



CASE STUDY French River Fire Department (FRFD)





⊕ CHALLENGE

After a disappointing experience with consumer-grade mobile technology, FRFD needed to find a tough, cost-effective device solution that would support the fire chief and volunteer firefighters equally well on the road, at a fire scene, and in the station..

⊗ SOLUTION

The TOUGHBOOK 55 laptop had the right combination of durability and computing power for a busy fire chief who's always on the go, while the TOUGHBOOK G1 tablet's rugged design (MIL-STD-810G and IP65 certified) was a perfect fit for the firefighters.

✓ RESULT

TOUGHBOOK has enabled FRFD to work faster, coordinate more effectively with partners, produce clearer images for documentation, generate better reports, and accomplish more than it did with consumer-grade devices. FRFD is currently planning its transition from TOUGHBOOK G1 to next-generation TOUGHBOOK G2 rugged tablets.



French River

French River, a rural municipality in the Sudbury District of Northeastern Ontario, maintains a volunteer force of 30 firefighters under the leadership of a professional fire chief. The French River Fire Department (FRFD) responds to about 80 major incidents per year from its two stations in Alban and Noëlville, the largest towns in the 718 km² municipality. Working in close cooperation with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) and neighbouring municipalities, FRFD often combats wildfires in the district's fields and forests.



Don't try to take the cheap route because it will actually be more expensive in the end. Yes, TOUGHBOOK may cost a bit more up front, but they last longer. My TOUGHBOOK 55 laptop is five years old and still going strong.



Roch Bigras
Fire Chief/CEMC
French River Fire Department (FRFD)





Consumer-Grade Mobile Devices Weren't Up to the Job

During the infamous Parry Sound 33 forest fire, Fire Chief Roch Bigras had a serious problem with his laptop at a crucial time in the fight. While Bigras was shuttling between fire scenes, his consumer-grade device literally began coming apart at the seams, causing it to experience progressively worse malfunctions.

The department also had durability issues with consumer-grade tablets used by the volunteer firefighters. Purchased during the COVID crisis with an Ontario government grant, these tablets had proven to be more costly than anticipated to operate. Like the Chief's laptop, the tablets simply could not withstand the rough treatment and harsh environmental conditions to which they were subjected. Also, the batteries quickly became depleted because the tablets were almost always plugged into the fire trucks, a scenario for which the consumer-grade devices had not

been designed. After barely two years in service, two of the tablets had to be replaced, an unexpected expense that put a strain on the small department's budget.

Going forward, FRFD needed a more durable, cost-effective breed of mobile device, one that could tolerate regular bumps and drops, severe vibration (from driving on dirt roads and forest tracks), choking dust, heavy smoke, rain, snow, and temperatures ranging from extreme cold in the winter to the humid highs of a typical Ontario summer.

TOUGHBOOK is Purpose-Built for Public Safety Professionals

Checking in with colleagues, Fire Chief Bigras learned that many of the local EMS workers and police officers were using Panasonic TOUGHBOOKs, so he consulted the municipality's IT department for their assessment of the devices. The IT workers, well aware of TOUGHBOOK's reliability, long service life and durable, low-maintenance design, encouraged him to go with Panasonic. Taking their advice, Bigras soon replaced his broken computer with Panasonic's TOUGHBOOK 55, a 14" semi-rugged laptop featuring modular design and exceptional battery life.

The impressive performance of his laptop motivated Bigras to later purchase a batch of surplus TOUGHBOOK G1 rugged tablets from the Sudbury Police Service on GovDeals.ca, as replacements for FRFD's disappointing consumer-grade devices. Within a month, the department had 10 TOUGHBOOKs mounted in its fire trucks, ready for service. All of these tablets have identical setups, allowing volunteers from both stations to pick up any FRFD device and use it efficiently. For convenience, IT configured one of TOUGHBOOK's user-definable buttons to open a web browser and automatically log the user into FRFD's cloud-based suite of productivity applications.





TOUGHBOOK Delivers Greater Long-Term Value

Panasonic's versatile TOUGHBOOK 55 laptop has enabled Bigras to work productively in the office and on the road, supervising field operations, attending meetings, conducting inspections, maintaining communications and reporting on incidents. The Chief especially appreciates how easy it is to adjust the screen brightness on his TOUGHBOOK. This feature is very helpful for preserving night vision while he performs essential tasks with the device at a fire or an accident scene.

Bigras is equally pleased with the performance of FRFD's rugged tablets. Thanks to TOUGHBOOK's formidable computing power, the firefighters are able to instantly call up the maps they need to navigate the backcountry, assess threatened areas, determine municipal boundaries and coordinate with their MNRF partners. Volunteers can now focus 100% on the job of fighting fires, without worrying that their mobile device might break if it takes a hard bump.

FRFD has also used TOUGHBOOKs to save time inspecting equipment, a job the team performs every other week. Firefighters can now check a piece of equipment in less than 30 minutes, down from 45 minutes with the old tablets. Bigras attributes this improvement to TOUGHBOOK's speed and ease of use, which enable his team to quickly record comments, photograph defects, prepare reports and upload data to the cloud. The Chief noted that TOUGHBOOKs produce much clearer images than FRFD's previous tablets, making them a better choice for documenting equipment problems and visually capturing important details at fire scenes.

Based on its positive experience with the TOUGHBOOK G1 tablet, FRFD will soon start field testing the latest TOUGHBOOK G2 model. If all goes well, Bigras plans to upgrade his department to TOUGHBOOK G2s within the next three years. The municipality will then reallocate its TOUGHBOOK G1s to the Public Works department, which is currently experiencing durability issues with its own consumer-grade tablets.

As Fire Chief Bigras discussed his department's transition from consumer technology to rugged TOUGHBOOK devices, he repeatedly emphasized how important it was to consider the total cost of ownership, not just the initial price tag. Consumer-grade devices may appear less costly at first but when you factor in lower performance, shorter service life and a larger maintenance burden, it becomes apparent that TOUGHBOOK is a more effective solution for public safety workers, in terms of both cost and functionality.

