

Davidson, Robert William

Age: 19
Nationality: Canadian
Rank: Sergeant
Unit: No. 3 OTU
Occupation: Flight Engineer
Service No. : R/268109

Birth: 23 July 1925
Vancouver, BC,
Canada

Home Town: Vancouver, BC,
Canada

Death: 2 December 1944

Crash of Consolidated Canso 11086,
near Ucluelet, BC

Burial: Commemorated Ottawa Memorial
Buried at site of crash.

Others: F/O Louis Day, 2nd Pilot; P/O John Mahoney, Wireless
Operator; F/O Robert Nash, 1st Pilot; Sgt. Joseph Patenaude,
WAG; P/O Frank Porter, Flight Engineer; F/L. George Ramsay,
Navigation Instructor, P/O Alonzo Staples, Navigator;
Sgt. Joseph Trudel, WAG.



Biography

A blue-eyed redhead, Robert Davidson was barely more than a child when he joined the RCAF. He was still in school with a part time job as a machinist's helper at Lack and Company in Vancouver. Robert had been in the King Edward air cadets during the previous year, and his father, who was born in Scotland, was serving with the RCAF overseas.

Robert enlisted on 10 August 1943. Keen and eager to fly, he applied for standard aircrew and, after Initial Training, in November 1943, he was sent to Elementary Flying School. It quickly became apparent that he lacked the skills and judgment required of a pilot, at least at that time. He was a slow thinker with absolutely no ability; rough on the controls, unable to judge height and distance and not even able to maintain height. Although still enthusiastic, he had no air sense and was too unsafe to be permitted to fly solo. In February 1944, still immature and still keen to get ahead in the RCAF, he was re-selected for Flight Engineer.



In No. 16 S.F.T.S. from February to June 1944, Robert found his metier and was considered an intelligent and capable trainee, above average and most cooperative. The following month was spent at gunnery school in Fingal, Ontario, where his performance was not impressive, and he went from there to Flight Engineer School where in August 1944, he earned his Flight Engineers Badge and the rather lukewarm appraisal of 'only weakness in safety equipment'.

A month after earning his badge, Robert was posted to No. 3 OTU at Patricia Bay, from where, a short three months later and only 19 years old, he was killed in the crash of Consolidated Canso 11086. It was seven months before the site of the crash was found and Robert, along with the rest of the crew, was buried by the wreckage.

Robert William Davidson was born 23 July 1925 in Vancouver, BC, to Robert Davidson, who in civilian life was a watchmaker, and Marjorie Evelyn Wood, who was born in England. A younger son, Kenneth Wood, had been born in 1929, and died at 17 months old in 1931

Details of Crash

On 2 December 1944, the crew of Consolidated Canso 11086 were briefed for a night navigation exercise to begin at 4:30 pm. The crew members were:

Sergeant Robert Davidson	Flight Engineer
Flying Officer Louis Day	2 nd Pilot
Pilot Officer John Mahoney	Wireless Operator
Flying Officer Robert Nash	Captain, 1 st Pilot
Sergeant Joseph Patenaude	WAG
Pilot Officer Frank Porter	Flight Engineer
Flight Lt. George Ramsay	Navigation Instructor
Pilot Officer Alonzo Staples	Navigator
Sergeant Joseph Trudel	WAG

Pigeon #43 RCAF 1064 Sole survivor

Three of the crew were French speaking and had chosen to be together. The aircraft had been intended for an earlier exercise but this was prevented by wireless problems.

Crews of six Canso aircraft were fully briefed for the exercise, which entailed flying from base to the southern tip of Vancouver Island, out to sea for about two hours and then back along the same route to base. Two of the aircraft were found not to be serviceable so only four actually became airborne to begin the exercise. One aircraft returned after about two hours due to wireless problems, and an hour later two more aircraft returned to base due to deteriorating weather. On their return they reported encountering very poor weather in the Juan de Fuca Strait

Signals at No. 3 OTU contacted Canso 11086 and instructed the aircraft to return to base. 11086 acknowledged the signal at 6:55 pm. An aircraft tracking system in Victoria maintained a plot on an incoming aircraft, which was assumed to be 11086, from 7:24 to 7:51 pm but lost this plot when the aircraft entered Juan de Fuca Strait.

W/T contact was maintained with 11086 until 8:00 pm, although difficulty was encountered in making contact, probably because of the low altitude the pilot

was forced to fly at due to the poor weather in the Juan de Fuca Strait. No further contact was made and at 8:50 pm, overdue action was taken.

The search for 11086 started on December 2nd and continued until December 11th. The search entailed 742 hours of daytime flying and 46 hours at night. A further 250 hours of searching started on December 15th after flares were discovered, which were believed to be connected to 11086. No trace was found of the aircraft or crew.

At 5:00 pm on December 6th, a bedraggled carrier pigeon, No. 43 RCAF 1064, returned to its loft at Patricia Bay. The pigeon had been issued to Flight Officer Nash on December 2nd and belonged to Canso 11086. It was exhausted, but showed no sign of having been in a crash. The droppings present on its upper tail feathers suggested that it had remained inside its box until the morning after the aircraft went missing.

The message capsule was missing from the pigeon's leg, giving rise to speculation that it had been handled.

Around 4:00 pm on December 5th a civilian, walking on Long Beach near Tofino found a capped beer bottle containing a message. He smashed the bottle to get at the note on which he could read "SOS" and a location. He took the note home, dried it out and contacted the RCAF at Tofino.

At the Tofino Station, the smudged note was deciphered as well as could be done, and it was decided to turn the note over to the Intelligence Officer at Western Command. The Commanding Officer at Tofino thought it most unlikely that an aircrew in a dinghy would have sent a note in a beer bottle, and the date on the note appeared to be in September. Although instructed to send the message immediately he did not send it until the next plane left on December 9th.

It was ultimately decided that the note was a hoax. However the Commanding Officer at Tofino was severely reprimanded since, had the note been from Canso 11086, his delay would have impacted the area searched and possibly the survival chances of the crew.

On 1 July 1945 the wreckage of an aircraft was located from the air by a DC-3 flying into Tofino. The wreckage was located 30 miles east of Tofino, Vancouver Island, on the S.E. slope of a mountain at about 3,000 feet and appeared to have been heading north-west. The front of the aircraft was completely burnt out but it was determined that both engines were under power at the time of the crash.

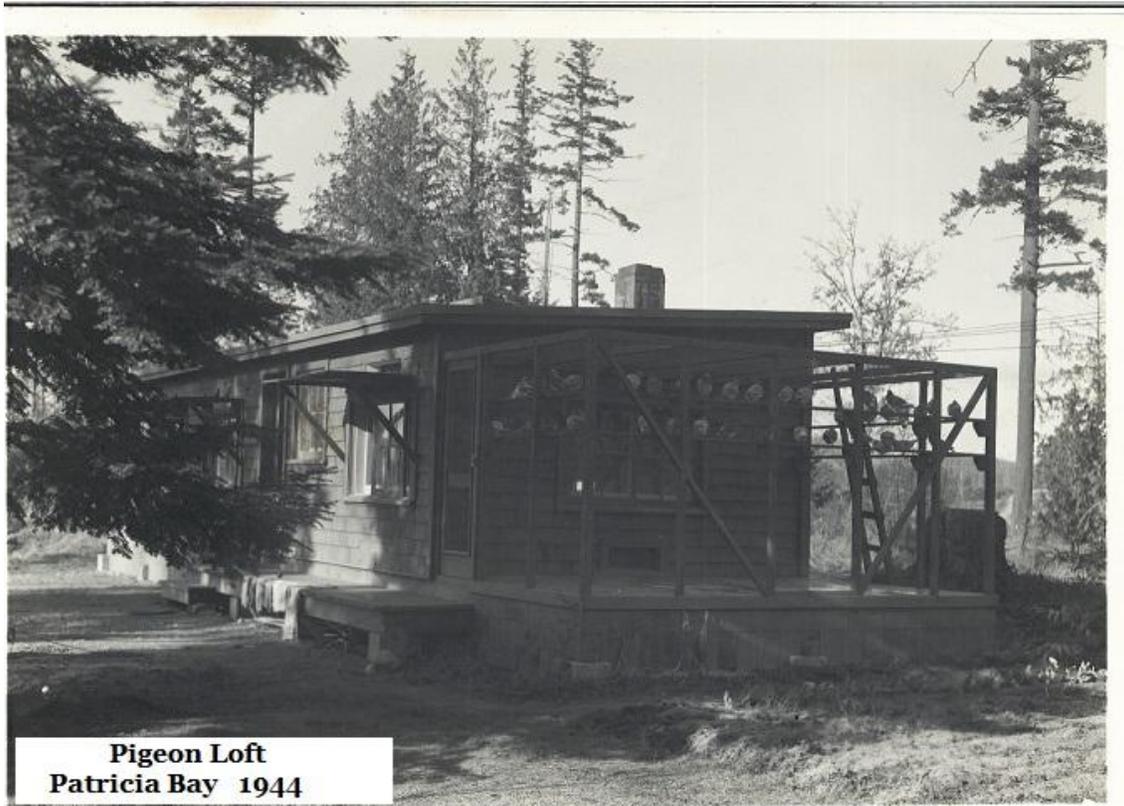
The plane was identified as Canso 11086 by the number on the fuselage.

A watch was found which had stopped at 8:27, which is presumed to be the time of the crash. The pigeon box catch was found to have been sprung by the crash, so the pigeon could have escaped by exerting a little pressure. The pigeon log was also found with no pages missing. Every effort was made to identify the occupants, who were buried in a common grave at the site, and a funeral was conducted by the Protestant and Catholic padres who were present. The burial cairn was covered with a Union Jack and a white cross with the name and number of each man was erected.

The investigation into the crash was re-opened and it concluded that the cause of the crash was the failure of the pilot to reach a safe height while flying in bad weather in a mountainous area.

On 24 August 1986, after three years of planning, a new cairn had been built at the site, with a memorial plaque, and a formal dedication service was given for the lost airmen.





The RCAF operated homing pigeons for more than 25 years. They were carried aboard military aircraft for emergency use, as the birds were more reliable and lighter than the tube based radios of the time. The purpose was to use them to send a message back to the base if a plane was downed.

In 1920 Jericho Beach Station in Vancouver became the first station to establish a Pigeon Division. By 1944 there were 30 pigeon lofts in Canada; 16 on the west coast and 14 on the east coast. At its peak the Pigeon Division had one officer and over 300 enlisted men. Pigeons also served in Europe with Bomber and Coastal Command,

Special lofts for the birds were constructed, and airmen of the Pigeon Division were instructed in the raising and caring of homing pigeons. Pigeons were used throughout the war at Patricia Bay Station, where, for exercise, the birds were regularly released in Victoria and left to fly home.

On patrols it was common practise to load two pigeons in special boxes onto the aircraft and then remove them on its return and return the pigeons to the loft. The accident described here is the only one out of Patricia Bay in which a pigeon returned to base after a crash. There is no record of whether the aircraft carried a second pigeon that failed to survive.

