

Crash site of Royal Canadian Air Force Canso A 11007 revisited © Dirk Septer 2009

As a ghostly reminder of a long forgotten chapter in World War II history the wreckage of the flying boat sits in the coastal scrub forest near Tofino on Vancouver Island, B.C. Some shreds of fabric hanging down from the aircraft's ailerons and tail gently move in the breeze. The faded number 11007 near the tail identifies it as the Consolidated Canso that crashed here just before midnight on February 8, 1945.

This Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) Canso was just one of several that went down along British Columbia's rugged and remote west coast. Some crashed in the dense coastal rainforest, while others have never been located and presumably crashed somewhere over water.

What makes the remains of RCAF 11007 (msn CV 285) unique is that the wreckage of this aircraft still sits in the same place where it crashed 60 years ago. This despite the fact that it rests not far from a well-travelled highway and inside one of Canada's most popular national parks.

Fearing a possible invasion by the Japanese, the Canadian military constructed radar stations and military defences all along the pacific coast. A fleet of patrol bombers were constantly on the lookout for enemy submarines and paper balloon bombs sent over with prevailing westerly winds.

Being part of the Western Air Command and belonging to RCAF No. 6 (BR) Squadron Canso 11007 was built by Canadian Vickers at Cartierville, Que. On October 30, 1943, it was taken on charge. Early in 1945, this aircraft was temporarily assigned to RCAF No. 4 (BR) Squadron at Tofino, detailed to fly search and rescue missions in addition to the monotonous grind of anti-submarine patrols. Some two months after its crash, it was struck off military charge on April 13, 1945.

On February 8, 1945 around noon, Canso 11007 had left Coal Harbour and flew to Tofino. The weather was quite blustery by the time they landed at this RCAF Air Station on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Several crewmembers then drove to Ucluelet to pick up some engine parts and spent the early evening hours in the Tofino Mess.

Later that day at 2300 hours, the aircraft left Tofino on a routine night patrol on its way to Coal Harbour, the next reconnaissance station further north along the coast. On board the aircraft were 12 personnel, including one WD. (WD, the abbreviation for "Women's Division" also became the universal nickname for female members of the RCAF). Besides its normal emergency gear and a full load of fuel of about 750 Gal. (3,400 L), the aircraft carried four 250-pound (112.5 kg) depth charges.

Almost immediately after take-off from runway 28, before the radio operator even had time to send a routine message, the aircraft's port engine quit. An attempt to turn back to the airfield failed. While making a 180-degree turn the aircraft lost altitude and started skimming some trees on the edge of a plateau rising up into a hill.

The pilot, F/O Ronnie J. Scholes later said that they were too low to turn and could not gain altitude so he decided to land straight ahead. Scholes managed to slow the plane by pulling it into a full stall landing at impact. He then skillfully pancaked it into the bottom of a heavily wooded hillside only a few miles from the airport. If the aircraft had touched down a few seconds earlier, it would have ended up in a soft open bog with only a few scrubby pine trees.

Breaking through the much bigger trees, the aircraft stood almost upright on its nose before settling back down. The port side wing fuel tank ruptured on impact with the trees and sent gasoline gushing down the hillside. The starboard engine tore off under full power. Hitting the ground about 10 feet uphill in front of the nose it caught fire.

The impact knocked co-pilot L.C. Lake out for a few seconds. "When I came to, I saw the motor burning and thought this might be it, as raw gas was flowing off the starboard engine mount." Referring to Scholes' handling, pilot-navigator F/O Lace Knechtel later wrote: "I personally feel that the majority on board owe our lives to his sheer guts."

But it was actually Knechtel's quick reaction that saved the aircraft from further damage and probably some crew's lives. Immediately realising what the score was when the engine quit, he braced himself against a bulkhead in the waist gun area. As soon as the aircraft came to a stop, Knechtel grabbed a fire extinguisher and doused the engines before the flames had really got started.

Knechtel later described the crash: "I was riding in the port blister, facing aft, when I realised the plane was in a stall attitude. I looked out to my right and we were down between the trees! We hit and the tail went up and up until I was looking at the stars past the tail; then it crashed down and all the lights in the aircraft went out. I could hear a crackling noise, looked out forward and saw, through a waterfall of gasoline from the ruptured left wing tank, the port engine on fire."

"There was no sound from anyone. I thought they were all dead, until I heard someone start swearing. I yelled for a fire extinguisher. One of the engineers handed one out to me and I climbed up over the wing by kicking a foothold to get started."

"When I got over the top, the nose was ripped completely away forward of the pilots' seats. The seats were just sitting there in the open! The nose was lying off to the right and on its side. I can still recall seeing the fluorescent instruments and hearing the gyros humming!"

Eight of the crew and passengers had minor cuts and bruises while three others were unhurt. "Ronnie (Scholes) had a fractured forehead and a broken nose," Knechtel recalled. "The WD had a sprained ankle and the others had numerous cuts and bruises, all minor." The survivors dragged out the parachutes and stumbled about 150 feet (45 m) away to the level ground behind the wreck.

The three uninjured made trips back to the aircraft for sleeping bags and emergency rations. Using one of the parachutes they set up a tent and remained there overnight. "We bedded down the more seriously injured and established a watch. We tried the Gibson Girl (emergency radio) without an aerial, as I wouldn't allow any of the fellows to climb a tree in the dark. At about 0300 hours we could hear shouting on the airport and then an aircraft cranked up."

After Canso 11007 failed to arrive at Coal Harbour, Tofino initiated a search before first light next morning. At 0330 hours, Canso 9753 with F/O Weir at the controls took off into the dark night. A few minutes later, Knechtel saw the aircraft's port running light overhead and fired a red flare with a Very pistol. However, the aircraft flew straight ahead and disappeared.

"About the time I stopped cussing him for his blindness, he came around the hill from the other side, circling left and dropped a parachute flare. It scared the hell out of us. We didn't know whether it would drop on us or on the aircraft with the spilled gasoline and bombs." Fortunately the flare missed everything.

Later that morning another search aircraft took off flying in a straight line to the crash site. The Canso circled as a beacon homing a ground party to the downed aircraft. After reaching the wreckage, the injured were packed out while the others walked, all ending up base hospital for treatment or observation. The Canso was left where it crashed.

A faulty magneto was later found to be the cause of the crash. The other one seemed to be within the limit and going with just one, it failed. Co-pilot Lake noted, "Were it not for Knechtel's quick thinking, the aircraft would have gone up as a torch."

Four RCAF personnel later hiked into the crash site to remove and detonate the depth charges. The radio and the machine guns were also retrieved. Two holes blown in the fuselage were apparently done to destroy the aircraft's secret radar gear. A couple of hundred yards from the wreck water-filled crater about 20 feet (6 m) across still shows the spot where the four depth charges were blown up.

In a family photo album Burlington, Ont. resident Gar Darroch found a series of old black-and-white snapshots showing an RCAF Canso at its crash site in heavily forested terrain. "Dad and other members of the search crew had hiked through the dense rainforest to retrieve the

machineguns and radios.” One photo showed his father standing on the fuselage behind the wing with belts of ammunition draped over his shoulders and hips.

From 1943 to 1945 F/O Edward “Ted” Darroch was stationed at Tofino with RCAF No. 4 (BR) Squadron. He was the flight engineer on the Canso that was sent on the night search for the missing 11007. After spotting the aircraft and returning to Tofino, he was then assigned as the flight engineer on another Canso that took off after daylight to guide a ground crew to the crash site.



On February 10, F/O Darroch and at least three other RCAF personnel hiked to the wreck to remove the machine guns and radios. This was the first trip into the site after the crash crew had been attended to.

In 1987, Gar Darroch decided to try to locate the crash site and take photos of its existing state. His preparations involved studying the “secret” wartime daily diary of RCAF station Tofino on microfilm and many letters and phone calls. A bush pilot based at Tofino, who was familiar with the crash site, marked the location on a topographic map. In May 1988, Darroch and his wife Janet travelled to Vancouver Island.

On May 13, 1988, armed with a map and compass, after a trek of less than an hour they reached the wreck. Finally, months of preparation were rewarded with a first glimpse of worn white paint and twisted aluminum visible through the trees. The military markings and registration number were faintly visible. The wings still had trees embedded from the crash impact. “This rendezvous with the past was complete when I stood in the same location as my father had – 43 years before. It was definitely my most memorable vacation.”

“By the way, it was my dad who dropped that infamous parachute flare,” Darroch notes. “He and some of the survivors chatted about that afterwards and agreed that the outcome could have been much altered had it actually dropped on the gasoline.”

Although the wreck, located at 49° 07' N, 125° 46' W, just back from Radar Hill is not too far off the highway between Ucluelet and Tofino, it is not easy to reach. Over the years many hikers trying to visit it did get lost in swampy and in many places thick bush. In 1970, the crash site became part of the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, Canada's first national park on the Pacific Ocean.

During World War II, the summit of 96-m high Radar Hill near the northwest end of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve was cleared as one of the radar installations. Evidence of foundations of the radar station can still be seen when climbing the ramp to the viewpoint.



Plans by a private party in February 1966 to salvage the aircraft never materialised. The Canadian Museum of Flight (CMFT), after relocating to Langley, B.C. renamed the Canadian Museum of Flight, had originally planned to lift out the wreckage with a Department of National Defence Chinook helicopter. After these were sold off, CMFT toyed with the idea of making a deal with the National Guard “Happy Hookers” at Paine Field to lift it out.

However, then another British Columbia aviation museum butted into the act, claiming to have permission to lift out the aircraft. “They made a lot of noise about it and stirred up Parks Canada, who then forbid removing anything from the national park,” former CMFT president Jerry Vernon notes. “We actually felt that we would be doing them a favour by removing the wreck from their park.”

The CMFT was quite seriously looking at a well-funded recovery and restoration of the aircraft. Multimillionaire retired mutual fund owner Bill McRae had been the last CO of 4 (BR)

Squadron at Tofino, at the time the Canso crashed. He had already bought an airworthy Canso for the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum. McRae then had grandiose ideas of funding an airworthy restoration in British Columbia of the wreck at Tofino if it could be airlifted out.

Despite being a registered heritage site in a national park, over time the wreckage has been badly vandalised. It pretty well has been stripped of about anything that could be unscrewed and unbolted and was not too heavy to be carried out. Despite all this, the fuselage is still in remarkably good shape. It is, however, covered with names, initials and dates left by aviation buffs and looters alike.

Comparing an original aerial photograph taken of the crash site on February 12, 1945 with recent ones shows amazingly little change of the aircraft and its immediate surroundings over the past 60 years. But since National Parks policy forbids anything to be removed from inside its boundaries, the wreck will likely remain here for a while longer.

The feared Japanese invasion did not come but pilot Ron Scholes never flew again after this crash.

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