

# Mahoney, John Ambrose

**Age:** 19  
**Nationality:** Canadian  
**Rank:** Pilot Officer  
**Unit:** No. 3 OTU  
**Occupation:** Wireless  
Operator/Air Gunner  
**Service Number:** J/48161



**Birth:** 19 April 1925  
Grand Falls, NB,  
Canada

**Home Town:** St. Leonards, NB,  
Canada

**Death:** 2 December 1944  
  
Crash of Consolidated Canso 11086  
near Ucluelet, BC

**Burial:** Commemorated Ottawa Memorial  
Buried at site of crash.

**Others:** All RCAF: Sgt Robert Davidson, F/E; F/O Louis Day,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Pilot; F/O Robert Nash, 1<sup>st</sup> Pilot; Sgt Joseph Patenaude,  
WAG; P/ O Frank Porter, F/E; Fl Lt. George Ramsay, Nav  
Instructor; P/O Alonzo Staples, Navigator; Sgt Joseph Trudel,  
WAG

## Biography

John Mahoney was the youngest of three young francophones who trained together as wireless operators and air gunners (WAG), were posted to Patricia Bay together on 9 September 1944, and were crew members on Consolidated Canso 11086 when it went missing on 2 December 1944. Although the youngest, he was the only one of the three to be commissioned when they all earned their WAG badges in August 1944.

John enlisted in August 1943, four months after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. He had a grade 11 education and was, at the time, working as a garage mechanic. His medical examiner passed him as being in good general condition, not outstanding or particularly intelligent, but a fair candidate for aircrew. One of John's brothers was in the RCAF at Service Flying Training School and John was very enthusiastic and keen to be accepted for flying duties. He had spent a year as a private in the Officer Training Corps at St. Joseph's University.

John was born 19 April 1925, in Grand Falls, New Brunswick, to Ambrose Mahoney and Marie Bernard. The family had five sons and four daughters, of which one daughter and one son died in infancy. Ambrose died of cancer when he was 54, before John enlisted, and Marie was partially dependent on John. When the wreckage of Canso 11086 was finally located in July 1945, John was buried with his two friends and the other crew members beside the aircraft.

Dear Mrs. Mahoney;

Since I last wrote to you we have carried out one of the longest and most careful searches I remember without finding any traces of your son's aircraft. In all we have flown over 800 hours, by day and night, covering the whole area from Comox and Tofino in the North to the California Line in the south, as far East as Mt. Baker and 100 miles out into the Pacific. On the ground large areas have been searched by Air Force and other ground parties and every clue has been followed up to the limits of our ability. The time has now come when I am afraid we must admit defeat. The service will be losing one of the most promising crews I have had here, who would have done credit to themselves and to the service when they went into operations, and we shall miss them sadly in this Unit, where we all share your loss and sorrow. Please accept my sincerest sympathy and that of all his friends here.



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

The search for 11086 started on December 2<sup>nd</sup> and continued until December 11<sup>th</sup>. The search entailed 742 hours of daytime flying and 46 hours at night. A further 250 hours of searching started on December 15<sup>th</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup>, a bedraggled carrier pigeon, #43 RCAF 1064, returned to its loft at Patricia Bay. The pigeon had been issued to Flight Officer Nash on 2 December 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 it 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 9<sup>th</sup>.

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 Douglas 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

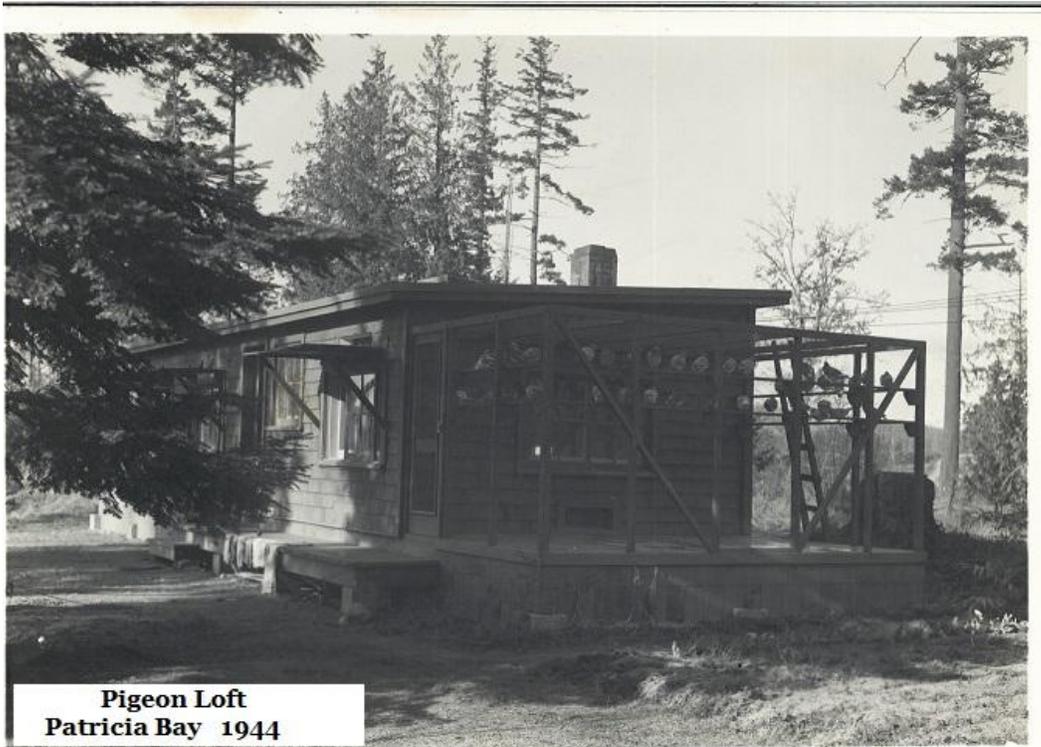
at the time of the crash. The plane was identified as Canso 11086 by the number on the fuselage.

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 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, special boxes, usually containing two pigeons, were loaded onto the aircraft and then removed on its return, with the pigeons returned to their 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.