

Flying Fire Trucks

The History of Aerial Fire Fighting in Canada

UPDATE 18 – 2009

At the start of January, Sylvia Achter supplied me with a number of photographs of A-26s, taken in Whitehorse in the early 1970s. Among the shots were a series of images of the mysterious MCAC - Mid Canada Aerial Contractors' plane, CF-BVH. Combine this with another shot I received in November 2008, and it appears that MCAC is one of those well photographed, poorly remembered companies. The search continues for more. Apparently the pilot for their 1973/74 seasons was Bert Nelson. Does anyone know anything about this man?

Early February turned out to be an extremely time for me. I finally got into contact with Mary Harrington, wife of the Dave Harrington, who owned Air Spray Ltd. when it started fire bombing with Stearmans. Mary not only spent time answering my questions, but she also directed me to the recipients of her late husband's records and photographs. Thanks to her comments, I now have a fairly good picture of an unknown company called National Air Tankers Ltd., who owned and operated what I know to be the first PBY water bomber in Western Canada. After our talk I found new motivation to dig out my little note book, working my way through the phone numbers. Telephone interviews were performed with people associated with Eastern Provincial Airlines, Conair and the Saskatchewan Smoke Jumpers. I also talked with Duane Hicks, of Hicks & Lawrence, who graciously packed up his family photo album and sent it to me.

Unfortunately the progress at the start of February quickly turned sour. My wife and I were expecting to move into our new house in late May. Well, the builder sprung a late March possession date on us - leaving us with just five weeks to finish a "fix it" list the length of my arm, pack, and find a renter for our current house. Sounds a little busy huh? I think I have a few more grey hairs because of that little surprise.

Early in April, Conair celebrated its 40th anniversary with a huge party in Abbotsford. Thanks to Tom Wilson, I was able to join the festivities as the guest of Murray Cliff - one of Skyway Air Service's Stearman pilots. Conair must be commended for the great party. Not only was I able to visit with many of my past acquaintances, I met some of you face-to-face, and introduced Flying Fire Trucks to others.

A post on an internet forum led to a number of leads for pilots who'd flown PBYs in Manitoba with Northland Airlines, Midwest Airlines and Transair Ltd. After a couple phone calls, I had a pretty good idea of what was going on with these companies. I even received some pictures.

In part, because of what Mary Harrington had told me, I began looking into a company called Mercury Flights. Now the few references I've found to this company say it was Dave Harrington of Air Spray re-naming his company. I thought this was odd, especially since it would have changed back to Air Spray (1967) Ltd., and after some more digging, I discovered it was a partnership gone sour. And since Mercury Flights competed against Air Spray (1967) Ltd., I had to add yet another chapter to the book. Incidentally, that brings it up to an even 50! I also managed to track down a massive collection of Air Spray information. I'm sure everyone will be surprised when you finally get to read that chapter.

After years of waiting, WestJet finally announced that it would begin service to Yellowknife. Naturally I was ecstatic, as it meant I'd finally be able to meet with Buffalo Airways and Northwestern Air Lease. Although this year's season could easily be called dead, I was still able to talk to some of Buffalo's pilots and AMEs in Yellowknife, capture some stunning photos of a DC-4 in front of the tanker base at Hay River, and finally meet with the father and son team of Terry and Brian Harrold in Fort Smith. With any

luck, and a boost to my bank account, I'll return next summer to get some action shots.

At the end of October, I was invited to attend a reunion of the Flying Fireman Ltd. in Victoria. It was an excellent opportunity for me to reconnect with many people I've spoken to, and to connect with many of the Flying Firemen I hadn't. Thanks to Derwyn Ross for organizing the event.

At the start of December, work had me in Vancouver and Toronto. Naturally I took advantage of this and spent some time visiting Canadian Air-Crane, SEI Industries (makers of the famous Bambi-Bucket), and Field Aviation Ltd. Each company shared some interesting information.

Some of you may have noticed a new book on fire bombing has come out (see sidebar). Although this book is almost identical to the original concept I had for Flying Fire Trucks, it falls down in that it has almost zero mention of Canada, or Canadians' contributions to the fire fighting industry.

From my perspective however, this book has done three important things:

- A) its proven there's a world-wide interest in fire fighting aircraft, and what they do.
- B) The author has left the door wide open for a fresh, all encompassing book on Canada's fire fighting history - my Flying Fire Trucks.
- C) Its lit a fire under my butt, driving me to press on harder and faster than I had been.

I'd only ask that you don't confuse this book with Flying Fire Trucks.

Trevor McTavish

Book Review:

Aerial Firefighting Wolfgang Jendsch (2008)

I'll admit, this is something new for me, reviewing another authors fire fighting book - albeit an unsolicited review.

Entitled "Aerial Fire Fighting", the author (from Germany) has done a commendable job documenting modern fire fighting activities in, well, pretty much every country EXCEPT Canada. I was surprised that in 352 pages, the Canadian content could be described as almost

completely non-existent. A quick check showed that Canada or Canadians were only mentioned a half dozen times in passing, typically with incorrect information (Canadians still water bombing with DHC-2 Beavers), and that three of the six photos of Canadian aircraft were taken while they were on contract in other countries.

Now, I of all people understand the challenge this author faced, but I would have expected to see some mention of Canada's significant contribution to fire fighting, which I would easily greater than Croatia or Korea's.

Inside the hardcover are 352 heavy-weight, glossy pages, packed with photos of a wide assortment of air tankers, bird dogs, helicopters, and a selection of people and places - almost all of them in full colour. The author claims he selected them from a collection of more than 40,000 fire fighting related photos and I'd believe him.

The original book was published in the author's native German, and the English version suffers in some sentence structure and typographical errors (eg: CL-315T), but if you can work your way through the takeout menu of your local Chinese restaurant, you'll have no problem following the Anglicized version.

The author has gone to a great deal of effort creating a list of aircraft types used in fire fighting although, as I've noted, Canada's contribution is again lacking in this area, plus I have a serious problem with anyone referring to Douglas airplanes as McDonnell Douglas or Boeing products.

Although Canada is noticeable in its absence, I whole heartedly recommend this book as a reference for what the rest of the world has been doing for the last 15 years or so.

