

Firm sells special fire trucks to U.S. military and airports

A Canadian company is completing the last two fire trucks in a \$50 million contract for the U.S. army. "We are finishing Number 362 now," said Bill Forder, director and shareholder of Amertek in Woodstock. Some of the 362 trucks were sent to the gulf war. The trucks are military fire trucks, known by some as crash/fire/rescue vehicles, or aircraft rescue fire fighting vehicles. "They are trying to play down the term crash," said Michael Potter, president and chief executive officer of Amertek. Whatever you call them, they resemble a large square box on wheels with a chiseled front. The eight-metre (26-foot) long truck, weighs more than 13,000 kilograms (29,000 pounds) fully loaded and has four-wheel drive to tackle rough terrain. The U.S. army is using the vehicles to combat fires at military installations in the States and abroad. Some were apparently used in Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf, but the military will not admit it. Information such as where the trucks are located and how many are in service is considered classified by the army. "It's our understanding that a number of our vehicles are over there," said Potter. "Officially, we don't know. A unique feature is the ability to spray while on the move. Each truck has a 2,500 litre (480-imperial-gallon) tank of water and 310-litre (58-gallon) tank of concentrated foam. The company is also now on the move, gearing up to fill a U.S. \$11 million, 74-vehicle order for the U.S. navy. This second major American military contract confirms Amertek's product as more than just "the right stuff," but the right product at the right price. If the navy likes what it gets, it may exercise an option for an additional 44 units at a cost of \$6.5 million (U.S.) "It's highly competitive in terms of its performance and price," said Potter. Winning American military contracts is quite an accomplishment for a Canadian firm. Orders for U.S. military vehicles are usually filled by American manufacturers. Oshkosh Truck Corp. supplies several types of military trucks including fire trucks. In addition to military applications, the Amertek fire trucks are used at commercial airports. Transport Canada has purchased 68 vehicles from Amertek and they are used at airports across the country for quick reactions to fuel spills or aircraft fires. The new navy trucks have a larger capacity -- 3,785 litres (800 gallons) of water and 568 litres (120 gallons) of foam. Its 400 horsepower engine is also more powerful. Both the army and the navy versions use Detroit Diesel engines and Allison automatic transmissions. In addition to putting out fires for others, Amertek has had to put out a few fires of its own over the past year. A \$7.6 million loss resulted after the bill of materials (the list of what goes into the truck) had not been updated as costs increased. This realization reduced the company's 1988 income by more than \$1 million and created the substantial loss last year. Once creditors heard of this mistake, the company had to scramble to keep things afloat. "Every day has been a battle," said Potter. Amertek also manufactures truck bodies used in more conventional municipal fire engines, dump trucks and garbage collection. (16 Mar. 91)