

Philippine bomber in WWII colours

Mars flying tanker will be out on Sproat Lake next week before it's shipped down to naval museum

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The twin Mars bombers don't look quite the same anymore.

Visitors and residents on Sproat Lake next week will have a chance to see the Philippine Mars bomber out on the water in its original colours.

Both Martin Mars water bombers will be parked at the Coulson Flying Tankers base on Sproat Lake at the end of next week, but pilots will need to taxi the Philippine out on the water first in preparation for its flight south of the border in the spring as part of a transfer to the U.S. National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Florida.

The mighty Philippine won't be airborne yet, but it will be moved out in front of the Hawaii Mars as the twin flying tankers are parked on land at the bomber base, said Wayne Coulson, CEO of the Coulson Group, which owns and operates the Martin Mars aircraft.

The Philippine Mars has been parked in the back of the base in recent years as it underwent a visual restoration. The familiar red and white was stripped off to reveal the bomber's original look.

"It's painted in the same paint scheme and markings as it was the day it was delivered in 1945," said Coulson, adding the plane was given a fresh coat.

Along with four other Mars bombers, the Philippine was



The Philippine Mars sits by Sproat Lake in July at Coulson Aviation's bomber base, repainted in its original colours from the U.S. Navy. Coulson plans to put the plane back in the water next week in preparation for transportation to a naval museum in Florida next year. (ERIC PLUMMER, TIMES)

originally constructed by the Glenn L. Martin Company for the U.S. Navy for service during World War II.

The Hawaii and Philippine Mars were purchased by Flying Tankers, a consortium of forest companies, and ferried to British Columbia in 1959. They were fitted with 27,000-litre water tanks for fighting wildfires. The Coulson Group acquired the aircraft in 2007.

The Philippine's transfer from Port Alberni to Pensacola

has been in the works for the past five years, Coulson said. In exchange for the historic aircraft, Coulson's company would receive two C-130 Hercules planes and eight smaller aircraft, which they would then overhaul and sell, he said. If the contract is finalized the bomber would fly down — either directly or with a stop in California — in April or May, 2016.

The Philippine was retired in 2012 after it was inactive for a

number of years. Coulson operated a museum at the bomber base from 2007-12 during the summer months.

A view of the Hawaii Mars in the air was available several times this summer during flights around the Alberni Valley. A group of 14 Chinese pilots and engineers visited Port Alberni in July to learn how to manoeuvre the large plane in preparation for (smaller) flying tankers currently under construction in China.

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Wayne Coulson, CEO of Coulson Group

After the Dog Mountain fire in early July the B.C. Government contracted the Hawaii Mars for 30 days, sending the water bomber on forest firefighting missions on the Island, the Fraser Valley and the Interior. The Hawaii set a new B.C. Record at a fire near Harrison Lake on Aug. 2, dropping 108,000 litres of water in an hour.

The Hawaii Mars's contract ended on Tuesday without an extension from the province.

Coulson said his company will keep the Hawaii flight-ready for another week in anticipation of a possible short-term contract with Washington State to help fight the Stickpin blaze near the Canada-U.S. Border south of the Okanagan. Then it'll be parked in behind its twin for the rest of the year.

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