

Mitchell, Russell Tremaine

Age: 20

Nationality: Canadian

Rank: Sergeant

Unit: No. 13 OT

Occupation: Pilot/Observer

Service No: R85428

Birth: 20 February 1921
Strasbourg, Sask.



Home Town: Strasbourg, Saskatchewan, Canada

Death: 15 December 1941
Crash of Supermarine Stranraer 927
Entrance to Nanoose Bay, BC, Canada

Burial: Crescent Road Cemetery, Strasbourg, Sask.

Others: AC1 Robert William Adams (crew); Sgt. Gordon Herbert Andrews (co-pilot); AC1 Robert Albert Blakely (crew); F/L Donald Clark MacDougall (pilot); LAC William Denis Riley (crew); P/ O Richard Wood (crew); Sgt. John Cunningham Gunn (passenger).

Biography

Russell Mitchell enlisted in the RCAF on 11 February 1941, a week before his 20th birthday. Before his 21st birthday, he drowned, trapped in a submerged Supermarine Stranraer in Nanoose Bay.

Russell was young even for his 20 years. He had left school with a grade 12 diploma and from then until he enlisted had worked as a grocery clerk. At school he was interested in the band and amateur dramatics and was on the school hockey team. On his application to the RCAF he described himself as 'mechanically inclined'. When he enlisted he was described as an average boy, clean, neat, tidy and pleasant. He was recommended for Pilot training. During training he was rated of average ability, good appearance and very good conduct. He was very nervous when he was tested as a pilot, regarded as immature and undeveloped with not much personality and unlikely to be a leader. His examiner wrote that he had good qualities of a high average pilot but needed experience.

On 19 October 1941, two days after receiving his pilot's wings and being promoted to Sergeant, Russell was posted to Patricia Bay and took a Bomber Reconnaissance course, which he passed as average. He died two months later on December 15th.

William Derby School in Strasbourg, Saskatchewan, has built its own memorial wall with Canadian maple replicas of the titanium bricks used in the memorial outside the Juno Beach Centre in France. There is a brick to commemorate each of the local servicemen and women who died. Russell's name is one of those on the memorial.



Memorial wall built at William Derby School, Strasbourg Sask.

Russell was born on 20 February 1921 to William Tremaine Mitchell and Nora Christine Samuelson in Strasbourg Saskatchewan. He had one brother, Keith.

STRASBOURG. — Sgt. Russell T. Mitchell, eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Mitchell of Strasbourg was the other southern Saskatchewan man killed in crash of the Stranraer flying boat in Nanoose Bay, B.C., while on an operational flight last Monday.

Born at Strasbourg 20 years ago Russell obtained his education in the public and high schools here. He took a prominent part in all activities of the student body, was one of the original members of the school band and the hockey team. He also took an interest in amateur dramatics, was frequently seen in plays and was always a great favorite. After graduating in 1939 Russell was employed in McBride's store until his enlistment in the R.C.A.F. He started training at Brandon in March, 1941, and took flying courses at Regina, Lethbridge, High River and Calgary. He received his wings as a sergeant-pilot on October 14 at No. 3 Flying School in Calgary. Since that time he has been taking an advanced course in navigation with the Coastal Patrol at Patricia Bay.

Sergeant Mitchell is survived by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Mitchell and one brother, Keith, all of Strasbourg.



Details of Crash

On 15 December 1941, at 1:10 pm, Supermarine Stranraer 927 took off from Patricia Bay seaplane base on patrol. It carried a crew of seven:

AC1 Robert William Adams
Sgt. Gordon Herbert Andrews
AC1 Robert Albert Blakely
F/L Donald Clark MacDougall
Sgt. Russell Tremaine Mitchell
LAC William Denis Riley
P/ O Richard Wood.

F/L MacDougall was first pilot and Sergeant Andrews was second pilot. All the remaining men were described simply as crewmen.

Sgt. John Cunningham Gunn asked the captain if he could join the crew. Despite having been warned previously not to carry unauthorized passengers, F/L MacDougall agreed to take him. There were two authorized passengers, F/L Booth and Mr. Hobbins, who needed transportation to Vancouver.

The aircraft landed successfully at Jericho Beach, where the two legitimate passengers disembarked, and took off again at 1:55 pm. At 2:33 pm, with deteriorating weather conditions, all aircraft from Patricia Bay were instructed to return to base. Stranraer 927 did not respond and made no subsequent contact with base.

Around 3:00 pm, F/L Mac Dougall tried to land at Nanoose Bay, where conditions were poor with strong winds (40 mph) and very rough seas. With no survivors and no radio contact, his reasons for landing are obscure.

According to civilian witness statements, at about 3:00 pm, the aircraft circled once and then came in to land. It touched the surface, bounced twice and was struck by two waves about 10 feet high. The left wing hit the water and the aircraft turned until it was almost vertical, nose down, and started to sink. Seeing the aircraft in trouble, civilian boatmen tried to reach it, but the aircraft sank before they could get there. They were able to pinpoint the location of the wreck when salvage attempts were made later. The witnesses did not think the aircraft had engine difficulties but some reported a 'flash' on the top of a wing as it landed.

It was about 4:00 pm when Patricia Bay were notified of the crash and sent an officer to investigate. No salvage efforts were possible on that day due to the rough seas. Two naval boats dragged the area the following day with no success and the next two days, the 17th and 18th, weather was again too rough for further dragging.

On Friday the 19th Pacific Salvage dragged area for more than three hours and finally located the aircraft in 30 fathoms of water. It was raised and towed to shallow water where a diver was able to attach lines to hoist it onto a barge.

On Saturday, the bodies of the crew were removed, brought to shore, and identified. They are recorded as having drowned. Only F/L MacDougall was missing. He was assumed to have escaped through the hatch above his seat and, unable to swim in his heavy flying gear, drowned. His body was never found.

The inquiry into the accident, which did not take place until seven months later, concluded that the cause of the accident was a heavy landing in rough water that damaged the left wing, collapsed the nose, and shattered all the windows, speeding the rate at which the aircraft sank. The damage to the aircraft with this, plus five days under water and the effects of the salvage, was severe.

No recommendations were made since it was impossible to determine why the captain chose to land in such challenging conditions.



SEVEN DEAD IN TRAGEDY

Complement of R.C.A.F. Flying Boat Lost When Craft Sinks

NANAIMO, Dec. 16.—The cause of the tragic death of seven men in the big Royal Canadian Air Force plane which dropped out of a storm, hovered above the waters of Nanoose Bay for a few minutes and then disappeared with a side slip into 240 feet of water, still remains unsolved tonight.

The big flying boat, which left Patricia Bay on Monday on a routine patrol in good weather, evidently had engine trouble at 3:20 p.m. while over Nanoose Bay and after circling twice around the angry waters off Maude Island, settled, hopped three times and then hit again, with one wing dipping into the water, slicing the way for the rest of the huge machine to slide to the bottom. The seven passengers, equipped with life belts, probably were unable to free themselves to obtain a chance to swim clear.

Four officers of the air force arrived in Nanaimo from Patricia Bay today and at noon interviewed eyewitnesses of the accident at Lantzville. They were trying to piece together the story of the crash. On

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