. Based on his professional background and study and research, I consider him to be the expert. If he says that recommendations from the *Ocean Ranger* report are not implemented and should be, I believe him, and so do lots of other people.

● (1550)

The second thing that astounded me—that truly astounded me—was the fact that Colonel Paul Drover of the Department of National Defence testified at the Cougar crash inquiry that there were no lessons to be learned from this crash, so there was no need to submit a report on the military's response. That statement has to be absolutely ludicrous. Isn't there always a lesson to be learned, good or bad? In my world no one is perfect, or I have never heard of anyone being perfect—well at least until now. Perhaps that statement speaks volumes on what is wrong with search and rescue.

Mr. Scott Simms, the MP for Grand Falls, Windsor, Gander, and Bonavista, who has been advocating for search and rescue units across the country for several years and for a 30-minute around-the-clock response time, and who has also been appointed as a member of this committee, was quoted in a Gander *Beacon* news article on December 16, 2010, and I quote from page 4: “The official response from the Department of National Defence is that the money” that could be spent “to reduce” the response time “to 30 minutes around the clock is too much money compared to the return they would get to maximize the efficiency.”

My question to you, to the Department of National Defence, and to the federal government is this: who and what determines the price of human life? If only one or two or perhaps three or four are lost, well, the financial cost of an efficient service couldn't be justified by those numbers.

After the shock of David's death had settled, I tried very hard not to blame, to try to give the benefit of the doubt, as difficult as that was to do. It was early in the game and there was still a lot to be learned. But there is no excuse now. We have the ability and the responsibility to ensure that we have the most efficient search and rescue response units possible, with operations based in locations that allow the response time to be as minimal as it can possibly be.

Money should not even be a consideration. If these tragedies took place in a foreign country, most particularly in a developing country, most would determine that if there was inadequate search and rescue available, Canada would be one of the first countries to step to the plate and try to correct the problem. Surely we can do the same for our own.

My purpose in appearing before you today is not to point a finger or to lay blame for what has happened in the past or to deal with any of the technicalities. Nothing is going to bring my son back or any of the others who have been lost in this terrible tragedy that has taken place offshore over the years. But if they continue to happen and nothing is done to improve safety measures or the quality of the service we have, then, yes, there is blame, and everyone who is involved in the decision to maintain the status quo will be answerable somewhere down the road when the next tragedy occurs, because likely or not it surely will.

I gave a lot of thought as to whether or not I wanted to be here today and have to relive all those terrible moments, but I strongly felt that if my experience could help save the life of someone else, then perhaps what happened to David will have some meaning. I implore you to bring forth the changes that are necessary to ensure efficient search and rescue so the emphasis can be on rescue and not recovery.

Again, thank you for this opportunity. I sincerely hope that I have given you some insight into my personal experience and the pain of losing a loved one in such a tragic way and that it will make difference in your deliberations and recommendations.

Thank you for having me here. Thank you very much.

● (1555)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Boutcher.

I'll give the floor to Mr. Feltham.

Mr. George Feltham (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would certainly like to thank you for the opportunity to appear before the standing committee. Certainly the response time is the focus of my presentation and why it's important to our industry.

Challenges in the harvesting sector from the waters off Newfoundland and Labrador due to sea and weather conditions are unpredictable in a harsh environment. After the moratorium in 1992, there was a need to access species such as shrimp, crab, scallops, turbot, and seals. This led to a shift to fishing in more remote offshore areas by vessels less than 65 feet, to 24-hour and longer fishing periods, and to longer distances from the home port, for longer trips beginning in April to November.

One of the things that has also driven the industry, and not only in larger vessels, is that the 65-footers are making five- and six-day trips. They are out in all weather. The 34-foot-11s, which even fish in the bay, are operating 24 hours around the clock because of fuel costs, to cut down, to try to even make ends meet. So the fishery, wherever you look at it, from the inshore to the offshore, is no longer eight in the morning till four in the evening; it's 24 hours around the clock.

Harvesters have certainly committed to safety. In the last number of years, since 2002, marine emergency duty training, MED A1 and A3, has been delivered to more than 10,000 Newfoundland commercial fish harvesters. That is a number that we're proud of because we certainly believe that safety is very important. More than 9,000 Newfoundland harvesters have received marine first aid training. It is a federal and provincial requirement for harvesters to complete MED training for at least one crew member on each vessel and for one crew member on each vessel to have marine first aid. Fishing vessels are also required to have certified masters and certified officers of the watch.

Our harvesters are some of the hardest trained in the world. Through education, training, safety equipment, and good seamanship practices, we are a safer industry today, but there is always room for improvement.

Since 1999 there have been 77 vessels lost at sea and 42 deaths related to the fishing industry. Aside from harvesters themselves, many others share in the responsibility for delivering safety to the fishing industry. Some of these agencies—I'm sure you're aware of them, but I'll repeat them anyhow—are DFO and line departments such as fisheries management, the Canadian Coast Guard, the office of boating safety, marine communications and traffic systems, search and rescue, and other marine programs. Over the last number of years, Transport Canada has made changes to the industry that have cost, yes, collectively, millions of dollars to the industry just to invest in safety. The transportation board, the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary, the Professional Fish Harvesters, the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union, Memorial University, the provincial labour department, the provincial Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, and yes, now, the insurance underwriters are breathing down our backs as well.

If you take all of these agencies and put them together, they have two common themes that keep repeating. I can hear the Transportation Safety Board and Transport Canada now when I sit in on CMAC meetings. You argue about the phasing in of certain electronic equipment or the phasing in of changes that you have to make to your vessel. They stand up there before you and they preach and they say quite clearly, you can't put a price on life. I agree. You can't put a price. You can't replace it.

The other thing they keep preaching, whatever course you take, whatever piece of equipment you put on.... I heard reference to the EPIRB a little earlier. People were putting EPIRBs on their boats. People were putting DSC radios on their boats and the black box, as it's called locally, the global positioning. They were doing it for one reason, and Transport Canada kept preaching: we have to reduce the response time to increase the chance of survival. Even to a first-aider, who takes first aid, that is one of the things you're told. Even with a heart attack, the faster you can start to help that person, the better his chances of survival. The fishing industry wrapped their hands around this equipment and put it on their vessels to try to reduce the response time.

● (1600)

The Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary—I heard reference to it here today—is a non-profit, volunteer organization used for search and rescue resources in the Newfoundland and Labrador region. Its members and their vessels respond to search and rescue incidents in the waters around the province, and occasionally they participate in search and rescue prevention activities. Ninety-two per cent of the membership is involved in the fishing industry. Each year, Newfoundland and Labrador regional auxiliaries respond to 35% of marine search and rescue incidents. That's an amazing figure. I'm a member of the coast guard auxiliary as well. I volunteer my time at no cost. As a matter of fact, in most cases it costs me money, even though I do get a little bit for my fuel or my vessel. That's it. The last search and rescue incident I was on, I lost my fishing day, and it took me 11 days before I could get back to my gear. That's what it cost me. I was tied onto the wharf for weather. So the fish harvesters of this province are contributing highly to search and rescue in this country.

In Ireland, Norway, and the North Sea, emergency aircraft must be in the air in 15 to 45 minutes. Canada currently has three levels of response times for search and rescue: 30 minutes from 8 to 4; weekend coverage; and a two-hour response time on holidays and evenings.

The North Atlantic is a harsh environment. Harvesters who work in this environment deserve emergency response times that are second to none. Every second counts during at-sea emergencies. I heard a reference here earlier to the oil industry and the location of search and rescue. You take the number of harvesters on the water and compare it with the number working on the rigs at any time in the season. I don't think you'll find any comparison. When you talk about from Cape Saint Mary to the Labrador coast, I don't think you have any consideration of where search and rescue money should be spent. It's the most centrally located and can provide service all around the area. We heard discussions here this morning about 800, 900, 2,000 passengers on an ocean-going carrier. I don't think it's in anyone's dreams that you'd be able to handle such a situation. That is a catastrophe, not an incident. We should be able to deliver the best possible way that we can go.

How do we achieve a better standard of response? We can improve response times, and most likely there will be a cost. Our fishing industry does not operate from 8 to 4. Gander is the optimum location. It provides the best search and rescue service for the entire province, for both commercial and recreational vessels. Response times are critical. It's impossible for someone to deny the importance of search and rescue to fishing communities. Scott alluded a little earlier to the number of communities in his district, and that's only one district. There are several others with just as many and more.

● (1605)

The fishing industry is one of the most dangerous industries in the world. Finding ways to improve safety will be a continuous process. Increased safety means increased safety measures and saving lives, but we all need to be doing everything to ensure that fish harvesters are coming home to their families and their communities.

Many things are in our control, like proper training. But those response times are not; they're in yours.

I'm assuming you'll let me know when my time is up.

One thing I want to leave you with is that safety must be a shared responsibility. Since 2002 we think the fishing industry has taken more than its share of the burden. We'd like you to act as some of your departments, Transport Canada, the Transport Safety Board, are saying—you can't put a price on life—and I think we'll be on the same lines.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Feltham. Thank you very much.

I will give the floor to Mrs. Ryan Guy.

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy (As an Individual): He said a lot of what I would say.

I don't come prepared like that, George.

You know, I know you're dealing with facts, you're dealing with dollars, and you're dealing with fatalities. It's the fatalities part that I have a concern with, and it's the response time in itself that I have a problem with.

Six years ago I found out all too well what the gut-wrenching difference was going to be between 30 minutes pre-flight time and two hours. The *Ryan's Commander* had gone down. It had capsized off Spillars Cove. Now, I could sit here and could quote facts, as George has done. I could tell you about the studies that have already been done. But instead what I want to do is I want to represent my two brothers, Dave and Joe Ryan, who can no longer represent themselves, who sat for over three hours—three gruelling hours, by the way—in a life raft.

So the difference that night in the response times, what would it have meant? That was the perfect escape. All hands had got off the boat, which doesn't always happen. They had got off the boat and they had got into their life rafts. And they bobbed around for what seemed like endless timelines. To them it was also a false sense of security. They kept looking, they kept hoping, they kept thinking that the chopper was going to be there, and it was only a matter of time and they would be rescued. No big deal. That's what you'd expect if it was an ambulance you were waiting for, if it was a fire department and you had been waiting for the fire truck to show up. But what happened that night is the winds got worse, as often happens on this beautiful island that we live herein.

You know, earlier that day they had looked at the forecast, and there was really no reason why they should not have left Bay de Verde to head towards St. Brendan's. They had been out for hours. They had safely passed Baccalieu Trail. They came up through the Tickle. Everything was fine.

There were a lot of things that happened to that boat that night, and a lot of reasons why they happened, and that's an issue in itself that is not to be here. But as George said, you can implement as many safety measures.... That boat was $1.8 million and it did not last its first fishing season. That in itself is a problem, but when you add to that the winds and the location—they were trying to get around Cape Bonavista. I know geographically it's hard for you guys to imagine what the coastline looks like here, but you're smack dab in the middle of nowhere here in Gander, which is great, because you're smack dab in the middle of Newfoundland—other than the Labrador side.

With the timelines, with the winds, with everything that was happening that night, the rain, the stories that came back to me, the people who were onshore who were just looking over...there was a generator. They had to sit on the generator, guys, in order for the ground search and rescue to even be able to operate their lights. So yes, every second counts. And that night the difference could not have just been tenfold, but in my opinion a hundred-fold, because if they had got there prior to when they did, that life raft would have been in what I would consider to be a safer—if there is any such thing in the ocean—rescue zone. But instead they were so precariously close to the cliffs. And then guess what else happened? The chopper had problems.

● (1610)

Now I have nothing bad at all to say about the search and rescue personnel. They went above and beyond their call of duty that night. But when you have this snowball effect happen, it's like Murphy's Law. And nobody plans for disaster, nobody plans for catastrophes, nobody plans for that big ship to go down. But when it does go down, you have certain things that you've planted in your mind, certain protocols that you think are there. You get your mayday out, you get in the life raft. Everybody's okay; that in itself is a miracle.

But when you're there and all of a sudden time has passed, over three hours, and you realize that when you're looking out through that door of the life raft, you're getting closer and closer to shore, and you have only one or two more flares that you can send up, because you've used them all, time's up, guys. One person got out of that life raft that night safely, and even then there were a lot of problems. All of those problems are listed in here.

The problems were within search and rescue, within the protocol, within the timelines and the fact that by the time they had got there, every single minute meant life and death, because the life raft was actually in so close to the rocks, so close to those jagged cliffs down there. By the time they got my brother-in-law off the life raft, that was it. It tipped over, it was gone. Every man was to himself, and it was survival instinct that kicked in after that.

I can't imagine what it must have been like for my nephew to have to turn around and look at my brother and see him sitting there, knowing that he was going to be the next one to go up in that basket into the helicopter, to have to leave him there, or what it was like hanging on the cliff after, waiting for the Hercules to get there. Because with all the problems that they had with the helicopter...and that can happen, I understand that. But when it happened after being late getting there, after going to the wrong location when they had gotten there.... It just takes a little mistake or an error in judgment to have it mean that much more and be that much more detrimental—as my family all learned.

I went on to write this book, diary of a madwoman, I call it—and I am still mad, but you come to accept certain things. In addition to this book, I also had Scott do a petition. This book did somewhat over 8,000 copies, and this petition that we put out, pretty much single-handedly, with some help from some friends.... We had almost 20,000 names that had already gone before the House of Commons to get this search and rescue time to change.

I've been in business a lot of years and I understand it's about money, it's about making sense, but as George has often said, you can't put all the safety requirements on the fishery. It's not right. They've done just about everything they can imagine doing. And since the *Ryan's Commander* went down, there were four people who could tell a story. That doesn't often happen. But those four people did an account of everything they could think of. They pointed out everything that they thought they could have done, that could have been better that night. And the one big thing that they always came back to was that if only the chopper had gotten there 15 minutes before, 30 minutes before, it would have made the world of difference to us.

That's it for me.

● (1615)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Ryan Guy.

Mr. Bartlett, you have the floor.

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett (Retired Fishing Captain, As an Individual): I'd like to thank the chairman and the group for coming here today and giving me the opportunity to appear.

My name is Wilfred Bartlett and I'm a retired fishing captain.

For the last 10 years, I fished. I fished on the Labrador coast up as far as Maine, which is 750 miles from my home port.

I live on an island surrounded by water.

I have been a member of the Canadian Marine Rescue Auxiliary —they got the “Marine” dropped out of it now, so it's the Canadian rescue auxiliary—from the time it started in Newfoundland and Labrador, approximately 30 years ago. And that crest, I'm real happy to wear that, I'll tell you.

I have been lucky enough to never have used the service of search and rescue, except a couple of times when I was stuck in ice, and then we were not in any immediate danger. But I have been involved in rescue operations in very dangerous situations, both for the people to be rescued and for me and the crew. The main one was on September 4, 1980, off the coast of Labrador, when a Portuguese ship with 64 people went ashore in a storm in Black Tickle, Labrador. I'm happy to report no loss of life. You all saw the thing I passed around.

I live on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, which is prone to storms and a lot of lost lives of people who make a living from the ocean or who just use it for recreational purposes or travel. Out around where I live, it's more important to have a boat than a car, right? That's your enjoyment.

We have a search and rescue service operated out of Gander by the Department of National Defence. And while the location of Gander is the ideal place for this service and should never be moved, my complaint with this service is that it's being operated on what we refer to as bankers' hours, and therefore it is not providing a very good service.

I did not criticize this service until I lost a friend of mine, Captain Larry Parsons, on the *Check-Mate III*. I found out that it took 50 minutes for the helicopter to get in the air and that these two crew members appeared to be alive when it arrived on the scene. That was really a shocker. Fifty minutes in the North Atlantic Ocean in November is a lifetime. In fact, a minute could be a lifetime when you're out in the North Atlantic floating around in the suit.

I am using the following three incidents as examples of what I am talking about. They were mentioned earlier by the Town of Gander.

The first one is the *Ryan's Commander*. I'm familiar with that boat. In fact, she was built in my hometown out there, and three of my family members, immediate family members, worked on the construction of that boat.

On September 19, 2004, *Ryan's Commander* was lost at sea, and two people died. At 18:42, a National Defence Cormorant helicopter was tasked and left Gander at 19:42, 60 minutes later.

On September 12, 2005, *Melina & Keith II* was lost at sea, and four people died. The Department of National Defence at Gander was tasked at 16:50. It left Gander at 18:10, 80 minutes after the call came in. Captain Shawn Ralph has been going back and forth to court ever since, because somebody has been trying to make him pay for what happened. It wasn't his fault at all.

On January 31, 2008, *Check-Mate III* was lost at sea. On board, my good friend Captain Larry Parsons and his friend, Christopher Oram, lost their lives. The Department of National Defence helicopter at Gander was tasked at 21:50 and left Gander at 22:40, 50 minutes later. Both were reported in water and responsive, and the helicopter at that time made no effort to retrieve them.

These are three examples at sea in recent years where if we had had a quicker response time from the Department of National Defence helicopters stationed at Gander, the outcome could have been very different, and more lives would have been saved. In fact, I believe they all would have been saved in these three incidents.

Response time: *Melina & Keith II*, 80 minutes; *Ryan's Commander*, 60 minutes; *Check-Mate III*, 50 minutes. That's quite a long time to get a helicopter off the ground, especially for rescue at sea, when sometimes minutes or seconds are the difference between life and death. Remember the Spanish vessel that went down on the Grand Banks last year, in perfectly good weather, when the crew didn't even get a chance to properly dress? They were lucky that the coast guard vessel was standing by. In fact, they were standing by to board them at that time, and we all believe she was scuttled.

The purpose of this presentation is to point out the dangers of trying to make a living from the sea. I have spent a large part of my life on the ocean, and my most happy and satisfying time has been doing that. While the ocean can be so kind and provide us with the bounties of life, it can also be so cruel, as our history has recorded.

● (1620)

If we had ambulances and fire trucks that took this time to respond, the general public and the politicians would not stand for it. Why is it still allowed to continue? We have a rescue crew in Gander on-site from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., I believe, five days a week. Even on-site, they have a response time of 30 minutes. After hours, response time is up to two hours. In the three examples I am using, these accidents happened after hours. The people on the ocean don't stop working at 4:30 p.m. It's a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week job. We have much more traffic on the ocean these days because of the oil and gas activities.

My purpose in appearing here today is to put pressure on our government to get public support for a rescue helicopter in Gander on standby around the clock, and also to cut the response time down to less than 30 minutes. I believe that is far, far too long. Hopefully, we will save more lives in the future.

I'm not criticizing the people on the ground in Gander. I am criticizing the Government of Canada for not providing this valuable service 24/7, 365 days a year, so that the people who get in trouble on the ocean can have hope that every effort is being made to ensure that they will be rescued. In 2009, in a two-week period, we lost four people in three different incidents in the bay that I live in, Notre Dame Bay, but at that time it wouldn't have made any difference. It's just that there was no call that went out. The helicopter wouldn't have made a difference. But when you're on the water, it's nice to know that when a call comes out they're going to respond faster.

Gentlemen and ladies, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bartlett.

I will give the floor to Mr. O'Callaghan.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan (Secretary, Local 90120, Union of National Defence Employees): I don't have anything as passionate or heart-wrenching as that to say.

My condolences to all of you who have lost people at sea.

Honourable Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, dignitaries, and guests, my name is Sean O'Callaghan. I'm here representing the Union of National Defence Employees, Local 90120. We maintain and fix the Cormorant search and rescue helicopter here at MOB Gander.

Here is a little background on me. I am a 24-year veteran of the Canadian Forces. I've spent 23 years fixing helicopters as an aviation technician. For close to seven years I've been an employee of IMP Aerospace here at MOB Gander 103 Search and Rescue, and this is my 12th year in a search and rescue squadron.

My function today is to give you a brief overview, from a maintenance perspective, of what we consider to be some of the shortcomings that are preventing the Cormorant maintenance program from operating as efficiently and effectively as it should. How does this tie into the SAR response question? It's a simple matter of the number of resources that we can supply to the customer in a timely fashion.

It is worth mentioning that the Cormorant helicopter is one of the most advanced, largest, and complex helicopters operating in the world today. When originally purchased, the Cormorant was touted as a seven-to-one helicopter, which is to say for every hour of flying it would take seven maintenance hours. Today we sit at roughly 30 to one: for every hour in the air, it takes 30 maintenance hours. The inspections and inspection schedules are getting larger and more intricate as we continue to encounter problems that were not anticipated, as one would expect for an aircraft going through its life cycle.

The rule of thumb for manning an operational organization such as ours is “man for the worst times, not the best, and expect the unexpected”. Our problem is twofold: manpower and parts. Parts are a well-documented issue on the Cormorant. As you will see, these two are tied closely together. My main point today is that the maintenance organization that we're in right now is currently undermanned, and we're having trouble providing assets to the customer, which is DND.

I'm going to get a little technical, but not too technical. I have to explain my job.

Our organization is broken down into four major areas: aircraft technicians, supply technicians, maintenance planners, and an administrative assistant. Today I'll deal only with supply and aircraft technicians.

First is supply. At present, we have two people, who both work days. The supply tech deals with shipping and receiving, the issuing of parts and materials, inventory and stocking of all aircraft parts and materials, the replacement of tools, tool calibration, and the labelling of all aircraft petroleum oils and lubricants, which is done can by can. So these guys are busy.

A recent audit by a third party pointed out that aircraft technicians should not be allowed in the supply area. Supply is supposed to be a closed and secured area to preserve the integrity of the inventory and the serviceability of the parts therein. We, as a collective union, have been saying this for a good number of years, but it has fallen on deaf ears.

The solution to the audit's finding was that during the day aircraft technicians should not be allowed in the supply area. Instead of having the technicians go in and sign out their parts, which has been the standard practice for eight years, the supply tech would do it. You give him a list, and he goes and gets the part and gives it to the technician. During the night shift, though, it's back to normal. So the aircraft technician goes into supply and does this.

This has effects. First, the inventory is not properly controlled. We've had numerous inventory problems in the past. We'll go to look for a part, and we'll think we'll have it when we don't. It was taken out by a technician, who probably didn't sign for it because we're in a hurry, so that it shows as being there when it's actually not.

I've spent an hour in supply on complex jobs getting my parts when what I should have been doing was working on the aircraft, prepping it for the job. Countless hours of a technician's time are spent doing supply work.

● (1625)

Another problem with the two-man system, of course, is vacation, time off, and sick leave. If two guys can't keep up, one certainly can't. So the overwhelming consensus, even by some of the local managers, is that there is a serious need for three supply technicians. It would ensure the job is done correctly and would alleviate the need for the aircraft tech to do that job.

We've asked for a third supply tech on numerous occasions, but have been told that in order to accomplish this we'd have to lose an aircraft technician position off the floor. This is, of course, counterproductive as the mandate of the organization is to fix aircraft.

Now to the aircraft technicians—and I'm sorry if this is kind of dry. There are three different types of aircraft technicians who work in Gander: aviation technicians, or avn techs, such as myself. We deal with flight controls, engine planning gears, hydraulic systems, pneumatic systems, and electrical systems.

I'll bet the translator is having fun keeping up to me here.

Combined with this, avn techs also have secondary roles, such as vibration analysis, hydraulic sampling, and maintaining support equipment. This is the most intensive trade of the three, since it encompasses such a wide range of areas as well as the highest area of aircraft-related faults.

Avf techs, or avionics technicians, deal with communications, radar, and automated flight control systems. Aircraft structural technicians, or acf techs, deal with aircraft structures, manufacturing of parts, composite materials, and the refinishing of all previously mentioned. This is also a very work-intensive trade. As the aircraft ages, it will become more intensive.

We also have aviation technicians who are cross-trained to avionics, but not the other way around. So where the bulk of the work lies, we have nobody who's cross-trained back to the avn side.

We have piece servicing crews, days and nights, and a maintenance crew that works strictly days. We generally have three helicopters in the house, but sometimes we can have four. Servicing crews maintain the flying aircraft, and the maintenance crews carry out major inspections, which can be very indepth. They can take months to complete. During the times when the flying aircraft are serviceable, the servicing crews will augment the maintenance crews, and this augmentation is expected and built into the aircraft out-date.

The problem with this is that the servicing crews don't always get a chance to do that, and there have been numerous occasions where we will not get to the maintenance aircraft for two to three weeks because of operational commitments. We need to provide a serviceable asset so we can hold SAR standby.

Needless to say, if we can't go help the maintenance guys, this has a ripple effect on the aircraft's out-date and it can delay the inspection by weeks.

We used to work a lot of overtime. If we got behind in a maintenance helicopter, we'd work a lot of overtime, sometimes two to three weekends in a row. However, that's been substantially cut, and we suspect it's a monetary issue with the company. Technicians can sometimes accumulate 100 to 200 hours of overtime and then they can cash it out. If a lot of people do that at the same time, it's quite a bit of money.

Lack of parts also poses a significant problem when it comes to man-hours. If we don't have the parts in inventory, we're forced to rob or remove a part from another helicopter. This doubles the time of the task, and it's quite a common occurrence.

Other factors that impact manning are vacation time, overtime, overtime time off, sick leave, and long- and short-term disability, because it's a fairly physical job we do. It's easy to get hurt, especially backs.

In the last few years we've also seen an increase in out-of-unit taskings, whether it be supporting the Olympic games or, more recently, the aircraft sampling inspections held in Halifax, where MOB Greenwood and our MOB were tasked to provide three technicians each for a three-month period. That's crippling at this MOB.

In our profession we cannot afford to be tired, distracted, or overtaxed. Not only do the lives of the aircrew who man and fly these helicopters depend on our ability to provide a safe and serviceable platform, but the lives of the people who are in need of help also hang in the balance of our abilities. You can't save them if you can't get to them.

We take our jobs very seriously, and all that we ask in return is that we be provided with the necessary support and manning to accomplish them. We estimate the required manpower increase would be in the vicinity of five avn techs at a minimum and one supply technician.

● (1630)

We would respectfully submit that the in-service support contract should be re-evaluated on the basis of manning the MOBs so that we can meet our objectives and supply our customers with the helicopters they need in a more efficient and timely manner.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank our witnesses this afternoon. I know that it must be a little bit difficult to be with us this afternoon, because it brings back some memories. I want to let you know that it will be useful for our work, and I want to thank you for that.

We're going to have time to do one round of seven minutes. I'll give the floor to you, Mr. Simms. You have seven minutes, if you want to share your time with Mr. LeBlanc.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): I may towards the end, if I can just check on the time.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, sir.

[*English*]

That was a good choice of words.

I want to add my voice to Mr. Bernier's, about your coming here and sharing your stories. I know all of you, whether in person or on the phone. I've dealt with you in many regards during your situation. I think you would agree with me that all we've learned from this is an issue towards fixing a systemic problem. I've never heard anyone ever call into question the bravery of an airman or airwoman involved in this particular industry. I have never heard anyone question or doubt the sincerity of the people who fly, maintain, and also rappel from or dangle from choppers and fixed-wing aircraft. I'd like to add my voice in that regard.

The story you have is one that is compelling as a victim impact statement and what this could do. You've written a book about it, Johanna, one that is very well done.

Mr. O'Callaghan, I'm glad you're here.

● (1635)

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: You're welcome.

Mr. Scott Simms: I'm very glad you're here, and thank you for coming. I want to thank the folks at UNDE as well. As a matter of fact, I mentioned the SOS campaign before, Save Our Squadron. It was actually this and another particular group that were heavily involved in that and were promoting it. I think it all lends itself to the passion you have towards this industry. You may have been dry at times, but you were certainly informative. Maybe you'll write that in your epitaph someday.

This is a unique situation you're in. Across this country, you are different from the rest. Your element of search and rescue is a very, very important one. You've pointed out weaknesses in the system that a lot of people don't even realize.

Just reiterate, once again, where you think this system for you has become most difficult, from a systemic point of view.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Any time you have a goal-driven organization and you marry that to a profit-driven organization, you're going to have trouble. In order to maintain the helicopter to the standard it should be, we need to have more people involved in this program.

As we accumulate time in the company, our leave entitlement increases. One-third of the workforce now is getting four weeks. Next year that will increase and will probably be more like 60%. A year after that it will be everybody. As you start to tack onto vacation short-term and long-term disability—we have guys who have been off for four or five months or six months, right?—that really puts a much larger load on the technicians who are there.

As I said before, if the servicing crews are working on unserviceable platforms that need to come up, then we can't go and work on the maintenance helicopter. That adds weeks to the inspection, and that has a ripple effect on the military side, because they're trying to train. I'm sure that Major Reid alluded to something like that this morning, I would imagine. I didn't hear him.

Mr. Scott Simms: But this leads to a better posture, and it leads to helping reduce response times, I guess—

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Absolutely.

Mr. Scott Simms: —which is one element in why you're here.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Well, if we only have one serviceable helicopter and that breaks, we need to fix that. If we have a backup, then we can just substitute, right?

Mr. Scott Simms: Wait until we get fixed-wing SAR; then you'll really be busy.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Certainly.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you, Mr. O'Callaghan.

Mr. Feltham, you've been a fisherman for quite some time. I'm going to use somewhat the same line of questioning that was used earlier with Mr. Johnson. But you're primarily inshore; you don't fish as far offshore as Mr. Johnson does.

Just along the same line of questioning, then, do you feel that the industry is safer than it was 20 to 25 years ago? You have a lot of equipment. There are a lot of regulations. How do you feel about the service itself in regard to where you fish?

Mr. George Feltham: The fishery is safer, yes, there's no question about that. With the amount of investment that harvesters have put into it, and with the equipment they have, it's safer. But you know, all the training they've done has created sort of a false pretense amongst fishers to believe that help is going to be there within....

I mean, I've been also an instructor in safety, and you create the environment that it's at your fingertips, that all you need is the equipment. You've got this GMDS global system there, and everything is transferred. You flick this switch—bang—and everything is transferred, and all of a sudden it's activated here in Gander and that helicopter is in the air. But in the last number of incidents that we had—it hasn't really come out since—the timing factor, the response time, has been....

And people say to you, “Well, what in hell am I putting all this equipment on my vessel for? Shoot, it's going to take them two hours before they get off the ground.” I mean, that is the general attitude. Even though you may be right that they're off the ground within an hour, that is the general attitude.

One of the things, you know, is what the harvesting sector is saving the Department of National Defence, search and rescue, by their participation, by being on the spot. I connect it to the fixed-wing as well; I think it's important that fixed-wing be stationed here in this province as well, because in the fishing season we are on the water. We are on the scene. The quicker they can get a position plotted, the quicker the coast guard auxiliaries can get there. Sometimes the coast guard auxiliaries take care of it by the time the deployment is off, because it's relayed directly back to the vessel that's on the water.

The thing is that with change.... People don't see all the incidents. You're talking about all the incidents here in the province, but it's actually gone down. Fishing activity in the early nineties was much less than it has been since 2002 in terms of the amount of people on the water and the distance they're going, the time they're travelling. The activities have increased over the nineties, and the amount of death-related incidents is going down. So we're doing something right, but we need to be able to really do all we can. We're not there, and I think we need the government there.

● (1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I will now give the floor to Mr. Bachand.

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): I would first like to make some comments on the testimony you have just given us.

It is always difficult to lose a loved one in such tragic circumstances. It is difficult to imagine your grief. You must understand that we are trying to fix the situation, but there is very little we can do against fate. In life, things sometimes happen that are hard to explain. Especially when a loved one, someone dear to our heart, is a victim. Often you are left with a feeling of incomprehension. In addition, we may spend time imagining the last moments of the victim. I must admit that it is hard for us to listen to you.

It is important that you give us this testimony. You have a voice here as persons, as Canadian taxpayers who have lost a loved one.

For our part, we are trying to determine what the problems are. We want to take action so that we lose as few people at sea as possible. We are examining these problems.

For instance, we try to have the best equipment and the best human resources. This work requires highly trained people. If you are aware of the training methods for search and rescue technicians and have seen them at work, you understand that they have no equivalent in the Canadian Forces. No one is better able to rescue someone than a search and rescue technician. I understood today that they give all of their energy to do this. Unfortunately, to do all this takes money.

I am getting to the responsibility of elected representatives, that is to say, us. Some people think that our work is easy, that everything is fine, and that we are well paid. I would have liked to see them sitting here in my place today to listen to your testimony. Each one of us here feels a certain responsibility with regard to what happened and what might happen again. You must understand that we are trying to do our best to ensure that the money is spent in the right places.

Earlier, we had an excellent discussion on the location of services. I don't know if you were here to listen to what was said. What is the point of having an airplane that can go three times faster than the speed of sound if we are incapable of setting up a base close to where accidents happen? Sometimes, it is a matter of seconds. That is what is important to us. It is somewhat difficult.

Let me repeat that if we could do something against fate, it would be important to act, but unfortunately there is nothing we can do about that. We try to reduce the number of losses as much as possible, but we have to take societal choices into account.

I make choices, as do my colleagues from the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party and the NDP. I have made my choice. I told the minister and I say it again to the department officials: I don't think it is normal that we are investing some $15 billion in the purchase of C-17s, C-130Js, Chinooks, and we have not yet begun to invest in the purchase of search and rescue airplanes. That is a choice, but I want to make it very clear that it is not my choice.

In fact, I organized a day to look into what is wrong with this picture. I wanted to know whether we could meet with the ministers, to have a look at what the problem was and why the search and rescue teams were not getting off the ground. We talked about the location of services earlier, and that is one good thing. That said, introducing new equipment like these planes is a choice. Why did they get there in fourth place? Why did they not get there sooner?

It is important for us to see to it that these choices correspond to the needs. This choice made by the National Search and Rescue Secretariat takes into account the health and life of Canadians and Quebeckers. It is a matter of seconds. This is the equipment that is needed, generally. People can understand that it is needed to save civilian lives, not only the lives of military personnel. I certainly don't want to denigrate the military, but some choices are political.

I simply wanted to say that I support you wholeheartedly. I also want you to understand that all of the members here have the population's well-being at heart. Unfortunately, there are societal choices that have to be made. We are always grappling with the fact that more is being invested in health care than in education or the armed forces.

I wanted to tell you that your testimony touched me. I would like you to take a few minutes or a few seconds to reply to what I have just said. Do you at least have some confidence in us, we who are in a way the search and rescue technicians of politics? We are doing our best, we are well trained, but sometimes we have trouble managing because of fateful incidents that are impossible to avoid.

● (1645)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Bartlett.

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: One of the biggest problems I have with search and rescue—and maybe somebody can respond to this—is with the 30 minutes. When the people are there on site, it takes 30 minutes to get off the ground or you have a 30-minute limit.

I was talking to an ambulance driver out our way the other day, and if they go out in the night and make a call and they get home at 3 o'clock in the morning, they have to get somebody out of bed to put fuel in that ambulance before it's put back in the garage. So when the next call comes, it only takes five minutes and they're aboard the machine and they're gone. Now these are not people who are living at the garage. They're just volunteers like the ones you see around most communities. It's one of the things people are really questioning.

The other thing is, what is the price of a life? I went to Larry Parsons' funeral. I had to go and talk to his wife. Her husband died because it took that chopper 50 minutes to get off the ground. When the chopper got there—and it's in this report here, and don't ask me where I got it, by the way—they were responsive when the helicopter came on site. So you can imagine if it had gotten off the ground in 20 minutes—that was half an hour earlier—they'd be home now with their families today. This is the big issue I have.

When it comes to money to put it there 24/7, I think it is darn well worth it. If my taxes have to go up a little bit, I've no problem with that. I spent part of my life on the water. I know how dangerous it is out there. It's not like if you're driving your car and you run off the road, and by and by you get up on the road and hitchhike. Out there, it's a different thing altogether. A vessel can go down in minutes, as has been proven over the years. I could name some that people never had a chance to get a lifeboat off of. Some of them never even got their life jackets on. That's how fast the boat can go down.

In a vessel you have all kinds of water intakes coming into it, and it only takes one of them to break down in the engine room and all of a sudden that boat is half full of water before anybody knows about it. When you get so much water, it'll automatically sink or tip over, whatever the case may be.

So the response time to me is the most important thing, and it has to be 24/7. Find the money. Cut back on some other wasteful programs. I could name a few, but I won't here today. Find the money.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bartlett.

I'll give the floor to Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming this afternoon. Your stories are very moving, and particularly those of you who've lost family and friends in disasters.

For you, Priscilla, even though it's been 24 years, it's obvious that you still are extremely moved by what happened and motivated to bring us the message. I think we all take seriously that we have the ability and the responsibility to make recommendations here, and that certainly will be guiding my thoughts.

Thank you, also, Mr. O'Callaghan. I think there is a lot of knowledge at stake here in terms of how this all works.

Perhaps I can start with you. You were telling us that this helicopter, the Cormorant, was either designed or presented as a helicopter with a ratio of maintenance to flying of seven to one, and now it's 30 to one, meaning that it spends four times as much activity or time being maintained as was anticipated. Does that result in us, the people, essentially not having enough helicopters, or is that putting words in your mouth? Can you tell us what the consequence is of having helicopters that aren't available because they're having to be maintained four times as much as was anticipated when all of the plans were made?

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: It definitely has a lot to do with serviceable assets. If it were a seven-to-one helicopter, it wouldn't be in maintenance as long as it was. But what they did was underestimate what we call "lifed components" and how quickly they would break down.

From our end, from an IMP organizational end, we've gone through a couple of hirings to rectify that problem, but we still find ourselves behind the eight ball as far as being able to keep up and maintain the Cormorant to the level that is required by DND personnel and what they'd like to see go.

Mr. Jack Harris: But as a consequence of that, are the three helicopters in Gander enough to do the job, in your view?

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: I think the original procurement fell short. I think we needed 20, not the original 15. You always have to account for things not operating as they're supposed to. It's a mechanical piece of gear and very electronic and complex. That was the original problem.

So we're kind of stuck here now with....

Mr. Jack Harris: Okay, thank you.

Obviously the notion of planning goes into making decisions, and we've heard a lot of comments about the 24/7, 30-minute standby requirement. It's a position I support and have been championing for some time.

Some of you asked about the value of a life, or the cost. There are costs to doing different sorts of things, and I'll give you an example. It comes from a report prepared by the Department of National Defence in September 2004.

This is about procurement of fixed-wing search and rescue aircraft. They also studied what the standby posture—the 30-minute standby requirements—would do to the design of the aircraft in planning the program. I want to read what it said specifically, because it would affect the cruise speed of a fixed-wing aircraft. This is from the executive summary. The analysis is later on.

> Increasing the number of hours that the SAR standby posture is 30 minutes represents another obvious manner in which the minimum cruise speed can be reduced. The analysis estimated the 30 year cost of various increases to the current 40 hour per week allotment of 30 minute standby. In particular, it was found that the cost of maintaining 30 minute standby 24 hours per day, 7 days per week for 30 years would be in excess of one billion current year dollars. These costs were deemed too prohibitive in light of the fact that the budget for the acquisition of the [fixed-wing search and rescue] aircraft is $1.2 billion.

So $1 billion over 30 years sounds like a lot of money, but when you divide it by 30 years, it works out to $33 million per year for a national program.

I wonder if you'd care to comment on those numbers. This is for fixed-wing aircraft, not helicopters. There may be a different analysis and a different number. But does that number strike you as something that should be regarded by the government as prohibitive if it comes to trying to change to a 24-hour, 30-minute standby response?

Does anyone want to comment on that?

● (1655)

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: You have to advance; change is inevitable. We know we have problems. It has been pointed out here the number of different problems that have arisen from just these hearings alone. So you take the knowledge given from all aspects. In a perfect world we'd get it all.

Jack, you'd get one in St. John's. We'd keep the one that's here in Gander. But for God's sake, the 24/7 is the biggest issue for Newfoundlanders, for families, in my opinion, and that's why I'm here. If you don't speak out, it's always about dollars, but everything is about dollars. What do you fix first? It's like having an old house. Where do you start? You know it's going to fall apart if you do not put money into it, and wherever you look there's a requirement. So where will your money be best spent? Money is money. There's never going to be enough money in the government. Look at the deficit.

So I don't know the answers. That's hopefully why we've got you guys—and I would not want to be a politician for that reason. Where do you spend the money? How do you spend the money?

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: They probably wouldn't want to go out on the water either.

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: That's true. Well, I would. I'd rather be out squid-jigging than sitting here, believe me.

Figuring out where the money is best spent...from a family's perspective, I'm probably not going to find exactly where this is.

"Newfoundland and Labrador families slam internal search and rescue report". I know I'm not supposed to pull something out like this, but this was actually dated October 7, 2008.

> Families in Newfoundland and Labrador who have lost fishermen at sea said they are upset about a recent military internal report that recommends search-and-rescue squadrons should not be staffed round the clock.
>
> [Me] Johanna Ryan-Guy lost two brothers when the Ryan's Commander capsized on the rocks near Cape Bonavista in September 2004.
>
> [I]...said the internal report is "a tough pill to swallow".
>
> The study reviewed all incidents rated as a Category 1—defined by grave or imminent danger requiring immediate response and assistance to prevent the loss of life, between 2000 and 2004.
>
> In those years, there were 1,054 Category 1 cases, and in nine of them, the department determined that reaction time of the search-and-rescue crews might have been a deciding factor in the victim survival.
>
> At the heart of the study was the question of the viability of staffing crews at the squadron to hasten reaction time.

Guys, this is 2008. We're sitting here and this is 2011. I've had it up to the ying yang with most of this stuff, to be honest with you. But I know there's a lot of red tape and I know it takes time.

> Status quo is a two-hour reaction time during the nighttime, when crews are off shift, and on call from their homes. During regular staffing hours, search-and-rescue crews have a 30-minute reaction time.
>
> The report showed there would be little benefit and huge costs to reducing reaction time for nighttime shifts. The document also showed that keeping crews on 30-minute posturing times, 24 hours a day would cost [at that time] at minimum $200 million more per year.

I said that I was discouraged by the report. I'm still discouraged because we're still scrabbling at the same issues. Not much has changed. That boat went down in 2004. This stuff that we're talking about, Jack, that was an issue then and it's still an issue. And if it's 10 years from now, there are still going to be issues. You talk about money. I'm not rich but I'm not poor either. Do you think that money would make any difference to me with regard to Dave and Joe's lives? I understand that you cannot save everybody. Not even God can do that, okay? But whatever resources you do have, it can't always be about the money. What's right to do with the money that you do have?

Priscilla, how many years have you been up to the ying yang with this? Go for it.

● (1700)

Ms. Priscilla Boutcher: Well, I guess it's been ongoing, but I think with all the tragedies that we've spoken about here today, surely God we've learned enough from them that we have the ability. I think everybody has the ability. I think the politicians and the federal government have to take more responsibility to ensure that we don't have these ongoing tragedies. Whether they're small or large, one is too many.

I'm not here today to challenge the communities, because that's not my job. I want fairness. I think the powers that be should have a response put in place as minimal as possible for time, whether it's in Gander or St. John's. They have to be responsible people. I know that sometimes politics are involved, but I think this is too important.

Going back to the *Ocean Ranger*, someone at that time should have had some responsibility. These boys, or men, or people should not even have been working that night. We all knew it was the worst storm in history. And surely God, ahead of time, I hope we've improved, and we know that even if it's a small disaster, these men of ours—fishermen or whoever—should not be out in the Atlantic working.

It wasn't fit. Anyone who was out in that never had a chance of survival. But it hurts when it happens, I'll tell you.

I think some precautions could have been taken. Let's learn from these tragedies. Communication to me and my family failed more than 100%, and I never want for a family to get as little communication as we received. I still hurt over it, because there was none, absolutely none. I fought with search and rescue on the plane to tell me what happened. They couldn't tell me.

Like I said, I had to phone my clergy for him to find out what was the truth, 12 hours after, and with everybody in Newfoundland knowing. I think it's because I was remote from the area; I was not in the city and the communities around the north shore and all those places. It was just me in Corner Brook and I had no one to turn to. I was getting horrible answers.

Like I said, I think that money.... What's a life? I mean, we have to communicate, and as for safety, in my books it was unsafe for these people. Training is a must. I don't know about now, but there were fellows on that rig who weren't trained and took responsible jobs. I hope my son wasn't one of them, because he was trained in some fields.... He took less of a trade waiting to go somewhere else and it cost him his life.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Priscilla Boutcher: And as for those dollars, like we've all been saying today, what's the value of a life? Surely God, let's improve what we have. We've been working at it over the years to make things better for everybody. We're proud to do—

● (1705)

The Chair: Thank you.

Briefly, sir.

Mr. George Feltham: Yes, Mr. Chairman.

In response to Jack's question, no, the $33 million is not too much. I've been fishing for 32 years and I know what it's like to be out there. I've fished offshore and I've fished inshore. Right now, I'm fishing inshore. But when you've been looking at four- or five-day forecasts.... To put it in perspective, yesterday in Eastport they called for a few flurries. We had 20 centimetres of snow. That's how reliable our forecasting is.

When you have vessels going out there that depend on four- and five-day forecasts, they're either leaving in storms or coming in storms. It's unavoidable. It's not only the fishing industry, but you can imagine what my wife and my kids are going through at home. I'm not downing the people, but they don't have the response time from the coast guard, from the search and rescue, that should be there.

I have a son who's on the tankers right now. I know what it's like out there. I know what it's like with 13-metre seas and 55-knot winds. I don't care if you're on an 800-foot boat or what, I'll tell you, you think about where they are and about how if something happens what response is going to be there for them. No, Jack, it's not too big a price....

The Chair: Thank you.

I will give the floor to our last member, Mr. Hawn, for five minutes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all of you for being here. The sea is obviously an incredibly dangerous place. Everybody's heart goes out to people who are lost at sea, and obviously to their families, and we thank you for sharing your stories with us.

Ms. Ryan Guy, you made a couple of statements that I think are true about money best spent, money spent where it can do the most good.

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: It's not the business side of it—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes. But it's very practical and it's very realistic, because realistically there aren't unlimited resources, so we do have to put the resources we have.... We should always try to do more, obviously, but we do need to focus them on the things that will hopefully make the most difference. I know that in the 103 and in every outfit, when something happens, they do try to learn lessons, obviously to make it better the next time—if there's something to be learned.

I do want to talk, Mr. O'Callaghan, about a couple of things you mentioned, at the risk of inviting more dryness—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Laurie Hawn: —but it's important because it goes to ability to maintain the level of service and so on that we have and perhaps improve it.

We chatted this morning with Major Reid and we asked the question: what would it take to increase the response time to 30 minutes 24/7? His basic answer was double the aircraft and double the people. Would you concur with that?

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: I would definitely concur with that.

Just looking at the logistical end of going 24/7, it's a fairly massive undertaking.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: And if he wants to double his resources, you'd definitely have to double your people. That brings in time for a new hangar. The logistical end of this is big.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes, it's simple to say, but it is a little tougher to do. It's not that we shouldn't strive for that, but we also have to face some realities.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Right.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: With respect to the Cormorant—and again, I'd like to get your take on another comment we heard this morning—our Cormorants are leading the fleet worldwide. One of the things that comes with that is that we're finding the problems first.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: It would be sooner.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: That's one of the things that's obviously driving our maintenance man-hours per flight-hour.

Just to be clear, because some people sometimes have the wrong impression when you say that it's 30 maintenance man-hours per flight-hour, it doesn't mean that the aircraft is down for 30 hours. It means that there are 30 man-hours worth of.... There are techs working concurrently, and so on.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Right, every technician accounts for his hours.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Exactly, and it's cumulative.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Yes, they're accumulated.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Now, just to be clear, because I think this is an important point, you're having challenges now with respect to resources—people, spares, and so on. Did I hear you correctly when you said that to maintain the posture now you would need, in your view, five avn techs and one supply tech just to...?

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Five avn techs and one supply tech is the minimum—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: —in its present state.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: That would be to maintain the current posture of 30 and two, and so on.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Absolutely, yes sir.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: You talked about inventory control and so on and some of the breakdowns and that, because you have techs going in and out of the supply.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: Yes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Is there any effort, or should there be an effort, to train the techs in some inventory control procedures?

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: We already know how to do that, but that's the problem. Now what you're doing is taking the aircraft technician off the aircraft and giving him a job in something that we're saying we're already undermanned in.

● (1710)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes, so really, the sup tech is the long pole of the tent here.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: It's the only solution.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Who have your requests and inputs gone to in NDHQ?

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: We deal with IMP management, so everything we've said has gone to the program director, Mr. Bill Ricketts.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I know Bill.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: You would, yes.

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: Sir, I have a statement from IMP, if you'd like to hear, with regard to Mr. O'Callaghan's comments here today.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I have no objection, if you want to do that.

We'll probably get to it, because IMP, then, obviously deals with somebody at 400 Cumberland and puts the request in, and so on. I'll just leave that for now.

I have just a quick comment. It's a little tougher to get an airplane going than to get an ambulance going.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: It's much harder.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It's a bit of an apples and oranges thing. I can hop in my ambulance and start it. It's a little tougher....

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: I'm not talking about.... Sorry.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I think it was Mr. Bartlett....

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: Well, all of us have kind of said that, because that's the basis. What I'm talking about is the double standard. It is having it ready and having it be off as quickly as it possibly can be.

Earlier I listened. I heard him say that only 17% of the incidents actually happened between 8 and 4.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Actually, it was 20%. According to 103, it's 20%, but whatever.

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: I'm all for quality of life.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes.

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: They'd kill me if I actually said, “Why don't you reverse it?” If only 20% is happening between 8 and 4, and you have 80% happening after four o'clock and on weekends....

Hon. Laurie Hawn: So we should put them on 30 minutes from four o'clock in the afternoon to eight o'clock in the morning, and let it be two hours from....

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: I don't know. That's what I'm saying.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes, there is some obvious logic there, but it's not quite as simple as that.

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: Obviously, you talk about logistics, but it's just something that stands out to me if you're talking numbers.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: And I think it's fair to say that everybody in the system is trying to make things better. The guys at 103 are obviously doing a great job. I don't think anybody would question the kind of job those folks are doing.

Mrs. Johanna Ryan Guy: God, no.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It's spectacular.

Now, I had another question.

Actually, it is back to Mr. Feltham. When we talked about training and the work the industry is doing and so on, which is great, and that's essential, you talked about medical training and masters and officers of the watch training. Are you where you need to be on that? Again, it's one of those things I guess you're always trying to do better.

Mr. George Feltham: I think right now, to answer your question, in Canada, and probably in the world, Newfoundland is probably leading the country in the qualified people running their boats and the qualified in MEDs and that. I guess the answer is no, you're never to where you're to, but the feeling within the industry is that we've done more than our part. We've certainly brought it to a level that was never there. We've seen where we're saving lives because of that. So we feel that we have to build on that. We feel that government has a responsibility to do that.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Is there any such thing as a perfect system that will give you 100%? The sea is a dangerous place. We will always lose people at sea.

Mr. George Feltham: I don't know if we'll always lose people. We had a year when we lost none, okay, in 2003—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: That's unusual.

Mr. George Feltham: —if my memory serves me correctly, in the fishing industry. But when we decide, whether it be offshore oil or we're going to harvest the sea, or whatever it is, there has to be a system there. It's going to happen. We have to develop a system. When we as a government are not as good as our next-door neighbour down the street, or we as a government are not as good as the ones across there, you start to question why.

The 17% that occurs between 8 and 4...I mean, these are numbers that are hard to accept within the industry. There's no question about that.

Our industry has changed. We haven't looked at it. Let's not err on the.... I mean, you're fishing around the clock now, at least from April to November—fishing around the clock. It's changed. Search and rescue has to change with it, to some degree. Can we go all the way? I don't know if we can go all the way in one step, but we've got to start going forward. We're not moving. This is the point; we're not moving.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Nobody would disagree that everybody needs to do the best they can with what's at hand. You try to get more at hand to do more all the time. That's what I think everybody, certainly everybody in this room, is committed to doing. Your testimony today and your stories and your experience and your sharing of it is helpful and worthwhile, and I thank you for that.

I think my bell rang a couple of minutes ago.

● (1715)

The Chair: I just want to ask all the members if they agree to listen to Mr. Cooper for two minutes. He is the deputy site manager. He wants to speak to our committee for two minutes.

Jack.

Mr. Jack Harris: Is this like a rebuttal or something? It's a bit unusual. He sort of jumped in at the bottom and said he wants to comment on some of the things that this gentleman said. Is that something we're prepared to allow on an ongoing basis?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I would ask Mr. Cooper what is the purpose of his statement.

Mr. Don Cooper (Deputy Site Manager, IMP Aerospace): It's just a statement from corporate on.... Mr. O'Callaghan's comments here today don't reflect probably the feelings or thoughts of the company.

Mr. Jack Harris: That's understood. As a union representative he's talking about his employees, and he's speaking on behalf of the employees, not on behalf of the company, as I understand it.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: I'm definitely speaking on behalf of the employees.

Mr. Jack Harris: It's kind of a given, I suppose.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: I don't speak on behalf of DND.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Are you saying, Jack, you are prepared to listen...?

Mr. Jack Harris: No, no. If all he's saying is that Mr. O'Callaghan's views don't reflect that of the company, then we can accept that, if that's what he wants to say. I assume if he wants to make a representation to the committee itself, he can make one in writing, or whatever. I have nothing against the person. It's just simply the fact that if we go somewhere else and somebody doesn't like what someone says, can we then say, okay, someone wants to rebut that or say something different by way of argument? I'm just wondering whether that's something we're going to accept on an ongoing basis?

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Chair, I guess my point.... I have no idea what Mr. Cooper is going to say, but since we're here and since we've got the people here that we do have, I think it's frankly incumbent upon the committee to listen. We can choose to disregard it or take it any way we want, but I think it would be appropriate for us to hear from the company that is corporately responsible for operating those aircraft. To me, that's common sense. I don't know what you guys think.

The Chair: So are you...?

Yes, Scott.

Mr. Scott Simms: The problem is, earlier today someone had asked—he's a former honorary colonel who was sitting here and wanted to speak—and I told him there was no way he could do that. I was of the understanding that was the list and that was that. You can take it for what it's worth.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I don't know who that was or what his thing was. It would seem to me that since IMP is responsible for maintaining the aircraft, it would make some sense, while we're here and they're here, to hear what they have to say. It's clearly relevant to response times. It couldn't be clearer than that.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn, are you proposing a motion to—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes, absolutely.

The Chair: Okay, so we have a motion in front of us.

You can discuss that, Claude.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I gave my support to this right away, because I don't think we will be going back to Newfoundland and Labrador in the near future. It is a democratic exercise. Some people may not have known about this. Why not listen to them, if we have the time?

I am a former unionist and a great friend of National Defence, in particular of Jérôme Turcq and people from that group. Moreover, I am also able to understand that the employer may have another viewpoint. I think we have to listen to him. We will listen with discernment to everything people have to say, we can do that, we are mature enough.

Since we are in a democracy and we do have the time, I agree that we should hear them.

[*English*]

The Chair: Jack, on the same point.

Mr. Jack Harris: I'm in general agreement with the notion that if someone is here and wants to have something to say, we should hear from him. In fact, I proposed just that in Ottawa, you may recall, and the committee turned it down when I suggested that we should hear from whoever wants to have something to say to the committee. We relied on a witness list instead.

If we're going to hear from this gentleman, we should also offer to hear from the gentleman who spoke to Mr. Simms today. We're setting a precedent, Laurie, I have to say, that is contrary to what the committee has said. I've got nothing against Mr. Cooper. I'd be happy to hear what he has to say. Maybe he should send us a letter, unless we're going to open it up to anybody else who's here who wants to have something to say.

● (1720)

The Chair: Okay. We have a motion in front of us from Mr. Hawn that Mr. Roy Cooper, deputy site manager from IMP, be allowed to make a statement to us.

Mrs. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Speaking to Mr. Harris' concern over setting precedent, you know how one thing can lead to another in terms of another scenario at a future point. If we agree to this, hearing from another witness, perhaps we can also agree, have some sort of consensus, that we're not setting a new convention. It's because we're in specific circumstances here—we've come all these miles—that it won't become something we'll do on an ongoing basis.

Thank you.

The Chair: I'll call the vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: You have four minutes.

Mr. Don Cooper: Thank you. My name is Don Cooper. I'm the deputy site manager with IMP Aerospace. IMP maintains Canada's fleet of CH-149 Cormorant aircraft in support of search and rescue operations and has done so since 2001. IMP takes exception to some of the comments made here today and intends to appear before the committee at a later date to make representations in its efforts to clarify the comments, which we believe do not accurately reflect the SAR operations.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's your statement?

Mr. Don Cooper: Yes, it is.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank all the witnesses.

Yes, Mr. Bartlett.

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: I've got a couple of questions, seeing I've come a long way.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: This is not setting a precedent, Jack.

The Chair: So do we have consensus?

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: This gentleman...I don't know if I understood or not. Did you say if you went 24/7, you'd have to double the resources? What do you mean? Just manpower, is it?

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: If the military doubled their assets, if they doubled the number of helicopters....

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: Why would you need to double the number of helicopters?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I'm on the wrong side of the questions and answers here, but we asked that specific question of the CO out there. He's the guy who understands what it takes to have the availability, and his answer is, basically, double the personnel and double the helicopters. That's from a professional who understands the business and understands how to get people in the air.

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: From a layman who doesn't understand.... These helicopters are going in the air anyhow, whether they're going in 30 minutes or 60 or 70, right?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: With all due respect, the CO's business is to understand what resources it takes to keep an airplane available 24/7 on 30-minute standby. It's things like training. It's things like people having to go on leave. They have sick leave. They have training from a personnel perspective. The number is double the airplanes and double the people.

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: What do you want to double the airplanes for if they're only going on the same...if you've got—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: If you've got double the people, you have to train them.

Mr. Sean O'Callaghan: You have to train them.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: People have to be trained. They have to have their currency kept up and they have to have their qualifications kept up.

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: If I get a call to go out and do a rescue tomorrow, whether I leave and it takes me 15 minutes to clear the wharf or two hours, it doesn't matter, I don't need two boats.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: But you need training. If you're the guy flying the airplane or doing the SAR tech and it's double the people, you need training. They don't just sit there.

Trust me or not, the answer is—

Mr. Jack Harris: You're asking the questions. I don't agree with that assessment. I think if we're going to accept that.... I realize he's the commanding officer of a squadron, but I don't accept that as an answer. I'd like to see, and I'll be asking for, a more in-depth analysis.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Sure, that's great. That's fine.

Mr. Jack Harris: I understand his opinion, but I'm tending towards Mr. Bartlett's analysis at the moment. I'd like to see someone—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I'll take the professional's side.

Mr. Jack Harris: I'd like to see a professional with a full paper on that, and we're going to be asking for one.

The Chair: Yes, Jack, thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Bartlett. I understand your point. If you want to speak to a member after the meeting, all the members will be here. And we're going to have a session—

Mr. Wilfred Bartlett: I have two other items.

One of the gentlemen said we're always going to lose people, right?

The Chair: You can have this conversation after the meeting, because we are now out of time. I want to thank you.

I just want to say to the members that at 7 o'clock tonight there will be an informal meeting with people. All the members of this committee will be here for an informal meeting.

Mr. Bartlett, if you want to come to speak with us, that will be appreciated.

Thank you very much. That will end our session number 42.

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