Nanaimo’s big yellow birds

Seemingly a permanent fixture at the Nanaimo airport, the first of two Consolidated PBY-5A flying boats may soon be on its way to Europe. For nearly five years, these aircraft have been sitting not far from the Nanaimo-Colaishaw Air Terminal, attracting the attention of passersby on the old Island Highway.

In 1998, the two PBYs had been purchased from a company in Ontario and flown to the Vancouver Island airport. Known as the Canso in Canada and Catalina in the United States, during the Second World War these amphibians served on anti-submarine, shipping and air-sea rescue patrols.

In 1947, the Babb Company (Canada) Ltd. was advertising for sale a number of PBY-5A Canso aircraft located at various points throughout the Dominion. Prices ranged from $9,000 to $15,000. Subsequently, many surplus Cansos entered civil use, some being converted to carry passengers. Fitted with a wide variety of antennae and other instruments, they were also used extensively for electromagnetic surveys. Others were converted to water bombers, including the two Nanaimo machines, most recently operated by the Government of Saskatchewan.

In 1963, Field Aviation converted both aircraft to water bombers for service with Kenting Aviation and France’s Protection Civile in the fire-fighting role. In 1974, they went to Norcanair, and later in 1980, the Government of Saskatchewan. Retired in 1997, the two Cansos were purchased by Hicks and Lawrence of St. Thomas, Ontario, which in turn, sold them to a Malaysian operator.

Nanaimo AME Ray Williams started working on the two aircraft to make them suitable for tourist operations in Africa. Waterbombing tanks were removed and the lower fuselages re-skinned. The aircraft were also fitted with one-piece tinted observation blisters and side windows, a rear ventral airstair and a 12-passenger interior. "They were destined to work in Zimbabwe around the Zambezi River, Victoria Falls and such. Unfortunately, the project stalled due to political unrest in that country." The two flying boats remained in Nanaimo.

Three years ago, Alfred Rijkers, one of 14 shareholders in an international consortium and his partners started looking for a Catalina aircraft. "It’s a small world; everyone in this kind of activity knows where every Catalina is hanging out." Catalina Aircraft Ltd., a company registered in the United Kingdom, has now purchased Canso C-FNJF from its Malaysian owners.

Rijkers estimates that of the 3,431 aircraft produced, between 20 and 25 are airworthy. Williams believes the number may actually be as high as 30. An extensive re-fit of the aircraft (msn CV283 built by Canadian Vickers in 1944) was completed in April 2003. The plan is to have the aircraft in England by the end of May. "But before that, they have to do a lot of flight training and running the engines around here for a while," says Williams.

Rijkers, an aircraft designer from the Netherlands who was on the Airbus development team, is in Nanaimo familiarizing himself with the aircraft and helping to prepare the Canso for its ferry flight to the United Kingdom. Following re-certification by Transport Canada, the aircraft will be used overseas for aerial photography. "The leisurely 105-knot cruising speed of these aircraft makes them perfect for such work. They can stay aloft for 28 hours without refueling," says Rijkers.

Taking the northern route to Duxford will require five stops. The crew will consist of three pilots, a maintenance engineer, a journalist and a number of the group’s shareholders. The departure will not go unnoticed. "There’s a lot of interest from the local community. On take-off, the Catalina will be escorted by several other aircraft," Rijkers states.

Rijkers, who is not yet qualified to fly the aircraft, has been on many flights on a Canso that operated in England between 1984 and 1998 until it was lost during a water landing near Southampton.

"Initially, we will fly the aircraft on the European airshow circuit while contracts are being firmed up." For the coming season, the group has commitments for 10 airshows and probably double that number in negotiation. Rijkers is quite optimistic about the future of their half-million US.-dollar investment. "We may have a filmaking contract for at least six months. If this materializes, the second Canso will be needed. So, Canso C-FNJF (1943 Canadian Vickers msn CV249) may follow in 2004.

"With 14 shareholders supporting this aircraft, there is a good financial base to continue operating the Catalina, even if there’s no work for it," Rijkers observes. "We’ll take whatever comes along."

Not far from the two yellow aircraft lies a pile of parts. It’s about all that remains from another former RCAF Canso.

They made a houseboat out of it immediately after the Second World War," says Williams, who located these parts in Ontario. The weird-looking contraption was called "Sad Sack." The tail section and wings were removed and a deck placed on top surrounded by a railing. "They put a couple of marine engines on it and for a number of years it cruised around the Great Lakes," Sad Sack or not, apparently this former Canso had a couple of U-boat kills to its credit.

The Canso’s nose went to Skagit County, Washington, where one of these aircraft is being rebuilt. "They wanted it for the gunner’s nose, and I ended up with the rest." Williams paid $200, a good deal for the extra parts and worth even more as scrap aluminum.

Boeing, Canadian Vickers and Canadair Ltd. produced a combined total of 424 PBY-5As. In 1979, as many as 39 Cansos, most of them Canadian-made, were still active in Canada. Now, less than 25 years later, this number may soon be down to less than half a dozen. After losing one two years ago, Buffalo Airways still has three of them flying from Yellowknife each summer.

With the planned departure of yet another Canadian-built Canso, Canada will lose a little more of its rich aviation history.