

# STAPLES, Alonzo Irvine

**Age:** 27  
**Nationality:** Canadian  
**Rank:** Pilot/Officer  
**Unit:** No. 3 OTU  
**Occupation:** Navigator  
**Service Number:** J/45415

**Birth:** 13 April 1917  
Fredericton,  
New Brunswick,  
Canada



**Home Town:** Fredericton, New Brunswick,  
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; P/O John Mahoney, W/O; 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**

Edna Grace Staples had two sons, Alonzo born in 1917 and Gerald, born seven years later. Both sons joined the RCAF and both sons died in aircraft accidents in 1944. Gerald died in June of exposure, in the sea somewhere between Iceland and Scotland, and was buried in Lerwick, Shetland, Scotland. Alonzo was reported missing on December 2. Despite extensive searches, it was into 1945 before his crash site was located and he was buried with the rest of the crew in a common grave next to the aircraft on Vancouver Island.

Alonzo Staples began his military career in the Army. From 1940 to 1942 he was with the 23rd Field Ambulance (RF). He left this to join Royal Canadian Engineers (AF) where he served for eight months and qualified as an engineering draughtsman. On 16 March 1943, he left the army to join the RCAF, where his younger brother was already training as a wireless operator/air gunner.

At enlistment, Alonzo was well received as a bright young man with courage, determination and adaptability. After Initial Training, in November 1943, he was sent to No. 6 Bombing and Gunnery School. He was keen and interested in the work, showed ability, and in January 1944, was sent for further training at No. 10 Air Observer School.

Alonzo's performance in Navigation was well above average. He was clear thinking and excellent at chart and log work, as might be expected with his army training as a draughtsman. Despite not being very '*militaristic*' in his bearing, his appearance was good and he was popular with his class and co-operative. He was recommended for immediate commission and earned both his commission and his Navigator's Badge on 19 May 1944.

Three months later, Alonzo was posted to No.3 OTU at Patricia Bay. On 2 December 1944, he was the Navigator on Consolidated Canso 11086 when it flew into the side of a mountain on Vancouver Island.

Alonzo Irvine Staples was born in Fredericton, New Brunswick, on 13 April 1917, to Eben Miller Staples and Edna Grace Capen. Eben died in 1942 of Tuberculosis. A younger brother, Gerald Frank, was born in 1924 and died of exposure, as a Flight Sergeant in the RCAF, in 1944. Alonzo married Emily May Quong on 23 September 1943. Emily, widowed after 14 months, never remarried.



Alonzo Staples and Emily May Quong



Gerald Frank Staples

SA13

## 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 <sup>nd</sup> Pilot
Pilot Officer John Mahoney	Wireless Operator
Flying Officer Robert Nash	Captain, 1 <sup>st</sup> 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 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 December 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 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 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

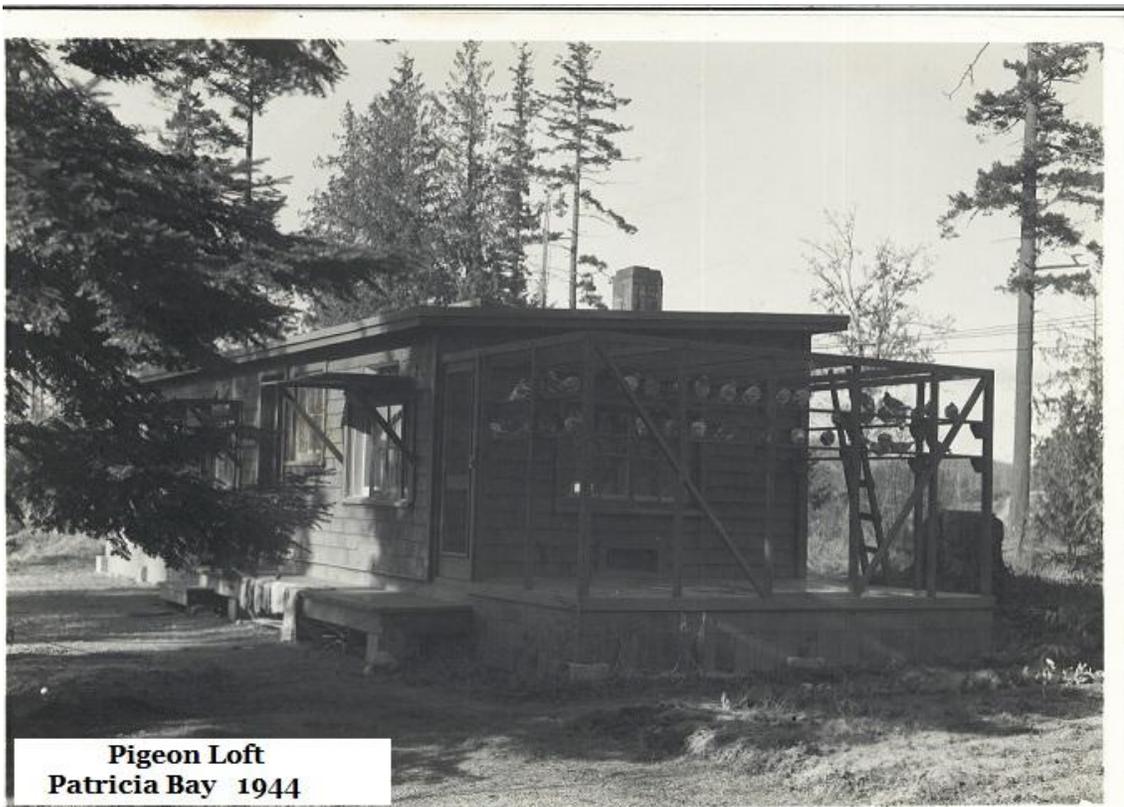
on the fuselage.

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, it was a normal practise to load two pigeons in special boxes onto the aircraft and 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 which failed to survive.