

A gusher!



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

Ross Carney with the Colby Fire Department flushed a fire hydrant on West Seventh Street today. Carney said the department

started flushing hydrants today to make sure they all work. It will take four to six weeks to work on all the hydrants in the city.

Harmless quarter lead to spy coin warning

WASHINGTON (AP) — The surprise explanation behind the U.S. government’s sensational but false warnings about mysterious Canadian spy coins is the harmless “poppy quarter,” the world’s first colorized coin, The Associated Press has learned.

The odd-looking coins with a bright red flower were so unfamiliar to suspicious U.S. Army contractors traveling in Canada they filed confidential espionage accounts about them. The worried contractors described the coins as “anomalous” and “filled with something man-made that looked like nano-technology,” according to once-classified U.S. government reports and e-mails obtained by the AP.

The silver-colored 25-cent piece features the red image of a poppy — Canada’s flower of remembrance — inlaid over a maple leaf. The unorthodox quarter is identical to the coins pictured and described as suspicious in the contractors’ accounts.

The supposed nano-technology actually was a conventional protective coating the Royal Canadian Mint applied to prevent the poppy’s red color from rubbing off. The mint produced nearly 30 million such quarters in 2004 commemorating Canada’s 117,000 war dead.

“It did not appear to be electronic (analog) in nature or have a power source,” wrote one U.S. contractor, who discovered the coin in the cup holder of a rental car. “Under high power microscope, it appeared to be complex consisting of several layers of clear, but different material, with a wire like mesh suspended on top.”

The confidential accounts led to a sensational warning from the Defense Security Service, an agency of the Defense Department, that mysterious coins with radio frequency transmitters were found planted on U.S. contractors with classified security clearances on at least three separate occasions between October 2005 and January 2006 as the contractors traveled through Canada.

One contractor believed someone had placed two of the quarters in an outer coat pocket after the contractor had emptied the pocket hours earlier. “Coat pockets were empty that morning and I was keeping all of my coins in a plastic bag in my inner coat pocket,” the contractor wrote.

In Canada, senior intelligence officials expressed annoyance with the American spy-coin warnings as they tried to learn more about the oddball claims.

“That story about Canadians planting coins in the pockets of defense contractors will not go away,” Luc Portelance, now deputy director for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, wrote in a January e-mail to a subordinate. “Could someone tell me more? Where do we stand and what’s the story on this?”

Others in Canada’s spy service also were searching for answers. “We would be very interested in any more detail you may have on the validity of the comment related to the use of Canadian coins in this manner,” another intelligence official wrote in an e-mail. “If it is accurate, are they talking industrial or

state espionage? If the latter, who?” The identity of the e-mail’s recipient was censored.

Intelligence and technology experts were flabbergasted over the warning when it was first publicized earlier this year. The warning suggested that such transmitters could be used surreptitiously to track the movements of people carrying the coins.

“I thought the whole thing was preposterous, to think you could tag an individual with a coin and think they wouldn’t give it away or spend it,” said H. Keith Melton, a leading intelligence historian.

Melton said the Army contractors properly reported their suspicions. “You want contractors or any government personnel to report anything suspicious,” he said. “You can’t have the potential target evaluating whether this was an organized attack or a fluke.”

The Defense Security Service disavowed its warning about spy coins after an international furor, but until now it has never disclosed the details behind the embarrassing episode. The U.S. said it never substantiated the contractors’ claims and performed an internal review to determine how the false information was included in a 29-page published report about espionage concerns.

The Defense Security Service never examined the suspicious coins, spokeswoman Cindy McGovern said. “We know where we made the mistake,” she said. “The information wasn’t properly vetted. While these coins aroused suspicion, there ultimately was nothing there.”

A numismatist consulted by the AP, Dennis Pike of Canadian Coin & Currency near Toronto, quickly matched a grainy image and physical descriptions of the suspect coins in the contractors’ confidential accounts to the 25-cent poppy piece.

“It’s not uncommon at all,” Pike said. He added that the coin’s protective coating glows peculiarly under ultraviolet light. “That may have been a little bit suspicious,” he said.

Some of the U.S. documents the AP obtained were classified “Secret/Noform,” meaning they were never supposed to be viewed by foreigners, even America’s closest allies.

The government censored parts of the files, citing national security reasons, before turning over copies under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act.

Nothing in the documents explained how the contractors’ accounts evolved into a full-blown warning about spy coins with radio frequency transmitters. Many passages were censored, including the names of contractors and details about where they worked and their projects.

There were indications the accounts should have been taken lightly. Next to one blacked-out sentence was this warning: “This has not been confirmed as of yet.”

The Canadian intelligence documents, which also were censored, were turned over to the AP for \$5 under that country’s Access to Information Act. Canada cited rules for protecting against subversive or hostile activities to explain why it censored the papers.

Washington searches for Iraq war leader

WASHINGTON (AP) — Now that the White House is searching for a “war czar,” it begs the question of who has been coordinating U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan the past four years.

A team of West Wing players led by national security adviser Stephen Hadley has tried to keep turf-conscious agencies marching in the same direction on military, political and reconstruction fronts. A few Bush aides say privately, however, that the White House probably should have recruited someone to oversee the war effort a year ago.

Critics say the administration’s job of coordinating the war has never gone smooth enough or fast enough.

And now two key members of the White House team focused on the war are leaving.

“The problem is not broad strategy and policy, it’s that the bureaucracy is so inefficient and there’s been so little follow-up that the machine doesn’t work,” former House Speaker Newt Gingrich said. He believes red tape in Washington is the biggest obstacle to winning in

Iraq.

Gingrich has joined others in suggesting that a single person report directly to Bush — and perhaps the next president — and ask: “What are the choke points? What regulations do we need to fix?”

The new job comes as Bush’s combat troop buildup is trying to bring a degree of calm in Iraq so political reconciliation and rebuilding can take root.

“We’re at a point now where we’ve got a plan,” Hadley said. “Execution of that plan is now everything.”

Hadley said he wants to make sure that if any request from the war zone bogs down among agencies, there is someone who can speak for the president to get it solved quickly.

“That’s the kind of thing that I do, but I can’t do it full time,” said Hadley, who must monitor hot spots around the world.

Hadley interviewed several candidates in the past few days. He has contacted at least six retired military leaders — either to learn what they think about the job or to try to persuade them to take it.