



View of Mount Benson, 1940s.

Photo: Nanaimo Community Archives. Lovick Studio Collection 2018010A-P37

ON HALLOWED GROUND

The crash of Queen Charlotte Airlines Flight 102

By Darrell Ohs

It was the worst aviation disaster in BC history of its time. Nearly 71 years ago, a now maturely forested site halfway up the north face of Mount Benson on Vancouver Island was a bleak and burning landscape of skeletal aircraft remains and charred bodies. Contents and personal effects were scattered up to 500 feet [152 metres] from the point of impact where the aircraft had flown straight into the face of a rock outcropping and exploded into a flash of blue and orange flames that was seen and heard up to several miles away.¹ Under driving rain on October 17, 1951, the first eyewitnesses on site used flashlights to shine their way through the scattered and smoking fires of burning wreckage, fuel, and oil. Flashlight beams and flames, hissing and steaming under the down-pour, illuminated broken bodies and random luggage

contents: a red slipper and a red sweater, a machinist's micrometer, a bricklayer's union card, and some pulp fiction novels.

Flying in the dark

The airplane was a military surplus Canso PB5Y-5A built in 1941 for RCAF anti-submarine bomber patrol. Acquired and converted for civilian passenger use by Queen Charlotte Airlines (QCA) and registered as CF-FOQ, the ill-fated aircraft was en route to Vancouver from the Aluminum Company of Canada's (ALCAN) hydro dam and smelter project in Kitimat. The plane was filled to capacity.²

The aircraft took off from Kitimat at 3:30 p.m. and was to arrive in Vancouver at 6:10 p.m. Official night-fall was 5:50 p.m. Heavy rain was reported in Nanaimo,

with a cloud ceiling of 400 to 500 feet [122 to 152 metres]. The crash occurred at 6:58 p.m., more than an hour after nightfall.³

Regardless of weather conditions and darkening skies, pilot Doug McQueen continued the flight under Visual Flight Rules (VFR) rather than landing and remaining in Port Hardy or Comox overnight. McQueen was not fully qualified to fly by Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) nor was the Canso certified for IFR.⁴

The last radio report from the Canso came at 6:48 p.m., estimating their position to be on course 20 miles [32 kilometres] west of Vancouver. But in the dark, McQueen didn't realize that the aircraft was in fact 37 miles [60 kilometres] to the west of the proper flight path. Flying west of Nanaimo he mistook the city's lights—as seen through the fog and rain-obscured cockpit windows—for those of Vancouver. Ten minutes later, the Canso flew into the side of Mount Benson.

The crash

About the time of the final radio transmission, Brannen Lake resident Frank Murphy saw the Canso fly low and fast over his home on Doumont Road. As a former RCAF Flying Officer at Air Force Station Patricia Bay on the Saanich Peninsula, Murphy had conducted pilot training on Cansos during the Second World War. He feared the worst as he watched the familiar aircraft's running lights disappear into the clouds over east Wellington (a neighbourhood north of Nanaimo).⁵ It is thought that the pilot circled the city lights of Nanaimo twice to get his bearings, then veered to the west. Founder and president of Queen Charlotte Airlines, Jim Spilsbury, explained that to approach Vancouver from the west, aircrews must turn back over the Georgia Strait to position the aircraft for an approach from the sea.⁶

At the Jingle Pot Road electrical substation, operator Keith Price saw the plane circle the area, flying just 50 feet [15 metres] above the 130,000-volt high-tension wires. Price could almost read the numbers on the plane.⁷

Suddenly the plane roared southwest towards Mount Benson and smashed in a sheet of flame against the mountainside. The Canso's rate of climb from the substation at elevation 475 feet [145 metres] was approximately 1,000 feet in 1.2 miles [305 m in 2 kilometres]. Performance specifications of the Canso PB5Y-5A indicate a maximum rate of climb at 1,000 feet per minute.

At a rated climbing speed of 100 miles per hour [161 kilometres per hour], the pilot struggled to gain altitude while vainly searching for the horizon in zero visibility through the gloomy, rain-soaked sky. Through the

fog, Price saw the explosive impact at 1,600 feet [488 metres] on Mount Benson.

The aircraft struck a nearly vertical rock outcrop then fell onto a narrow ledge approximately 50 feet [15 metres] below. Analysis of the wreckage by the Department of Transportation indicated that the aircraft struck the face in an inverted position.⁸

Without visual references, such as a visible horizon, the occupants of the plane could have been spatially disoriented, not knowing which way was up. Perhaps the pilot was making a tight banked turn when the plane inverted.

The victims

From the end of Kilpatrick Road, four search parties started to climb different routes in the dark towards the wreckage. After almost three hours of crawling over salal, rocks, and slash, Owen "Wimpy" Jones of the *Nanaimo Free Press* was among the first to reach the scene of the tragedy. Well before reaching the point of impact, Jones saw scattered pieces of the plane.

"There was an odour of burning flesh. You could smell it a mile away. That and the gas," he reported. "Old stumps were on fire. Pieces of the plane were burning all over the place. We used the flames and our flashlights to see."⁹

Also on scene that night, *Vancouver Sun* reporter Clem Russell wrote, "We found nothing but the smashed and smouldering bodies of six of the victims. Our flashlights could find no trace of the other 17 victims in the eerie blackness and driving rain.

"The body of a man lay with his head on a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher. Farther away, where a wing was resting on a snag, a charred body was huddled, one logging-booted foot projecting through the undergrowth. Another man's hand protruded through a cabin window."¹⁰

Only 20 bodies were found after an exhaustive search with just eight positively identified. The rest of the missing are presumed to have been incinerated. After the inquest at the Westwood Hirst Funeral home, led by the Nanaimo coroner, arrangements were made to return the identified remains to their communities.¹¹

On October 25, 12 of the 23 killed were buried in a mass grave in the Nanaimo Cemetery, four of whom had been "tentatively" identified. They were Patrick Brisson of Vancouver, Thomas Bone of Vancouver, Robert McFayden of Vancouver, and John Redding of New Westminster.

Officials of the Catholic, Protestant, and Sikh faiths performed funeral rites and ceremonies over the twelve caskets. Before a bugler sounded the "Last Post," the

padre of Branch 10 Canadian Legion offered prayers for the souls of the departed.

Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh, on their first royal visit to Canada, sent condolences from Winnipeg. Their itinerary had them arrive on Vancouver Island for scheduled visits to Victoria and Nanaimo, coincidentally just a few days after the crash.¹²

Overnight, Nanaimo went from mourning to celebration as the city gave a red-carpet welcome to the royals at the Civic Arena. The Princess and Duke rested at Eaglecrest Lodge in Qualicum Beach, then, possibly to avoid becoming a distraction, made an impromptu visit to Port Alberni on the day of the funeral.¹³

Inquiry

The Department of Transportation Report No. 51-38 concluded that an “examination failed to disclose any evidence of malfunctioning of the airframe, engines, or controls, though the latter were so badly burned as to offer no reliable information.”¹⁴ It was also determined that the aircraft had adequate fuel on board and had been loaded in conformance with its capacity.

The investigation of the evidence established that “the probable cause of this accident was the continuance of the flight by VFR at night and under weather conditions of restricted visibility. Whilst it cannot be determined conclusively, it is probable that through a navigation error the pilot mistook Nanaimo for Vancouver. This may have been precipitated by inadequate pre-flight preparation in that the latest meteorological information was not obtained by the pilot before taking off on the south bound flight.”

Aftermath

The tragedy was no respecter of social and economic class. One of the passengers was Joseph Eric Melanson, the chief project engineer for Kitimat Constructors Alcan Project. He left behind his wife and five children.

Another was a 46-year-old labourer, Patrick Arthur Brisson, whose last known address was the YMCA in Vancouver. Those who nearly made it home to their nearby communities were Lake Cowichan resident John David Watson, married with two children and controller for Kitimat Constructors, and Parksville resident J.B. Ferguson, welder and father of four.¹⁵

Founded in 1943, for a time Queen Charlotte Airlines was Canada’s third largest airline. After this crash, the Department of Transportation punitively restricted QCA flying licences to short routes, no more than 100 miles [161 kilometres] from their bases. On appeal, some routes were extended but the profitable ALCAN/Kemano-to-Vancouver flights were still deemed off-limits for the QCA fleet.

In 1955, still struggling with curtailed operations, QCA was sold to rival company Pacific Western Airlines.¹⁶

Endnotes

1. Department of Transport, Air Services Branch, Civil Aviation Division, *Summary Accident Report*, Serial No. 51-38; *Vancouver Sun*, Thursday, October 18, 1951; Interview with Frank Murphy by Darrell Ohs, January 2004.
2. Department of Transport *Summary Accident Report*, Serial No. 51-38; *Queen Charlotte Airlines Ltd., Flight Operations Manual*, published January 28, 1952.
3. Department of Transport *Summary Accident Report*, Serial No. 51-38.
4. Howard White and Jim Spilsbury, *The Accidental Airline: Spilsbury’s QCA* (Madeira Park, BC, Harbour Publishing, 1994), 184.
5. Interview with Frank Murphy by Darrell Ohs, January 2004.
6. White and Spilsbury, “Mount Benson” and “Aftermath.” *The Accidental Airline*.
7. *Nanaimo Daily Free Press*, October 18, 1951.
8. Department of Transport, *Summary Accident Report, Serial No. 51-38*, “(d) Scene of the Accident.”
9. “Mount Benson Crash Second Worst in Canadian History,” *The Nanaimo Daily Free Press*, October 18, 1951.
10. “Plan Crash Ghastly Sight 1800 Feet Up Mount Benson,” *The Vancouver Sun* (October 18, 1951).
11. “Three Experts To Probe Crash,” *The Province*, October 19, 1951.
12. White and Spilsbury, *The Accidental Airline*, 186.
13. “Victims of Mount Benson Air Disaster Laid At Rest In Cemetery At Nanaimo,” *The Province*, October 26, 1951.
14. Department of Transport, *Summary Accident Report, Serial No. 51-38*.
15. “Victims of Mount Benson . . .”; “Three Experts . . .”; “Mount Benson Crash . . .”; Jan Peterson, *Harbour City: Nanaimo in Transition 1920-1967*, (Victoria, BC: Heritage House, 2006), “The Postwar Period”; Stanley Strazza, unpublished research notes and photos.
16. White and Spilsbury, “Aftermath” *The Accidental Airline*; Peterson, “The Postwar Period” *Harbour City*.



Darrell Ohs is a fourth-generation Vancouver Islander and former freelance writer and photographer. He has contributed articles and news items to a variety of magazines, often specializing in classic motorcycle riding and restorations for publishers in the UK and US. He was a frequent contributor of Vancouver Island-based stories to the *Times-Colonist*, with a focus on contemporary historical features capturing the connections between local people, places, and things on the cusp of entering the shades of our past. Darrell served as president of the Nanaimo Historical Society from 2014 to 2020.

There is no memorial to honour the victims and to convey an account of this tragedy and the circumstances that led to it.

The Nanaimo Historical Society (NHS) is looking to cooperate with the City of Nanaimo to establish a memorial at Northfield Rotary Lookout Park, situated at the intersection of the Parkway (Hwy 19) and Northfield Road. From this park, the vista of Mount Benson can be seen.

City of Nanaimo Parks is supportive of the request and will assist in presenting a proposal from the NHS to a city council meeting in February 2022.



Darrell Ohs discusses the story of Flight 102, standing next to its wreckage.

On May 25, 2021, Darrell Ohs (past president of the Nanaimo Historical Society), Steve Hughes (aviation enthusiast and member of the Nanaimo Historical Society), Ambrose Knobel (hiker and aviation enthusiast), Doug McLeod (student of archeology at Vancouver Island University), and Tom Paterson (author and historian) hiked Mount Benson to examine and discuss the crash of Flight 102.

Photos: From <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCegghaWOac>, Videography by Tony Orchard (Treasurer of the Nanaimo Historical Society)



Steve Hughes and Ambrose Knobel hike the Mount Benson trail to the wreckage of Flight 102.



Steve Hughes holds up wreckage from Flight 102, standing beside Ambrose Knobel.



Tom Paterson and Doug McLeod examine and identify the wreckage of Flight 102.