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**WHEN IN
DIRE NEED**
EUROPE ADAPTS
TO A NEW REALITY

**HOW TO
PICK A
HELICOPTER**

**AUSTRALIA'S
FIRST SOVEREIGN
CONTRACT
AIR TANKER**



AUSTRALIA'S FIRST SOVEREIGN CONTRACT AIR TANKER

CONAIR Q400AT WILL CALL AUSTRALIA
FOR FOUR YEARS ON NEW CONTRACT

STORY BY JASON JORGENSEN



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As of September 1st, Conair's Dash 8-400AT air tanker, or Q400AT as it's known in Australia, arrived at Bundaberg in Queensland, Australia, to kick off their new four-year contract which will provide for the Dash-8 turned specialized air tanker to remain in Australia year-round. Because the shared contract between two Australian states is long enough for the air tanker to remain in the country for the duration of the contract, Australia collectively has taken yet another important step in following the recommendations that the Bushfire Royal Commission report recommended after the devastating 2019-2020 fire season; the creation of a national 'sovereign' aerial firefighting fleet.

STATES WORKING TOGETHER

Conair, and Field Air, their Australian AOC partner of more than a decade, have recently been awarded a four-year, primary contract in Australia, for a Q400AT, the air tanker variant of the Dash-8. The new air tanker contract began on 01 September, 2021, and is for 168-day minimum standby per season which is a first for the country which has traditionally relied on the bulk of its large air attack resources to come from aircraft that are shared with North America. The unique workings which allowed this new contract to come to fruition are that it is for 168-days shared by both Queensland, and the state of Victoria. Taking advantage of their offset fire seasons, the combined states were able to produce a contract of a much longer length that will be managed between them both.





Photo courtesy of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

While both states have committed to the total contract length, the structure of the contract also gives Conair an eight to ten-day break in between working in Queensland and then moving the aircraft over to Victoria. Though in reality, this break could also be taken up by either, extensions in Queensland or early starts in Victoria. This is a significant step forward in Australia's aerial firefighting capability because it enables Conair to leave the Q400AT in Australia 12 months of the year, as there is now sufficient work that Conair can manage to budget the maintenance, stores, and logistical support for that aircraft in-country, without the need to ferry the aircraft back and forth from North America. The result is what could very well be considered the first sovereign contract air tanker in Australia.

BORROWING A PAGE FROM THE NORTH AMERICAN PLAYBOOK

Though new to the scene in Australia, this contract type is based on a model that is quite common in North America. There, the governments of Canada and the United States



Photo courtesy of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

have always had a fleet of contracted air tankers since the late 50s, early 60s. This is because when the governments of the day were forming their air tanker programs, they didn't entertain the purchases of the aircraft, they simply wanted to contract them from the private sector to save themselves the added factors.

Conair has had these types of contracted partnerships with the government of British Columbia, the government of Alberta, and the government of Yukon since the 60s and those contracts have always been of sufficient enough length that they were able to build a successful company around them. Now, this new four-year Australian contract is the first step towards a similar type of program where the contract is such that the company doesn't need to bring the air tanker back to try to find more work in the Canadian season.

PIECES AND PARTS

As is typical with sending their aircraft on overseas contracts, Conair has also sent over a spares pack with the airplane. This pack is essentially a shipping container full of the parts and tooling that would likely be needed by the air tanker crews while they are away on contract. However,



one of the nice things about the Q400s, and Conair's RJ-85 air tankers is that the original, commercial aircraft variants are both very common in the skies over Australia.

This means that the company would also certainly have access to emergency parts, and tooling types all over the country should the need ever arise. With the air tanker now being in Australia year-round, it means that Conair will be shipping over more loads of additional spares and tooling in order to stock, and maintain stock, at the facility where they will be conducting their maintenance activities.

NEW BASE OF AUSTRALIAN OPERATIONS

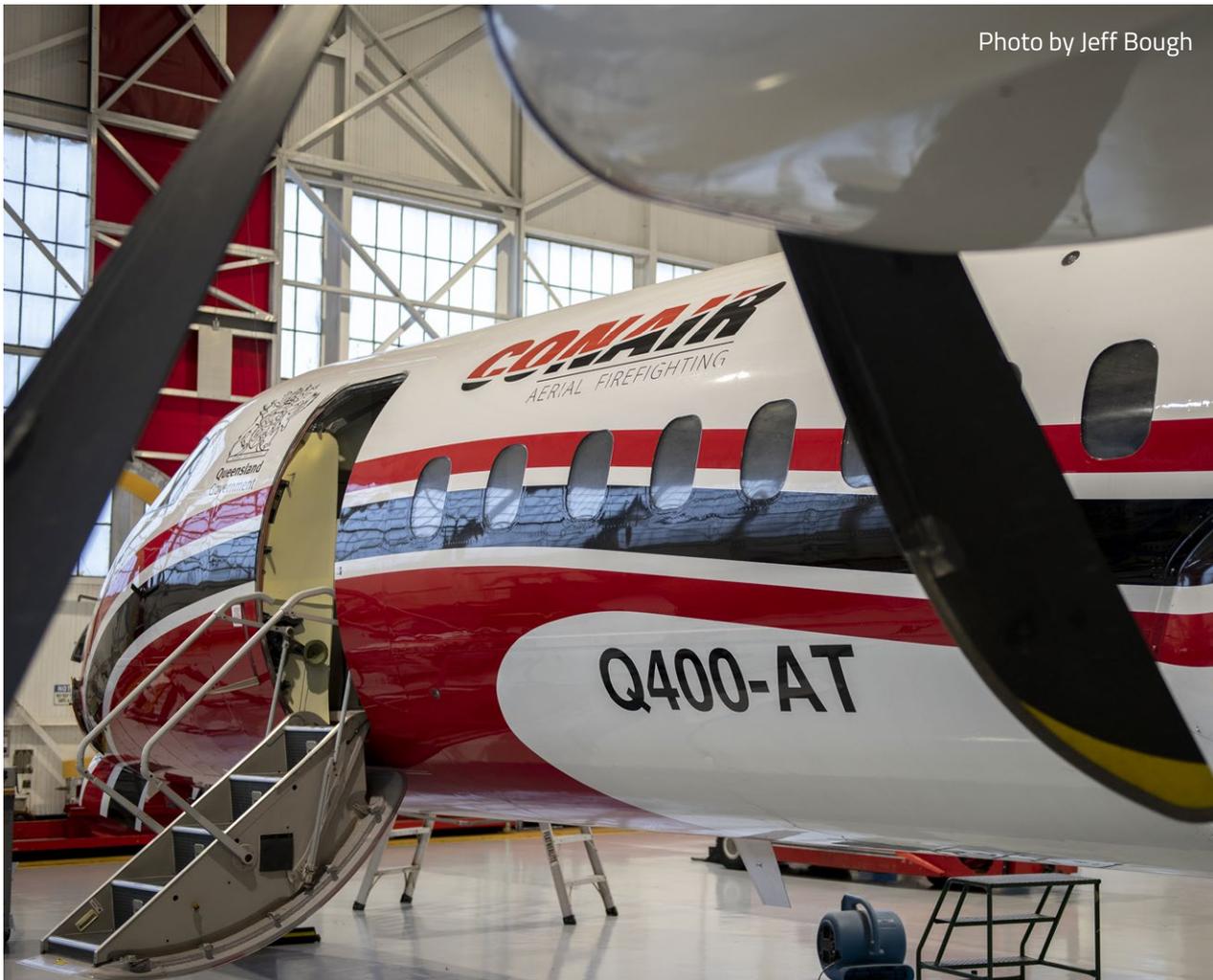
For the first two years of the contract, Conair will be



Photo courtesy of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

renting a hangar in Avalon to support their Australian tanker program, but now that they no longer need to transport aircraft, personnel, and supplies back and forth between continents each season, Field Air is working to set up a permanent maintenance facility in Australia for the aircraft.

The new \$5 million maintenance facility is presently in the detailed planning stages and is slated to be constructed at what is known as a 'greenfield site' just off the southeast end of Runway-36 at Ballarat Airport in Ballarat, which is located just outside of Melbourne in the state of Victoria. Once completed, this hangar will become Conair's first permanent maintenance facility in Australia for their tanker programs there and will be of a large enough size and capability to accommodate either a Q400AT or RJ-85 for maintenance.



PANDEMIC EFFECTS

Though Conair's Q400AT will now be permanently based in Australia, the initial movement of the aircraft from British Columbia to Bundaberg, and the subsequent movement of additional aircrews and support personnel haven't been without their difficulties, especially when dealing with the extra considerations and circumstances which have arrived in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. "COVID is the first and last thing we think about every day. It has impacted every corner of our business around the globe, and our contracts in Australia are no different," states Jeff Berry, Conair's Director of Business Development.

The company has been fortunate to have very good lines of communication with the Australian Government, and other governing agencies, through their Australian partner. Berry also explains that they are working constantly with the Australian authorities on how to safely move the crews into Australia, integrate them and have them operate safely without violating any of the protocols that are in place in Australia.



ISLAND HOPPING

And the effects of the pandemic haven't just changed how things are done in Australia, it has even affected the routes that the company uses to ferry aircraft. Conair's typical route to Australia would be from Abbotsford, BC to Hawaii, then the Marshall Islands, where they would overnight, then over to the Solomon Islands and ending in Australia. The Solomon Islands have been closed for over a year now, so Conair has had to re-route from the Marshall Islands to Guam and then on to Cairns, which adds about five to six hours to the trip.

All along the way there are protocols for COVID testing and providing proof of vaccination and more protocols upon arrival to make sure the crews are not in violation of any isolation requirements. Not to mention the mountains of paperwork that go into foreign operations such as this even in non-pandemic conditions. As Berry reflects, "It's all continuous and evolving, but our continued success revolves around open communications. And we're very fortunate we have that!"



PURE AIR TANKER

The only modifications Conair needed to make to the aircraft for the Australian contracts were upgrading the radios to reflect the requirements of the fire agencies in Australia. However, the task of flying an aircraft across the Pacific that was never designed to do so, did take a few extra modifications. Because the AT version of the Dash 8-400 is designed purely for the air tanking role, it's a little bit lighter and carries a bit more fuel than the company's



Photo courtesy of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

multi-role Dash 8-400MRE variant, which gives the aircraft a full three and a half hour mission duration even with a full load of 10,000 liters of retardant.

Still, for the aircraft to physically make the journey across the Pacific Ocean, Conair had to install a temporary ferry fuel system which gave it the range needed to make it to Hawaii, a distance that this aircraft was never designed to fly. They also had to have an HF radio onboard the aircraft for the transoceanic flight. Once the aircraft arrived in Australia the company



uninstalled the ferry tank system and the Q400AT was returned to its dedicated air tanker condition.

THE MORE THE MERRIER

Their Dash-8 based air tanker is not the only aircraft from the company making the journey across the Pacific this year either. Conair also has two RJ-85s on additional contracts in Australia this fire season. One, which will be based in New South Wales, arrived in the country in October, and the second, which will be on contract in Victoria, will arrive in early December. So, as the Q400AT is wrapping up its contract in Queensland, it will be joining one of its sister RJ-85s in providing air tanker support to the state of Victoria.

MOVING FORWARD AS THE INDUSTRY BECOMES MORE FAMILIAR WITH THE Q400AT

The prospective future for Conair's newest air tanker seems very bright, the company says it has been receiving positive feedback from their partnering agencies everywhere the Q400AT has been utilized. Following on the heels of the aircraft's first successful contract in Australia last fire season, earlier this year, the aircraft was also used on fires in Alaska and British Columbia for



the first time and was later exported to Washington on contract from Alaska for the latter part of the fire season in the Northwestern state. According to Conair, everyone involved in those contracts has been impressed with the Q400ATs performance and capabilities. Additionally, while they won't discuss any specifics at this time, Conair states that there is also "international interest" in the AT version of their Dash 8-400 air tankers.

In light of this new contract, is Australia going to be following in the footsteps of North American governments in contracting its own, in-country, fleet of airtankers year-round? At this time it is probably too early to tell, but perhaps, Australia's first sovereign contract air tanker program might have opened the doors enough to allow it to be joined by yet another in the future - only time and conditions will tell. ■



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