

Biggs, Percival Frederick

Age: 22

Nationality: Canadian

Rank: Pilot Officer

Unit: No. 32 OTU

Occupation: Wireless Operator/
Air Gunner

Service No: J/21175

Birth: 19 March 1920
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada



Home Town: Wingham, Ontario, Canada

Death: 16 December 1942
Crash of Avro Anson N9560
West of Nanoose Bay, BC

Burial: Wingham Cemetery, Ontario, Canada

Others: Sgt. Andrew Joseph Doherty, Navigator, RNZAF;
P/O William Ward Harris, Navigator, RCAF;
P/O David Jack Robertson, Pilot, RCAF;
P/O James Roderick Vosburgh, WAG, RCAF.

Biography

Percival Biggs left school when he was 17 after completing grade 10. He worked for the next three years, latterly as a woodworker with a door manufacturing company. In August 1941, he left work to enlist in the RCAF with the hope of becoming a wireless operator/air gunner (WAG). The year before his enlistment, Percival was a reserve, a gunner in the 99th Battery RCA, Wingham, ON, where he lived.

At his interview for acceptance into the service Percival was seen as '*enthusiastic*' and good material for flight crew. He did well in training. At the end of his gunnery course he was class senior by popular vote, showed good leadership skills, and was recommended for a commission. He was granted his WAG badge and promoted to Pilot/Officer on 23 November 1942.

Percival was then transferred to No. 32 OTU in Patricia Bay. On 16 December 1942 he was WAG in Avro Anson N9560 when it crashed inland from Nanoose Bay. The aircraft was located three months later and from the nature of his injuries it appeared that he died on impact.

Percival was born 16 March 1920 in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, to Percival Robert Biggs and Edith Campbell. He had two younger brothers, Darrell, who was 20 in 1942, and Donald, who was six. He was not married.

"BURIED WITH FULL MILITARY HONOUR -

- Died In Plane Crash in December But Body Was Not Recovered Until Tuesday Last Week -

Wingham United Church was filled to capacity Monday afternoon for the funeral service of the late Pilot Officer Percival F. Biggs who was killed in a plane crash near the coast on Vancouver Island on December 16th, last. The body was recovered on Tuesday last week along with four others who lost their lives in the accident. The large gathering and impressive service and funeral was a splendid tribute to this fine young man who gave his life on active service.

Pilot Officer Biggs is the first to die on active service from Wingham in this or the First Great War and be brought home for burial.

The service was held following the arrival of the C.P.R. train and officers and other ranks of the R.A.F. from Port Albert escorted the remains from the station to the church. They passed through the 99th(Res.) Battery and the Wingham Legion who formed a guard of honour on the roadway leading to the church. Following the service the parade headed by members of the R.A.F. moved along John Street and up Josephine Street at the slow march. Citizens lined the streets as the procession went by.

The pall bearers and flower bearers were officers of the R.A.F. Port Albert. All told about sixty all ranks from Port Albert were in attendance. The service at the graveside was conducted by Squadron Leader Hooper, Chaplain at Port Albert and the Benediction was pronounced by Capt. the Rev. W. A. Beecroft. The firing party fired three volleys and all officers including those of the 99th gave the salute.

The service in the church was conducted by the minister, Capt. the Rev. V. A. Beecroft who was assisted by Squadron Leader Hooper..... and told of his cheerful, happy letters to his parents about whom he also expressed concern. We could do without this and such sacrifices, he paid, if we wished to live as slaves under the heel of some tyrant. But at times of peril, such as we have today, our youth have always come forth to fight that we might be free.

The choir under the leadership of Prof. A. W. Anderton, led in the service of praise. The hymns sung were "The Lord is my Shepherd" and "O Valiant Hearts". Prior the service Mr. Anderton played "Marche Funebre", Guilman: "Largo", Handel and "Funeral March", Chopin. At the conclusion of the service "Dead March in Saul" Handel.

Perc. was in his 22nd year. He was born at Ottawa and after living at Cochrane came to Wingham when ten years of age. He was a popular student at both the High and Public schools. Previous to his enlistment in August 1941 he was a member of the 99th Battery and was employed by C. Lloyd and Son. His first experience in the R.C.A.F. was at Manning Depot, Toronto, he then went to Jarvis. He took a wireless course at Winnipeg and then a Bomb and Gunnery course at Mossbank where he graduated as a Sergeant. This was in November last year and he came home on a furlough. While home he received word that he had been commissioned a Pilot Officer. The picture in this write up is the only one in his Officer's Uniform and was taken the evening prior to the accident. He was posted to the West coast and left here to take up his duties about....."

NOTE - clipping ends here.

Details of Crash

Avro Anson N9560 was transferred to Western Air Command in September 1941. On 16 December 1942 it took off at 9:30 am, on reconnaissance exercises with a crew of five:

P/O Percival Frederick Biggs	J/21175	RCAF	WAG
Sgt. Andrew Joseph Doherty	414549	RNZAF	Navigator
P/O William Ward Harris	J/14661	RCAF	Navigator (US citizen)
P/O David Jack Robertson	J/13019	RCAF	Pilot
P/O James Roderick Vosburgh	J/20163	RCAF	WAG

The route of the flight was Patricia Bay to Cassidy, to Powell River, to Jervis Inlet and back to Patricia Bay. Signal section received a wireless transmission “go” five minutes after take-off, which was the last message from the aircraft. The aircraft never returned to base.

There were six aircraft in total authorized to carry out the exercise and all the pilots and crew were briefed prior to the flight as follows:

“Instructed to map read along the coast between each target until they reached Parksville. From that point the navigators were to initiate courses until the square search was completed and Blubber Bay was found. Instructions were to map read from Blubber Bay to Stillwater. On the final leg from Stillwater to base, the instructions were to fly on a course as directed by the navigator.”

Blubber Bay is on Texada Island, Stillwater is on the North shore of Jervis Inlet.

The crew were specifically warned not to fly in or above clouds and were cautioned regarding the heights of land in this area. Instructions were to fly at about 1,000 ft. and not to fly below 500 ft. with the exception of the leg from Stillwater to base, which was to be flown at 500 ft.

In addition, the wireless operators were told to maintain contact with base at least once an hour and to return to base immediately if contact was lost. The other five aircraft were unable to complete the reconnaissance due to bad weather conditions at Cassidy and returned as instructed.

Pilot/Officer Robertson had flown this course before. His total flying time to this date was:

de Havilland Tiger Moth	82:25 hrs	Airspeed Oxford	7:05 hrs
Avro Anson	146:50 hrs	Handley Page Hampden	4:55 hrs

He had been with No. 32 OTU as a staff pilot for almost a month. His Flight Commander remarked on his flying ability as follows:

“He was very inexperienced with a poor background. He was posted to this Flight as a Staff Pilot after having been rejected from the Hampden Operational Training Course for poor airmanship.”

The Flight Commander did, however, state that Robertson’s flying ability on Anson was found to be satisfactory.

He also gave the opinion that, in general, pilots sent to Patricia Bay were of limited experience and lacked the ability to cope with the flying conditions peculiar to the location. There had been complaints from time to time on the calibre of pilots arriving at Patricia Bay and these had been noted at other Courts of Inquiry.

A search for the crashed aircraft was undertaken for several days following its disappearance, including one made by Anson R3431, which flew into the sea North of Salt Spring Island while searching.

In March 1943, two civilians out cougar hunting, Fred and Duncan Craig, found a large aircraft in heavy bush near Craig’s Crossing in the Nanaimo District. RCAF Station Patricia Bay station received the following communication relating to the find:

PROVINCIAL POLICE NANAIMO ADVISE RECEIVING REPORT FROM TWO BUSHMEN WHO CLAIMED TO HAVE SEEN LARGE AIRCRAFT IN DENSE THICKET OF SMALL TREES LOCATED APPROXIMATELY FOUR MILES WEST OF NANOOSE BAY VANCOUVER ISLAND BC EXTENT OF DAMAGE UNKNOWN BUT AIRCRAFT DESCRIBED AS BEING ALMOST INTACT AND TO HAVE MADE BELLY LANDING THE BUSHMEN'S REASON FOR NOT EXAMINING AIRCRAFT WAS THAT THEY THOUGHT THEY WOULD GET INTO TROUBLE IF THEY DISTURBED ANYTHING PRIOR TO ARRIVAL OF POLICE (.) 32 O T U PERSONNEL DETAILED TO PROCEED TO SCENE WITH PROVINCIAL POLICE MORNING 29TH FOR INVESTIGATION (.) AIRCRAFT PRESUMED TO BE ANSON 9560 WHICH WAS MISSING DECEMBER 16TH/42 WITH CREW OF FIVE ABOARD (.) FURTHER DETAILS WILL BE TRANSMITTED BY SIGNAL AFTERNOON 29TH

With the assistance of the Craigs, a search party located the site and confirmed that it was indeed N9560. The members of the party identified and recovered the bodies of the five airmen.

A letter was sent to the Governor General of Canada containing a recommendation from the Provincial Police, strongly supported by Western Air Command, that the two civilians who had devoted two days to assisting in the recovery should be compensated for their time and effort with a payment each of \$10.

From the Victoria Times Colonist
March 30 1943.

NANAIMO, March 29 (CP) — Bodies of five members of crew of an R.A.P. medium bombing plane which had been missing since December on a navigational flight up the east coast of Vancouver Island were lying in undertaking parlors here tonight following discovery of the wreckage of the craft in a dense clump of trees seven miles inland and about fifteen miles north of Nanaimo on Sunday.

The wreckage was found by Duncan and Fred Craig of Craig's Crossing, who were hunting cougars. The bodies of the airmen were inside the cabin. Last week a portion of the tail elevator was found in a tree about four miles off the main highway in Nanoose district.

A bulldozer, borrowed from a logging company, was utilized to break trail to the scene of the crash.

