The Biggest Job Ever
By Don Proctor

If you have flown into Toronto’s Pearson International Airport in the past year or so, you probably noticed the monstrously big hulk of a building taking shape at the airport. It is the new T1 terminal, which will be among the top five largest terminals in North America when completed later this decade.

The $1.1 billion (Canadian dollars) first phase has presented building and engineering challenges almost as hefty as its interior is cavernous. Furthermore, some design revisions resulting from the tragedy of 9/11 have thrown a few wrinkles into the building scheme. Just ask Eugene Conte of Downsview Drywall Contracting, a Toronto-based firm that has taken on its largest job ever, a $20 million (Canadian dollars) contract to install three to four million square feet of drywall and associated wall materials.

Like the World Trade Center, T1 is a structural steel building. Overall, the $4.4 billion 10-year development will require more than three-and-a-half times the amount of steel used to build the Eiffel Tower. That is a lot of steel, and after the tragic events of Sept. 11, designers went to great lengths to ensure that the structural steel meets the highest fire rating possible. In addition to a spray-on fireproof coating, many of the steel beams will now require a gypsum board “wrap,” for fire protection, explains Conte, project manager and senior estimator for Downsview.

One of the larger drywall contractors in Toronto, Downsview is no stranger to big institutional projects, having put its signature on several major hospitals in the Greater Toronto Area. But T1 offers the contractor a new challenge or two. One example is where drywall partitions meet steel beams. Normally, when addressing juncture points, there hasn’t been a major issue; now they are issues. Specifications for the new terminal now call for many of the structural beams to be wrapped in a double layer of 5/8 inch drywall.

“The owners (Greater Toronto Airports Authority) want to make certain that the steel meets and exceeds the National Building Code,” Conte explains.

In tandem with project architect, New York-based Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, and drywall manufacturer CGC, Downsview has engineered the drywall enclosure, which, to Conte’s knowledge, has never been used in Canada.

In addition to drywall, Downsview is installing an impact-resistant panel called Acrovyn, which consists of a 3/8-inch wood panel laminated with a vinyl finish. Varying from 3 feet to 12 feet long, the panels are installed over top of drywall. The spring-loaded panels are hung on a batten system secured to the drywall. Manufactured by the Pennsylvania-based C/S Group, Acrovyn is new to the Canadian market.

Conte says that while the airport project is the largest in Canada, there’s none of the construction pandemonium one might expect on such a large construction site. “It’s surprising that you don’t really see as many trades because it is such a massive space to work in,” he says.

Downsview’s nearly two-year-long contract is to be completed in time for T1’s opening in October 2003. It is not the only major Toronto drywall contractor working at the site. Another is Select Drywall & Acoustics, which is doing ceiling drywall throughout T1.

At $4.4 billion, the 10-year expansion of Pearson International Airport in Toronto is easily the largest construction project in Canada. It won’t be completed until late this decade, and there are lots of contracts yet to be tendered, including future piers for the big terminal. That spells good times ahead for some drywall contractors in Toronto.

About the Author
Don Procter is a free-lance writer in Ontario, Canada.