



A FOND FAREWELL FIRECAT

CONAIR'S TURBO FIRECAT RETIRES FROM SERVICE

PHOTO ANTHONY PECCHI

NEARLY 40 YEARS FIGHTING FIRES IN FRANCE

Conair, led by Barry Marsden's vision and foresight, evolved from an aerial fire control operator to world leader in aerial firefighting control products in the late 1970s when the group began purchasing surplus Grumman S-2 Trackers, primarily from the Canadian Navy, and modifying them into aerial firefighting airtankers. The aircraft was adapted by removing all of the military equipment, raising the cabin floor and installing a 3296 litre retardant tank where the torpedo had originally been. Christened the Firecat, a name that married its role in fighting wildfires with the Grumman tradition of using a cat as part of its naming convention, the first aircraft entered service in 1978 in Canada.

In response to challenging environmental conditions in the south of France, including mountainous terrain, large forests, strong winds, extensive dry periods and high temperatures, France developed a program of attack called *Guet Aérien Armé* or 'armed aerial war'. Key to the program was a fast airtanker with a 3000 litre capacity that operated more cost-effectively than a Canadair in the region. The answer was the Firecat and in 1981 France ordered three of what would be 14 airtankers in total over the years.



AN 'ARMED AERIAL WAR' ACROSS THE PACIFIC

In 1982 the French Sécurité Civile accepted delivery of the first Conair Firecat at Marseille International Airport after a long nine leg flight from British Columbia. After six years of successful operation, the French Sécurité Civile requested an upgraded aircraft and the Turbo Firecat was introduced, faster and capable of carrying a larger load than its predecessor.

The Turbo Firecat featured Pratt & Whitney Canada turboprops housed on cowlings constructed of lightweight composite materials, replacing the heavier piston engines. It also offered five blade propellers, a larger tank (3395 litre), foam injection system, and a single point refueling system in addition to underwing fuel tanks that allowed the aircraft to be reloaded and refuelled in less than 4 minutes.

The cockpit was enhanced in the Turbo Firecat but flying the aircraft was still not exactly comfortable. There was no door – only a hatch to slip through from the top of the fuselage.

With a cockpit flanked by two massive engines and no air-conditioning, the environment was hot and loud, even with ear protection. The cockpit dash could be termed vintage, a mix of dials, buttons and gauges with no screen in sight, but its simplicity is part of its appeal. One big advantage of the aircraft for pilots is its sightlines. Bubble side windows and a high wing design mean significant visibility from all angles.

“I worked on the Turbo Firecat prototype program from the start, fresh out of the AME program at BCIT. It was an exciting opportunity to be part of taking apart an existing airframe, down to the shell, and rebuild it into something quite different – then see it fly for the first time.” Marcel Pond, Conair. And on August 7, 1988 it did just that, taking flight from Abbotsford International Airport, manned by Captain Al Baker and Copilot Gordon Darnbrough, along with Flight Test Engineer Bill Schinstock.



Marcel saw the aircraft through from its birth to its retirement, working extensively with the Turbo Firecat in the last decade of its worklife. The French Sécurité Civile's 13 Turbo Firecats were initially set to retire in 2007 but in 2003 the French Government elected to extend the operation to 2020. For 8 years he travelled to France each fall to provide onsite technical support for periods of up to 6 months at a time, performing system component overhauls, major structural repairs, and detailed inspections in order to extend the airtankers' life.

It is bittersweet the aircraft has missioned out to its last fire. Conair is proud to have supported the French Sécurité Civile and our Canadian partners with this historic aircraft over the years, from envisioning its potential to realizing its value. Thousands of wildfires have been fought using this tanker, with millions of hectares and countless lives and structures being saved in the process. We are thankful for its service.



Photo Anthony PECCHI