



Courtesy of the Thunder Bay Museum

▲ Construction of the Hurricanes at Can Car

Made in Fort William

The Local History of the Hawker Hurricane

By Kat Lyzun

During the Second World War, the small city of Fort William, Ontario became a vital part of the Allied war effort. What is now the Alstom plant on Montreal Street was known as Canadian Car and Foundry (Can Car), and for a time was the largest aircraft company in Canada, producing thousands

of aircraft for the Royal Air Force. Can Car entered the aviation game in 1936, producing a biplane called the Grumman G-23 Goblin. By 1938, with war on the horizon, the British were looking for places to produce aircraft away from the front lines. Fort William, in the centre of

Canada, was not an obvious choice for a warplane facility. But after successful lobbying by cabinet minister C.D. Howe, who was also representing the Port Arthur riding, Can Car secured a contract to manufacture one of Britain's most advanced fighter planes, the Hawker Hurricane. David Kemp is a director



with the Northwestern Ontario Aviation Heritage Centre. He explains that the Hawker Hurricane was an ideal aircraft for the plant to adapt to. "It was really a transitional aircraft between the biplanes of the First World War, the 20s and 30s, to monoplanes [with one set of wings]," he says. "It was much more efficient, with less drag because there was only one wing and none of the struts and wires and such things. [The Hurricane] was the first monoplane that had been built in Britain, and it turned

out to be a good one." The wings and frame from the cockpit forward were metal, but the rear fuselage was covered with fabric, which made it much easier to repair if a bullet or shell went through it. It was a strong, sturdy plane that played a critical role during the war, including repelling aerial attacks during the Battle of Britain. Between 1940 and 1943, Can Car built 1,400 Hawker Hurricanes, or about 10% of the total Hurricane production. Elsie MacGill, the first female aeronautical engineer in Canada, had been working at Can Car since 1938, originally designing a training plane intended for the Royal Canadian Air Force. When the plant shifted gears to start producing the Hawker Hurricane, it was MacGill's job to ensure they could build the planes to Hawker's specifications. This she did with great success, earning her the moniker "Queen of the Hurricanes." Under her leadership, Can Car's enthusiastic and skilled workers were soon manufacturing these aircraft just as well as their British counterparts—a remarkable feat. It also mattered that MacGill was a woman, as some 40% of the workers in the plant were women as well. These "Rosies of the North" are featured in an excellent interactive website (rosiesofthenorth.ca) and a documentary by

▼ Fully assembled Hawker Hurricane



Courtesy of David D. Kemp (personal collection)

▼ Hawker Hurricane on display at the Hangar Flight Museum in Calgary



Courtesy of David D. Kemp (personal collection)

local filmmaker Kelly Saxberg.

The plant went on to produce Curtiss Helldivers once the Hawker contract was up, and while the Helldiver was a more sophisticated plane, the Hurricanes were dependable workhorses. Of the 14,000 ever built in total, 47 are known to still be out there worldwide on display, being restored, and so on. Of those, 19 are still airworthy. The neatest thing about that? Ten of those airworthy planes were produced right here at Can Car.

Additional sources: Aviation in Thunder Bay by Jim Lyzun; the Northern Ontario Aviation Heritage Centre.



▲ The Hawker Hurricane

▼ Can Car aircraft manufacturing during World War II



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▼ A Hawker Hurricane's first flight at the local Can Car plant



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