

**Continuation of the DC-6 story started in NetLetter 1531 through 1537.**

### **CONIFAIR AVIATION - AIR SPRAYING SPECIALISTS.**

Conifair (an abbreviation of 'Conifer spraying by air') had been formed in 1978, first operating two L-749 Constellations, later joined by four DC-4s, all of which were converted to agricultural sprayers. They had spray bars along the top of the wings, which were fed by tanks in the fuselage containing the insecticide.

Flown under contract to the Canadian Department of Lands & Forests, their principal objective was to protect the conifer forests from the spruce budworm pest. Conifair's base was at St. Jean, Quebec, but most flying was undertaken from Riviere du Loup, which was much closer to the forests.

After completion of the 1983 spraying season in July of that year, the two Connies were stored and put up for sale. Spraying operations would continue with the DC-4's and with the new DC-6's recently bought by the company. Our subject was flown to St. Jean, registered C-GBZC, painted into the Conifair colour scheme of blue cheat line with a thin red line at the lower edge of the blue, and converted to a sprayer, with the installation of internal tanks and spray bar.

It was given the number 09 on the rear fuselage and company roof titles. The other two DC-6s purchased by Conifair from Detroit became C-GBYA (ex-N3022F) and C-GBYS (ex-N2904F). All three DC-6s joined the DC-4s in the attack on spruce budworm, flying from Riviere du Loup during the spraying season. C-GBZC was active during the 1984 and 1985 seasons.

In September 1985, it was noted at St. Jean having been further converted by the addition of a large under-fuselage drop tank. This conversion was in connection with the sale of the aircraft, as around this time negotiations were underway for the sale of an aircraft to the French Government's Sécurité Civile, for use as a fire bomber.

### **FIRE-BOMBING WITH THE SÉCURITÉ CIVILE.**

The Sécurité Civile's fire-bombing fleet is based at Marseille's historic Marignane Airport, and for many years flew Catalinas, ultimately replaced by Canadair CL-215's and later by -415's. There was a need for a heavier aircraft, and in 1980 three Douglas DC-6s were acquired as fire-bombers and were converted for this role by UTA Industries at Le Bourget.

They were joined by a fourth aircraft in 1982, which had already been flying as a firebomber in the United States, and which had a Rosenbaum drop tank, which was of a different type to that fitted to the first three aircraft. It was of a more angular appearance and had twelve compartments, as against eight in the other type of tank. Both types of tanks had a capacity Of 12,000 litres of water or retardant.

On April 22, 1985 F-ZBAE, one of the Sécurité Civile's three DC-6's, crashed while fighting a fire near Perpignan and was destroyed. To replace it they bought another one, this being C-GBZC from Conifair, and for the sale it was converted with a Rosenbaum tank as seen at St Jean in September 1985.

Their new acquisition was registered F-ZBAP and it arrived on its delivery flight at Marignane on April 10, 1986. It was still adorned in basic Conifair livery, and would retain these colours throughout her service in France. It did, however, receive Sécurité Civile fuselage titles and their logo was applied on the tail. The Sécurité used "Pelican" as a call sign for their DC-6's, and each of them carried a number, with F-ZBAP becoming "Pelican 65", with this number appearing on the lower fuselage aft of the wing.

F-ZBAP entered service alongside the three other DC-6s, but tragedy struck shortly afterwards when F-ZBBU "Pelican 64" crashed on July 19, 1986 while fire-bombing in Spain, so that the fleet was reduced to three thereafter, comprising F-ZBAC "Pelican 61", F-ZBAD "Pelican 62" (both of these flew in a very striking overall yellow colour scheme) and F-ZBAP "Pelican 65".

All three continued on fire duty throughout southern France. The water or retardant was contained in the belly tank, so that the aircraft retained full use of the cabin. They could, therefore, be used to carry passengers or cargo, or would fly regularly to the island of Corsica to support the Canadair fire-bomber operation based there. F-ZBAP flew for the Sécurité Civile until sold in May 1988, leaving the other two DC-6s to soldier on for a few more years before they joined Everts Air Cargo of Alaska during 1992.

### **SALE TO CONAIR LEADS TO A RETURN TO CANADA.**

The buyer of F-ZBAP was another fire-bombing company, Conair of Abbotsford, British Columbia. One of the world's leading aerial fire-fighting organizations, Conair not only operates a large fleet of air tankers, but also converts aircraft for this specialized task.

They designed the highly successful 'Conair Firecat', a conversion of the Grumman Tracker, and they supplied a number of these aircraft to the Sécurité Civile. The sale of the DC-6 was thus part of a larger transaction, involving Conair's purchase of the aircraft while supplying further Firecats to the Sécurité Civile.'

For its return to Canada, the DC-6 reverted to its original registration of C-FCZZ, and Captain Rod Boles was dispatched to collect the aircraft. As he recalls, "I presented a cheque to cover the purchase price and spent the day running around various government offices in Paris to get the paperwork before the aircraft could be released."

On May 18, 1988 C-FCZZ departed from Marignane for the last time, flying north to Prestwick. The local enthusiasts were on hand to record its transit, their photographs showing it to be still in the same Conifair colour scheme as when first delivered.

Still sporting Sécurité Civile roof titling and tail logo, the DC-6 night-stopped at Prestwick and then continued onwards via Reykjavik, Frobisher Bay and Fort McMurray before arriving at Abbotsford on May 20.

The en-route refueling stops were required as the aircraft's auxiliary fuel tanks had been removed during fire-bomber conversion.

At Abbotsford the aircraft was overhauled and painted into Conair's smart red and white colour scheme, given Conair roof titles and the fleet number '452' on the nose-wheel door. It was to fly as 'Tanker 52' — with this number emblazoned in red on the aircraft's tail.



Conair tanker 52, alias Douglas DC-6A/B C-FCZZ gives a demonstration of her fire power during an Abbotsford Air Show watched by many enthralled spectators. (Sean Keating).

During the course of this work, the Rosenbaum tank was removed. By then it was outdated and did not provide optimum retardant coverage, and was replaced by a tank of Conair's own design.

The aircraft was also modified for oil-spill dispersant application and lake fertilization, both of which used internal tanks. Being a DC-6A it still retained its large cargo doors and could be used as required as a transport to haul fire-fighting equipment.

Thus modified, it joined the Conair fleet, which included ten DC-6 air tankers and many other types. It was to serve Conair faithfully for twelve years, until the DC-6s began to be superseded by Convair 580's. During this period, C-FCZZ was engaged in numerous fire-fighting sorties throughout western Canada.

**Continued in NetLetter nr 1539.**