

Christmas at Summerside - 'We just keep hoping'

In Ballinafad Christmas pageant at United Church

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There's a little plastic bottle on my desk, with a yellow ribbon tied around it. Inside are a few ounces of dirt - sandy, bright red dirt - dug from the fields of Prince Edward Island.

Now, this is a long way from Acton or Caledon or my house in Georgetown, but for the last few months, I've set a few minutes aside each week for the people of Summerside, PEI. Now that Christmas is coming, I wanted to share with you some of what is happening here.

In a way this matters to us because Summerside is - like Acton or Caledon - a good example of "small town" Canada. It's a community of people who find themselves tossed about on the tide of national events. Right now it is facing the imminent closure of a military base which is the major employer and economic lifeblood of the town.

The feds are axing CFB Summerside in an effort to reduce costs

and save money. This was also the reason we had those other cuts last Friday - which nailed the House of Commons, the Ottawa region and civil servants. I called last Friday's cuts a "victory for the people" because that's exactly what the taxpayers of Halton-Peel had been clamoring for.

So, isn't the closure of Summerside's base the same thing?

Don't we all have to share the pain involved in reducing the federal deficit and getting this debt monkey off our backs?

Well, we have to share as equally as we can. And it's hard for us to imagine here in southern Ontario an equivalent blow to that poised for that tip of PEI. It would be like losing the entire auto manufacturing business - and then some.

"We just keep hoping and hoping," Basil Stewart told me the other day. He's the mayor of Summerside, who has travelled regularly to Ottawa to buttonhole just about anybody who will listen. "They are frustrated and confused. This is going to be a long and a cold winter unless something happens."

There was a chamber of commerce meeting at the base last week, and the base commander outlined plans to phase out all the operations.

"That sure was a depressing meeting," Jack Balcom told me. He's chairman of the region in which CFB Summerside is located.

Operating out of the base is the 413 Search and Rescue Squadron, which critics of the government insist is in the best place to serve the needs of mariners. National Defence plans to move it to a spot in Nova Scotia where, among other things, there's a lot more fog.

Also taking off from the base are regular patrols which give surveillance to the fishery, and help keep foreign poachers and would-be drug smugglers at bay. The plan now is just to wipe that operation out.

The people in Summerside believe they have a case, and have been fighting now for eight months. In a way, I have joined that fight and have urged Ottawa to work on alternatives that would help save the community. Hell, if

we have to hire a small army of GST-collectors, then why not put them in Summerside? Why not try to privatize part of the base operation - maybe the fishery surveillance? Can't some creative and long-term alternative use be made of the impressive facilities there?

There's a kind of weary last-minute hope now that a meeting between Brian Mulroney and PEI Premier Joe Ghiz will result in some kind of a compromise. I hope so.

Last Sunday evening Brian Morrison, who works at the base, and some others organized a Christmas carol sing downtown near a decorated tree.

"It's just to try and raise people's spirits a little," he told me beforehand. "So, we're going to call it an Eve of Hope."

There is a very human side to government and when I went to Summerside a few months ago, I stared directly into that face. And then I wondered later how it would feel here, where we live, to have such a political thunderbolt strike one of our towns.

Would we fight back, as well? Would anyone in government listen?

Again, I hope so.

We all need our government to be responsible - and that means not saddling us with debt our children will curse. We also need government to be caring. That means balancing economics and the reality of people's lives. Ottawa needs to have a head, but it cannot rule without a heart.

This season I'll be giving thanks for all that Dorothy and I have, and for the abundance of the town we live in.

But I will also be thinking beyond that, of the new friends this job has given me - and of the PEI mud bottled on my desk. As long as hope lives, it stays right there.

evening. Their efforts were rewarded, with the sweet musical notes emitted. Rev. Bandy was presented with a few parting gifts which included a computer desk. Mr. Floyd Shortill represented the Ballinafad congregation, gave fine words of best wishes for Rev. Bandy.

The Women's Institute were joined by their husbands for a Christmas supper at Mrs. Doris Burt's home. A gift exchange that included the husbands was enjoyed by all. The ladies found time among the merriment to attend to business. Plans were made to distribute food baskets for shut-ins in the area, with a tentative delivery date of Dec. 20. A note was made for the donation given to the Foster family, who had recently suffered the tragedy of a house fire. The evening ended with eucyre being played. Their next meeting will be on Wednesday, Jan. 10.

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