

Water bomber hits its target

By Gordon Hamilton

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VANCOUVER - More than 1,000 people lined the prow of Canada Place on Wednesday afternoon for a chance to watch one of the world's largest and most effective fire-fighting tools - the giant Martin Mars waterbomber - in action.

The 73-tonne flying boat, one of only two left in the world, flew low over the towers of Coal Harbour on its approach run and dropped its payload right in front of Canada Place in a demonstration during the annual B.C. Truck Loggers Association convention aimed at promoting the aircraft's overpowering abilities.

"I love it, I love it," said aircraft enthusiast Dave Bedard of Coquitlam, one of the few onlookers who didn't have a camera for the event. "This is one of the most beautiful aircraft in the world. I came here just for the experience. You can't put it on film."

And for nine-year-old Noah Berson, out of school for a teachers' professional development day, one word summed up the Mars drop, no more than 400 metres from where he stood: "Awesome."

The Mars, a four-engined fire-fighting fixture in the province for 47 years, was brought over from its Sproat Lake base on Vancouver Island by owner Wayne Coulson, a forest industry entrepreneur who believes the 37,000 kilograms of water they can carry in onboard tanks gives them a role in fighting fire that can't be matched.

But there was a practical purpose to the drop too, said Doug Moore, marine operations co-ordinator for the Vancouver-Fraser Port Authority: If the Mars is ever needed to fight fires in Greater Vancouver, it's important to know that it can get in and out of the crowded harbour safely.

"This is the first time they have ever dropped in the harbour," Moore said. "One of the reasons we are happy to co-operate with this is because this is part of emergency response. If we have a major incident within the area, we may need these guys to help us out. This is a great drill."

Coulson bought the aircraft last year from TimberWest Forest. Timberwest was the last remaining company in a consortium of forest companies that acquired them from the U.S. Navy in 1961. TimberWest found them too costly to maintain.

"It's ironic when you think of all the companies that have come and gone, all the people that have come and gone, but the Mars is still here," Coulson said of the water bombers.



CREDIT: Mark van Manen/Vancouver Sun

The Martin Mars completes a demonstration drop of its load of water near Canada Place in Vancouver's harbour Wednesday.

"We thought this would be a real celebration of the aircraft."

Coulson, who considers himself the last operational owner of the Mars, said he is trying to breath new life into them by marketing them not only in B.C. but around the world.

Built in the dying years of the Second World War, the Mars was and still is the world's largest operational flying boat with a wingspan of 61 metres - wider than a Boeing 747.

Coulson has formed a corporate division in his group of companies for the aircraft - Coulson Flying Tankers - and has added enough infrastructure - a mobile workshop and a small repair boat so that even a blown engine can be replaced within 24 hours.

The bomber was used extensively in fighting the wild grass fires in California last fall, at one point stoping a stubborn fire got out of control near San Diego and raced towards a subdivision.

"We hit the bull's eye on the first drop and saved some homes," Coulson said.

Wednesday's tour was the first drop within the city but it wasn't the first time the Mars has been to Metro Vancouver. It loaded water from the harbour several years ago while fighting fire on the North Shore Mountains.

And in the 1960s it flew low over New Westminster in a bombing run reminiscent of the Second World War, dropping its payload on a Fraser River waterfront sawmill that was ablaze.

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