

Bell, John McLelland

Age: 26

Nationality: Canadian

Rank: LAC

Unit: No. 3 OTU

Occupation: Flight Engineer

Service No: R/162924

Birth: 2 March 1917
Strome, Alberta,
Canada

Home Town: Powell River, BC,
Canada

Death: 18 July 1943

Crash of Supermarine Stranraer 916,
Stuart Channel, BC, Canada

Burial: Cranberry Cemetery,
Powell River, BC, Canada

Others: F/L Warren Roberts McCarty, Armourer, presumed dead



Biography

John (Johnny) Bell and one, or both, of his brothers were partners in Bell Bros. General Store in Wildwood; a community north of Powell River, BC. John sold his share of the business before he joined the RCAF, but the store continued in business and can be found in the 1946 telephone directory for Powell River.

John was called up under the National Resources Mobilization Act in December 1941. A long-time Powell River doctor, Dr. O. O. Lyons performed his enlistment medical and noted that John, at 6'1" and 191 lbs, was in excellent health and certified him as Medical Category A. John was assigned to the Duke of Connaught's Own Regiment, Gordon Head, BC, for basic training, which he completed in January/February 1942.

In May 1942 John decided to join the Active Service Force and enlisted in the RCAF hoping to train as an Aero-engine mechanic. He was taken on as an AC2 and sent to Ontario for his initial training and later to BC. John was posted to Patricia Bay in September 1942, with the rank of AC1 and in December 1942, he was fully qualified as an aero-engine mechanic and promoted to LAC. In 1943, John was assigned to No. 3 OTU.

On 18 July 1943, John was Flight Engineer on Supermarine Stranraer 916, which sank in the Stuart Channel at about 12:00 noon. John was not one of the four crew members rescued, and his body was found in the Stranraer when it was salvaged. He had suffered multiple fractures, lacerations, and contusions which contributed to his death by drowning. He was buried in Cranberry cemetery, Powell River, BC.

John Bell was born in Strome, Alberta on 2 March 1917 to William Bell, a farmer who died in 1933, and his wife Kathleen. Both John's parents were born in Ireland. William and Kathleen already had two sons who served in the RCAF overseas; Charles, born 1911, and William, born 1915. A daughter, Sadie was born in 1920 and there was another daughter, Kathleen, who died in 1928. The family remained in Alberta for six years after John's birth and then moved to British Columbia. His mother and sister were living in Vancouver at the time of John's death. He was unmarried and he left his estate to his mother, with his sister as executor.

Details of Crash

Supermarine Stranraer 916 took off from Patricia Bay at 10:00 am on 18 July 1943 on a training flight. It carried six men:

LAC John McLelland Bell	Flight Engineer	drowned
F/O J. Chesney	WAG	slight injuries
F/O P. Hertslett	2 nd Pilot	serious injuries
F/L Leonard Gage Larsen	1 st Pilot	slight injuries
F/L Warren Roberts McCarty	Armourer	missing presumed dead
Sgt. J.E.C. Rogers	WAG	serious injuries

F/L McCarty was not officially part of the crew, but as a senior armaments instructor he had been advised to fly as frequently as possible and was treated as being on duty at the time of the accident.

The 1st Pilot, F/L Larsen, had 1350 hrs experience as a civilian pilot, 1221 hrs experience in service of which 473 were on Stranraers. Both pilots were flying instructors.

The purpose of the flight was mutual instruction in instrument flying under the hood, F/L Larsen and F/O Hertslett taking turns in piloting and instructing. The hood is a device which limits the pilot's vision. At the time of the accident, F/L Larsen was pilot.

The Stranraer took off at 10:00 am on 18 July 1943 with F/O Hertslett as pilot and F/L Larsen as instructor. F/O Hertslett made a blind take off and then flew for about 45 minutes going through the entire sequence of climbing turns, gliding turns, straight climbs and glides, recovery from awkward positions under the hood and turning to predetermined headings, winding up the 45 minutes with a blind landing.

The pilots changed positions and F/L Larsen repeated the sequence. This was followed by practising blind take off circuit and landing, first with F/L Larsen piloting and then F/O Hertslett, who landed in Stuart Channel near Thetis Island at about 11:40 am. The hood was removed and F/L Larsen took off and headed for base, flying south east down Stuart Channel at about 300 feet. Seeing a clear stretch of water ahead, with no obstructions for about 10 miles, F/L Larsen decided to practice estimating height above the water for depth

charge dropping, which is 50 feet. His rationale for doing this was that the procedure for approaching the target for simulated depth charge dropping was changed the previous April or May. He dropped down to 50 feet and continued straight down the channel and then, close to Crofton, decided to do a normal power landing straight ahead, just touching down, and then head back to base. F/L Larsen gave evidence at the inquiry that he was listening to hear the touch-down and remembered nothing after that until he was trying to clear himself from the wreckage under water. At the surface, he saw F/O Hertslett, F/O Chesney, and Sergeant Rogers and all four were picked up by a civilian rowboat and a fishing boat. F/O Hertslett gave evidence that they appeared to settle too quickly in the water and the nose was dipping down. He tried to assist F/L Larsen in correcting the nose without success. A civilian witness stated that he saw the nose of the aircraft dip and then the aircraft turned over onto its back and, in his estimate, sank in three to four minutes.

Prior to the accident, the aircraft was in perfect serviceable order and all of the crew had Mae Wests. When the severely damaged aircraft was salvaged on 24th July, the body of LAC Bell was still in the fuselage. The Medical Officer who examined him was of the opinion that he had suffered concussion rendering him unable to escape and had thus drowned. No trace was ever found of F/S McCarty.

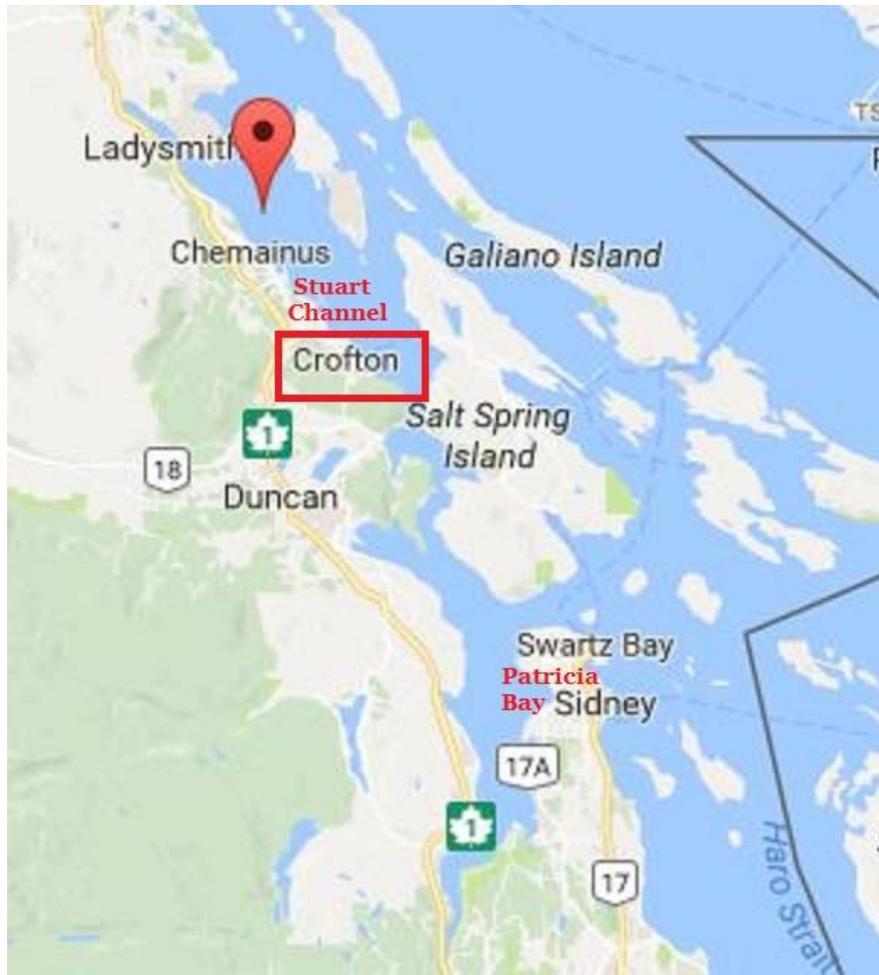
Several possible causes of the accident were put forward:

- the possibility of it having hit a floating log; although a log was located close to where the plane sank, it showed no sign of having been hit.
- the possibility that the aircraft, having been flown extensively, collapsed on landing; this was thought unlikely since it had an excellent maintenance record.
- the possibility of pilot fatigue; unlikely given the hours the pilot had flown,

The conclusion was that the accident was caused by pilot error in that he misjudged the height above a glassy sea and landed nose down.

The recommendation was a review of the instructions given to pilots for landing on a glassy sea.

Because the survivors had all suffered head trauma and this had contributed to the death of LAC Bell, a recommendation was made that helmets be provided.





These are photographs referred to in the evidence of Mr. Hill, witness and taken at 10:15 AM on 10 July 1943 by Mr. Hill, witness.

PC 159 10 JULY 43

Stranraer 916 during salvage