

HONOURS

Inventor earns top award

Salt Spring's Don Arney in elite group

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Recognition of a phenomenal invention that transformed the world of aerial firefighting and a company that continues to create and contribute on a global scale has earned Don Arney the honour of being a 2017 inductee into the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

The invention being celebrated is the Bambi Bucket, created by Arney in 1982. The now familiar firefighting device is an open-top cloth bag fastened beneath a helicopter with full collapsibility that delivers a solid column of water or foam efficiently, directly and accurately to extinguish fires.

Arney was completely surprised when he received news of his award from organizers of the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

"It was something completely unexpected. It came right out of the blue," he said.

The 45th annual induction ceremony will take place on May 4-6 at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. The black-tie event is hosted in partnership with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and other sponsoring organizations.

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Impact includes saved lives

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"A celebratory affair, each Induction brings the world's brightest minds together to experience surprises, stories and unforgettable moments," states press material.

"Each year, we induct a new class of industry pioneers into the National Inventors Hall of Fame who have conceived and patented innovations to further our nation, and this year's class is no exception," said NIHF CEO Mike Oister.

Inductees are either chosen by nomination or by researchers within the staff of the enormous organization that employs over 100 people and runs educational programs, camps and competitions for aspiring inventors.

"I was amazed to find out that 120,000 kids go through their programs every year," said Arney.

Arney's name came up through investigation by a NIHF selection and research team. Organizers required that the news be kept secret until the unveiling of all the inductees in January 2017.

Fifteen inductees both living and deceased will receive awards and be honoured at the ceremony. Arney joins the ranks of only 14 other Canadian inventors in the 45 years that the honour has been awarded.

Shortly after Arney received the news about his award, a delegation from the NIHF came to B.C. to interview and videotape him at work and at home.

They began by filming, interviewing and shadowing Arney at work at his company, SEI Industries in Delta, followed by two days of videotaping at Arney's beautiful Mount Belcher home on Salt Spring. They were particularly interested in his 47-year meditation practice, something Arney credits for inspiring his creativity.

They were also interested in the process of invention. How did he come up with an idea like the Bambi Bucket?

"Many inventions are a process of extension,"



PHOTO COURTESY DON ARNEY

Don Arney, the Salt Spring resident who will be inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame in Washington, D.C. in May.

explained Arney. "And timing plays a big part as well."

Before inventing the Bambi Bucket, Arney worked at an underwater salvage and construction company and he would look at the canvas bags holding 2,200 pounds of water and think, "What an incredible light weight to carry this tremendous load."

He had also been involved in various aviation pursuits since 1976, which gave him necessary background knowledge when he started to investigate "monsoon buckets," the old name for the firefighting vessels. He found they had huge deficiencies and were not well regarded.

"There were three types and none of them were working well, but no one knew how to do anything different," he explained.

He went to work and the Bambi Bucket evolved. When demonstrated to firefighting professionals and organizations, they were stunned. The Bambi Bucket entered the market at the perfect time, saving time, money and lives for firefighters and multiple other industries.

"I feel very fortunate that this idea came to me," said Arney.

Innovations and improvements to the Bambi Bucket have continued over the years, such as the ability to control the amount of water dispensed by "gating" water

flow through the Bambi Max valve. This latest device is highly sophisticated, energy-efficient, cost-saving and self-regulating with state-of-the-art computer technology. In addition to the NIHF induction award, Arney has also received the Canadian Manning Award for Innovation in 1987 and BC Export Award in 2003.

Beyond financial success and recognition, Arney's inventions save lives. When a woman from California realized Arney was the inventor of the Bambi Bucket, she shared her story.

Years earlier, she told Arney, a fire was racing up the hill toward her neighbourhood and home owners were told to evacuate quickly.

"We were just getting into our cars," she continued, "when suddenly seven or eight helicopters came flying over the hill, all with Bambi Buckets, dropping their loads every 30 seconds. You just heard this boom, boom, boom..."

The fire was literally extinguished before their eyes and their homes were untouched.

Other inventions are saving numerous lives as well. In 1985, Arney developed inflatable floats for ultralight aircraft after discovering that the existing products were unsafe. While having a conversation with two pilots, they also shared a survival story. They were flying in the Arctic when a violent downdraft forced them onto broken, jagged sea ice.

"When they hit the ice, they said it was like falling into mattresses," Arney recalled. "There were no injuries and it would have been a double fatality without the floats."

When asked if Arney will be able to share some of these amazing stories at the induction ceremony, he was doubtful.

"I think I get about a minute once I am called up there," he laughed.

Instead, organizers will screen the video that was created in the three-day visit to SEI Industries and Salt Spring.

More information is at www.invent.org.