Underwater 'Planespotting off BC

report & photography by Ken Donohue

The 737 (C-GBPW) was the 391st built and delivered on January 13, 1975, to Pacific Western Airlines. It also flew for America West Airlines (as N128AW), and last served with Air Canada.

Have you ever wanted to 'planespot without having to stand behind a security fence? Or longed to see the world's best-selling airliner close-up? Now, thanks to the Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia (ARSBC), you can. The only catch is that you will have to strap a tank of air on your back and dive about 80ft (24m) below the ocean's surface. This September, the ARSBC is creating an artificial reef by sinking a Boeing 737-200, which last flew for Air Canada. The aircraft was delivered on January 13, 1975, to Pacific Western Airlines, later Canadian Airlines International, and also flew for America West Airlines.

Originally, the airframe was to be scrapped, but the ARSBC was approached to see if it was interested in sinking the 737. Qwest Airparts, of Tennessee, which bought the aircraft from Air Canada, agreed to donate the airframe once all useable parts were removed. This project, and the reef itself, became known as ARS-540, for the fleet number that Air Canada gave this particular aircraft.

A non-profit organization, the Vancouver-based ARSBC has created six dive sites since 1990. Along with four Royal Canadian Navy destroyer escort vessels, and a coastal freighter of the Forties, the society's largest artificial reef is the HMCS *Cape Breton* (originally HMS *Flamborough Head*), a 10,000-ton (9,071t) World War II Liberty ship.

"We know how to deal with a ship, but sinking an airplane is something new," says Howard 'Howie' Robins, vice president of the ARSBC, as he shows *Airways* around the aircraft. Once sunk, the airframe will rest about eight feet (2.5m) off the ocean floor, on a specially built cradle system that is being designed by engineering students at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. "Since this has never been done before, the students are really designing a prototype for future projects," says Robins. "The cradle will have to be made to hold more than the airframe, as marine life collects on the site."

Once the recyclable components were taken off the aircraft, the next challenge was to move the airframe from Air Canada's maintenance hangar on the north side of Vancouver International Airport to a spot near the airport's South Terminal. "It was a surprisingly smooth operation," notes Robins. "The aircraft was carried on the back of a flatbed trailer, and a part of
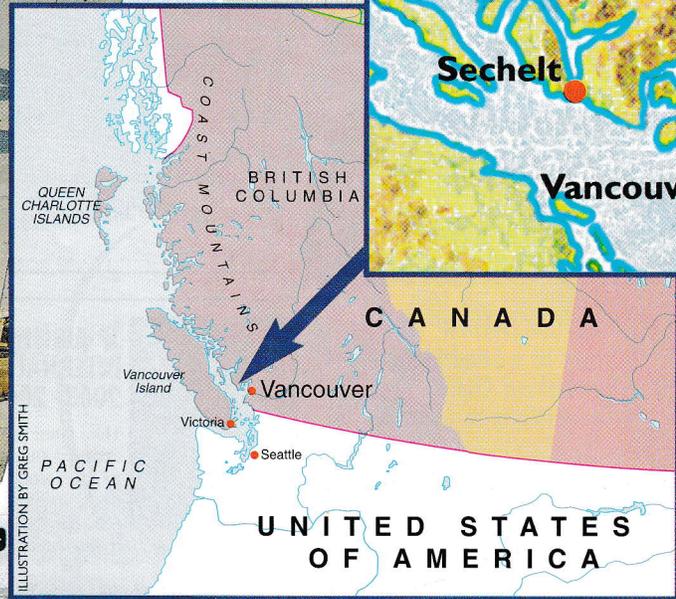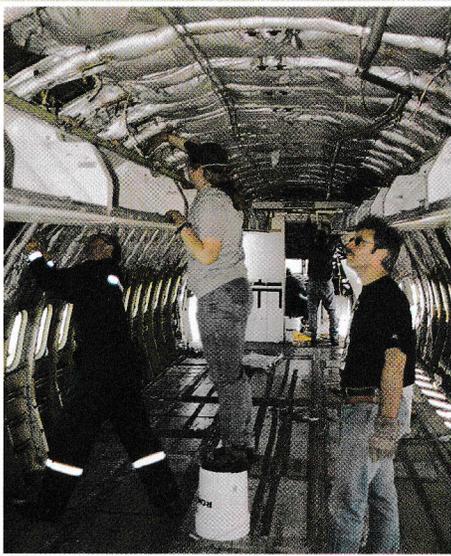
the airport's perimeter fence was cut." While the move itself took only 45 minutes, the whole operation lasted about five hours, and was done overnight so as not to interfere with air traffic.

In May, a volunteer work crew began stripping the inside of the aircraft to bare metal. Some pulled away insulation panels from the cabin bulkheads, others removed panelling in the cargo compartment, while another crewmember busied himself trying to make sense of the mass of wiring in the cockpit. Before the sinking, the cabin floor will be removed, so divers can enter the aircraft through the emergency exit doors or through the cargo hold. And because it will be sitting in relatively shallow water, light from the surface will penetrate the window holes. Apart from readying the inside of the aircraft, the ARSBC had to prepare the necessary paperwork, which included a Canadian Coast Guard application to sink. "We have had to involve the Coast Guard, Environment Canada, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans," says Robins, "but everyone has been very supportive."

Initially, the airframe was to be sunk in Howe Sound, near Vancouver, but a decision was made to change the location to Sechelt Inlet, near the town of Sechelt, about 70mi (112km) northwest of Vancouver, on BC's Sunshine Coast. The society is currently conducting five site surveys to determine the best spot for the airframe. "The ocean bed needs to be fairly flat with a mild current running through, and not a lot of outcropping," explains Robins. The entire 'footprint' will be about 150sq ft (14m²).

When the airframe is ready for sinking, it will be transported airside to a nearby Coast Guard station, placed on a barge, and taken to its final resting place. A crane will lower the hulk, attached to its cradle, into position. "This is a totally different project than sinking a ship," says Robins. "Everything, from transportation to the sink operation itself, will be a learning experience for us. When we sink a ship it is already in the water." As the airframe is lowered, there will be diver-to-surface communication, and the weight of the aircraft will send it to the bottom. Cameras will be mounted inside the aircraft and on its tail to document the sinking. Within three to five years, lots of marine life will have collected on the structure.

The cost of the project is about C$60,000 ($43,670), which is relatively small compared to the C$500,000

($364,000) needed to sink a naval destroyer. The Artificial Reef Society does not receive any government funding, but relies on private donations and its community of divers for support. As with other artificial reefs, this one is expected to provide huge spin-off benefits for the local community.

Robins notes that it would take dives by only about 600 to 800 people to pay for the project, and the society would expect that in the first season. "We are very excited about this," enthuses Robins, "This will be the first airframe to be sunk on the West Coast of North America—besides many of us have flown in this particular aircraft."

As I climb through the aircraft's emergency exit window and step onto the wing, Robins turns to me, "These are projects done by divers for divers." Maybe so, but it is not inconceivable that there are some aircraft aficionados who will gladly don underwater breathing apparatus and descend for some submarine 'planespotting. ✤

(For more information on the Artificial Reef Society, see www.artificialreef.bc.ca)