

How love saved the life of Normie Kwong and kept him off a doomed plane, 65 years ago today

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Dec. 9 marks the 65th anniversary of one of Canada's greatest aviation disasters. In 1956, 59 passengers and three crew members were killed while aboard a Trans-Canada flight from Vancouver to Calgary. The plane disappeared after running into icy weather over the mountains, but its wreckage wasn't found for five months despite intensive searches at the time. It was one of the deadliest air crashes at the time and still ranks as Canada's sixth deadliest air disaster.

Some of the high profile passengers aboard the plane were four members of the Saskatchewan Roughriders (Mel Becket, Mario DeMarco, Ray Syrnyk and Gordon Sturtridge) and one Winnipeg Blue Bomber (Calvin Jones.) They were returning home from an East vs. West all-star football game in Vancouver. Two other high profile football players were supposed to be on that plane. Jackie Parker changed his plans at the last minute, opting to instead go elsewhere to visit relatives. Norman Kwong (1929-2016) decided to stay an extra day in Vancouver, where he was courting his future wife. He didn't get on the plane so that he could stay on the west coast and have another date with Mary.

Fate spared them that day. Here's a story from the archives about those events; it appeared in Postmedia newspapers on the 50th anniversary of the crash in 2006.

The day that fate smiled on Kwong: In '56, Kwong skipped fatal flight in the name of love

Calgary Herald

Sun Dec 10 2006

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Byline: Mike Beamish

Dateline: VANCOUVER

Source: CanWest News Service

His full title is His Honour, the Lieutenant Governor, the Honourable Norman L. Kwong, CM, AOE.

Fifty years ago Saturday, however, the Queen's representative in Alberta was a young man named Normie Kwong, the fullback of the Edmonton Eskimos.

When His Honour looks back on a life of extraordinary accomplishment, he recognizes 1956 as a particularly significant passage. On Dec. 9 that year, Kwong and teammate Jackie Parker were supposed to be on Trans-Canada Airlines Flight 810, headed to Calgary from Vancouver following the East-West Shrine all-star game at Empire Stadium.

It's a long-ago story, but a fateful one, how love made him stay behind to woo the woman who was to become his wife.

"I was courting my wife (Mary Lee) in Vancouver at the time," Kwong remembers. "It was probably our second or third date, so I decided to stay over an extra day. I was booked on Flight 810. The only reason I didn't go was because I had a date. I'd hate to give her credit for that. Just kidding. But that was the actual circumstance of why I missed the flight."

After losing an engine just beyond Hope, the four-engined, piston-driven, DC-4 North Star was turning around and returning to Vancouver when it disappeared over the Cascade Mountains. For five months, it was as if TCA Flight 810 had entered the Bermuda Triangle. Despite an extensive search, the impact scene wasn't found until May 1957, near Chilliwack.

The plane had slammed into Mount Slesse, known as The Fang, killing all 62 on board, including Saskatchewan Roughriders Mel Becket, Mario DeMarco, Ray Syrnyk and Gordon Sturtridge and Winnipeg Blue Bomber Calvin Jones.

It remains Western Canada's worst aviation disaster and the sixth most catastrophic loss of life in the history of Canadian flight.

Parker, who like Kwong cancelled his original booking on 810, made alternative plans, deciding to visit relatives in Mississippi.

Following his retirement as a player, Kwong had a successful career in real estate, was part-owner of the Calgary Flames when they won the city's only Stanley Cup in 1989 and turned the Calgary Stampeders around with the hiring of Wally Buono as head coach. A member of the Canadian football and Canadian sports halls of fame, he was named to the Order of Canada in 1998.

"Everybody's had situations like that where you've made the right choice or a lucky choice and your life has turned out differently," Kwong says. "It's been a pretty good life for me. Four boys, all married, six grandchildren and another on the way. I've been very fortunate."

There has been a long line of teams, athletes and coaches, from Knute Rockne to Bill Barilko to Cory Lidle, involved in aircraft mishaps. Given the nature of pro and college sports, with their hectic scheduling and continental travel demands, the gratifying conclusion is that air crashes happen about as often as a perfect game. For comparison, more people have orbited the moon than pitched a 27-up, 27-down game in the major leagues.

It's almost ancient history now, but Reg Whitehouse remembers how fearful he became, how long it took to get over the loss of four teammates.

Whitehouse, who retired in 1966, immediately after the Roughriders won their first Grey Cup, said that, for the rest of his career, he would get on a plane and wonder if he would make it to his destination. He played in the '56 all-star game with Becket, a centre, and Sturtridge, a defensive end. DeMarco, an offensive lineman and Becket's business partner, and Syrnyk went along to Vancouver just to cheer them on.

"My wife (Joanne) was supposed to come with me, but we decided to cancel it. I just had a feeling," says Whitehouse, 75, who was partial to the turbo-prop Vickers Viscount, a faster, newer plane just being introduced by TCA. "I was supposed to go back with the other guys, but I decided to change aircraft. I always wanted to be on the Viscount because it had good climbing ability. The North Star was slow climbing, and it tended to pick up ice. It shouldn't have been flying in the mountains."

From the doorstep of his home on Rotary Street in Chilliwack, Whitehouse can see the peaks of Mount Slesse, where the debris field of flight 810 has been declared an official heritage site. In 1995 — following pressure from Families of Slesse, relatives of the victims who wanted the area safeguarded as a memorial site — the B.C. government agreed to create an enduring legacy.

Jones, the only Blue Bomber on the doomed passenger list, was supposed to have gone out earlier with teammates Bud Grant (who later coached the Minnesota Vikings to four Super Bowl appearances), Gordie Rowland and Bob McNamara.

An outstanding offensive guard at the University of Iowa, in 1954, Jones became the first collegiate football player ever to appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated. Named team captain and an All-American in 1955, he was the first black player to win the Outland Trophy as college football's top lineman.

At Iowa, Jones's No. 62 jersey — coincidentally the number of people lost on Flight 810 — is officially withdrawn, making him one of only two players in the university's 117-year football history to have his number retired. Similarly, the Roughriders have taken No. 40 (Becket), 55 (DeMarco), 56 (Syrnyk) and 73 (Sturtridge) out of circulation.

Rob Murphy, the B.C. Lions' left tackle who received the DeMarco-Becket Trophy, the prize that goes to the most outstanding lineman in the CFL's West Division, confessed he knew nothing of the trophy's background. "It's the first I've ever heard of it. The story behind that trophy just makes it more significant to me. . . . It's something that should be told."

A significant number of other community leaders were aboard the plane, as this Calgary Herald front page story indicates. The list included: Ald. Wally Rowan, his wife Yvonne Rowan and their two children Patrick, 12, and Suzanne, 5; Maj. Phillip Gower of the Queen's Own Rifles and Brig. Harold E. Wright, formerly the commander of the militia forces in Calgary.

73rd YEAR

Price 3 Cents

CALGARY, ALBERTA, MONDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1956

CALGARIANS MISSING PLANE

British Troops Are Ambushed By Egyptians

Protest Is Sent By Allies To U.N.

PORT SAID (AP) — Egyptian guerrillas attacked a British command post in Port Said on Sunday, killing 10 British soldiers and wounding 15. The British command post was a base of operations for a force of 100 British soldiers and 100 Egyptian troops. The British command post was a base of operations for a force of 100 British soldiers and 100 Egyptian troops. The British command post was a base of operations for a force of 100 British soldiers and 100 Egyptian troops.

Passenger List Of Missing Plane

- Harry Cleven, 320 46th Ave. S.W., Calgary.
- K. W. Collett, 2050 2nd St. S.W., Calgary.
- Mrs. N. J. Ross, 328 17th Ave. N.W., Calgary.
- John B. Hemming, 429 18th St. N.W., Calgary.
- Mrs. Helen Chapman, 1819 19th Ave. N.W., Calgary.
- Edwin Pettit, 3213 Killeney Road, Calgary.
- Maj. Phillip E. Gower, 24 Arden Drive, Calgary.
- Wally Rowan.
- Mrs. Yvonne Rowan, 42.
- Patrick Rowan, 12.
- Sumner Rowan, 5, all of 2628 8th Ave. N.W., Calgary.
- James M. McKay, 596 37th St. N.W., Calgary.
- Miss Jean Grant, 831 22nd Ave. N.W., Calgary.
- Miss Aline Litwinski, 2323 20th Ave. S.W., Calgary.
- Miss Audrey Harper, 608 17th Ave. W., Calgary.
- Harold McElroy, 2015 Champlain St., Calgary.
- Mrs. Isabel Adams, Duns Ave., 12th Ave. W., Calgary.
- M. G. Kennedy, Toronto.
- F. J. Wright, 1125 West 11th St., Vancouver.
- F. W. Edwards, 6926 Churchill St., Vancouver.
- B. Stewart, 2207 West 47th Ave., Vancouver.
- J. A. Munro, 2563 West 23rd Ave., Vancouver.
- Mal Beckett, 3801 Princess Drive, Regina.
- Harold DeMarco, Warren Apts., Regina.
- Gordon Sturridge, 615 17th Ave. East, Regina.
- Mrs. Gordon Sturridge, Regina.
- Ray Smyrk, Redwood, Alta.
- B. Carter, 4444 Edmond St., Burnaby, B.C.
- R. L. Laid, 4416 Burke St., South Burnaby, B.C.
- R. W. Mitchell, 2222 West First Ave., Vancouver.
- J. E. Henderson, P.E., 1, Joseph, Wash.
- Wong-yuen-wah, W.K. Chop Suey House, Regina.
- Constant W. Emire, RCMP, Union Bay, B.C.
- Mrs. L. C. Hart, San Francisco.
- Max Bailey, Town of Mount Royal, Montreal.
- D. Holden, Royal Bank of Canada, Winnipeg.
- Miss D. Beaumont, 223 Provencher Ave., St. Bonifacio, Man.
- Anthony Folger, Dallas, Tex.
- M. L. Bright, Fort Worth, Tex., and Edmonton.
- J. Strufflers, 1970 Quilchena Drive, Vancouver.
- H. E. Wright, 1118 West 48th Ave., Vancouver.
- A. L. West, 4716 West 4th Ave., Vancouver.
- J. D. Lynch, 5908 Yale St., Vancouver.
- J. H. McBeth, 56 Laurie Crescent, West Vancouver.
- K. W. Hamilton, 17 Wellington Crescent, Edmonton.
- Mrs. H. W. Hamilton, 17 Wellington Crescent, Edmonton.
- Miss Joan Williams, 19 Regal Ave. St. Vital, Man.
- E. J. Muir, Powell River, B.C.
- R. S. Stratton, 700 South Airline, Los Angeles, Calif.
- Calvin Jones, Steubenville, Ohio.
- Mrs. E. Welsh, Toronto.
- Wong Fook, Oriental en route from Far East to New York.
- Kwan Song, Cheng-sui-chun.
- Liu-wan Ying.
- Yuen Gar.
- Hastings.

The name of one passenger from the West Coast is being withheld pending notification of the next of kin.

TCA was able to report only that the five Americans were en route from the Orient to New York.

The crew was as follows:
Capt. Allan Clarke, 35, Montreal.
John Ross, 26, North Vancouver.
Dorothy Bjartsson, 24, Swan River, Man.



SEARCH FOR LOST PLANE. Sgts. Ldr. George Shen (third from left), is shown going over a map of the area where the TCA plane, with 62 persons on board, is believed lost. At present it is shown as hunting for the missing North Star, which disappeared an hour after taking off from Vancouver on a flight to Calgary. (Herald Wirephoto file)

Wally Rowan And Family On Plane Calgary Shocked At Crash News

Calgarians were stunned today by the news that 62 persons, at least 17 of them city residents, were missing in a Trans-Canada Air Lines plane in British Columbia. The North Star aircraft was last heard from about 7 p.m. Sunday en route to Calgary from Vancouver.

Several prominent Calgarians were aboard, some of them returning from the East-West football classic held Saturday in Vancouver.

Relations and friends of the missing Calgarians are trying to find out the plane may have made.

ROWAN FAMILY
Included in the missing list is Wally Rowan and his wife and two children.

Edwin Pettit, 3213 Killeney Road, Calgary, was also on board. Pettit has been active in Y.M.C.A. work in Eastern Canada.

Major D. H. Mackay was aboard by the news. He had had a long flight from Vancouver.

John B. Hemming, general sales and advertising manager for Palm Products, was also on board.

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Hungarians Resume Fighting

BELGRADE (Reuters) — Communist forces resumed fighting in Western Hungary following the withdrawal of western troops.

Several prominent Calgarians were aboard, some of them returning from the East-West football classic held Saturday in Vancouver.

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62 Persons Missing Among The Missing

A clue to the fate of 62 travellers, including 17 Calgarians, missing since 7:10 p.m. (PST) Sunday in their Trans-Canada Airlines plane out of Vancouver was the target today of one of the biggest air searches in Canadian air history.

Among the prominent Calgarians listed as missing on the plane were Ald. Wally Rowan, his wife and two children; Edwin Pettit, football official with the WFLU; E. W. Collett, of Mammic Ltd.; John B. Hemming, of Palm Products; Harry Gower, of Hilton Dross Ltd.; Maj. Phillip Gower of the Queen's Own Rifles; and Harold McElroy, cartage company executive.

Brig. Harold E. Wright, ED, of 1116 West 48th Ave., Vancouver, and formerly commander of the militia forces in Calgary, was a passenger on the plane. Brig. Wright is also president of Canadian Bankers Ltd. with head office in Calgary.

Brig. Wright was president of the Calgary United Services Institute, president of the Canadian Artillery Association, and former commanding officer of the 19th Medium Regiment, R.C.A.

Hope was still high early this morning that the four-engine North Star, carrying 44 men, 15 women, four children and three crew members, was down safely "somewhere in the Fraser Valley."

But orders of the 16 aircraft lined up at dawn to begin the daylight phase of the search were that the wistful mountains in the Hope-Penticton area where the airliner last reported.

West fears are that the airliner crashed into the mountains after a fire killed the port No. 2 engine in high winds and icing conditions.

First hint of trouble was heard from the plane's pilot, Captain Allan Clarke, at 7:02. He radioed the Department of Transport that a flashing light on his control panel had warned him of fire in the port engine No. 2.

The 35-year-old pilot did not turn in a distress call, but said he had feathered the No. 2 propeller and turned on the five extinguishers. He was flying at 30,000 feet and said he was returning to Vancouver.

The Department of Transport stressed, however, that Captain Clarke had not said there actually was a fire in the engine. At 7:09 the plane was spotted on a radar screen, but disappeared soon afterwards.

At 7:10 the pilot reported he was just east of Hope and asked permission to descend to 8,000 feet. Permission was granted and he was scheduled to arrive at Sea Island at 7:30.

Fire and emergency crews stood by at the airport, but nothing was heard from the plane.

Air-Sea search and rescue units were alerted at 7:25. Three possible landing points.

Airport officials then still clinging to the hope that Capt. Clarke had managed to land at one of three possible airports in the vicinity of his flight — Penticton, Kimberley and Abbotsford.

But nothing was reported from these fields and at 11:15 p.m. TCA officially reported the airliner overdue — five hours after it had taken off.

Also aboard the lost airliner was Calvin Jones, 23-year-old Winnipeg Blue Bomber guard. He missed his original flight and booked passage on the missing plane.

He had signed a contract for the 1957 season prior to being scheduled at Calgary, Regina, Winnipeg and Toronto.

The plane, carrying 30 passengers and a crew of three, was forced to turn around at Hope, B.C., 100 miles east of Vancouver after an engine flame.

Possibly Worst Air Disaster
If worst fears were realized and all aboard were dead, it would be Canada's worst aviation disaster.

Four of the passengers were football players of the Saskatchewan Roughriders, one with his wife, returning last following Saturday's East-West all-star game here.

Mysterious Light Sighted
Before daylight, a mysterious light was spotted atop

Phoney Auction Curb Wanted
Jewellers Request Protective Bylaw

The Southern Alberta Jewellers' Association has written a letter to City Council asking for a bylaw to protect the public from the type of jewellery auction sale which has made its appearance at two 8th Ave. E. locations.

Bylaw 1154, which was passed by the council in 1954, prohibits the sale of jewellery at public auctions unless the auctioneer is a member of the Southern Alberta Jewellers' Association.

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High Wind Cuts Swath In South

One of Alberta's famous Chinooks appeared briefly late Sunday night, but a look around, and then a look at the wind, showed the temperature 40 to 48 above with the humidity here at 50 to 52.

The wind was a steady 10 to 15 m.p.h. and the humidity here at 50 to 52.

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IN TODAY'S HERALD

Who were the three wisest men? A Christmas story on page 28.

Crazy questions, page 11.

Today is the 20th anniversary of King Edward VIII's abdication. In a story on page 10 the Duke of Windsor says, given the same choice again, he would act "precisely as he did then."

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Among The Missing



ALD. WALLY ROWAN



EDWIN PETTIT



JOHN B. HEMMING



JAMES M. MCKAY



HAROLD MCELROY



MAJ. PHILIP GOWER



BRIG. HAROLD E. WRIGHT



MISS HELEN CHAPMAN

(Other Pictures on Page 11)

NO SIGN OF THE PLANE

FOUR RIDERS AMONG 62 MISSING



TYPE OF TERRAIN IN WHICH THE AIRLINER IS LOST

Dulles, Lloyd confer

PARIS (AP)—Britain's Foreign Secretary Lloyd and U. S. State Secretary Dulles "made real progress" in their talks yesterday, an American spokesman said. The talks were expected to result in a program for the future control and operation of the North Atlantic.

"Real progress was made in warding off their views," he said in disclosing the meeting which he said they regarded as a "breakthrough" between the British and Americans who have been at odds over the pact.

In their first face-to-face talk since British and France launched their own intervention in the face of American disapproval, Lloyd and Dulles met in the American embassy residence. Earlier plans for a luncheon meeting were cancelled as a courtesy to Dulles, who is still recovering from an abdominal operation.

The speed in scheduling the Dulles-Dulles talk emphasized the feeling on all sides here that the membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization must have far-reaching work over a team in the day with Foreign Minister Christian Fiesco of France.



SEARCH AREA: The heavy line traces the scheduled route of the lost North Star which is believed to be somewhere in the circuit area.

Workers defying Kadar, call strike

BUDAPEST (AP)—Workers in several big Budapest factories said tonight they will defy the Soviet-sponsored government and undertake a country-wide general strike starting at midnight.

Budapest was tense under the gaze of Russian tanks and Hungarian police. A 40-hour general strike was proclaimed Sunday by the Budapest Central Workers' Council to start at midnight. The government evaluated by refusing the request and imposed martial law.

Due to the armed presence by the government, it appeared that not all factories and commerce would heed the strike call.

The government stand, against an overwhelming armed force, threatened new bloodshed. Midnight tonight 14 p.m. MST is the new line.

The proclamation said the strike was intended to protest the "anti-people and anti-workers activities of the government of Premier Jozsef Kadar."

Mindszenty story page 8

The story of Cardinal Mindszenty's flight from Hungary will be found under on page 8.

VANCOUVER (CP)—An eastbound Trans-Canada Air Lines plane vanished Sunday night with 62 persons aboard in turbulent weather over the mountains of southwest British Columbia. More than 12 hours later no trace had been found.

It was last reported near Hope, 100 miles east of Vancouver, at 7:09 p.m. PST.

Passengers included four football players of the Saskatchewan Roughriders returning from Saturday's East-West All-Star game in Vancouver and the wife of one of them; Harold C. McElroy of Regina and Calgary, president of S-mee's Security Storage Ltd., and Wong

McElroy, Sturtridge's wife listed

MONTREAL (CP)—Trans-Canada Air Lines today began releasing the names of 59 passengers aboard a North Star plane missing in British Columbia. Others were withheld pending notification of next-of-kin.

The list:

Mrs. E. Welch, Toronto.
Mr. C. J. Kennedy, Toronto.
R. Cronin, 288 4th Ave., South-west Calgary.
K. W. Collett, 1909 2nd St., South-west Calgary.
J. M. MacKay, 1946 27th St., North-west Calgary.
Mrs. H. J. Rose, 187 14th St., Calgary.
Mrs. A. A. Kalner of Portland, Ore.
J. J. Wright, 1125 West 11th St., Vancouver.
F. W. Edwards, 1608 Church St., Vancouver.
A. M. Moore, 1543 2nd St., West Vancouver.
A. Vancouver, 2801 Princess Ave., Vancouver.
Marie DeLorain, 11000 49th Ave., Regina.
Gordon Sturtridge, 1013 27th Ave., East Regina.
Mrs. Gordon Sturtridge, Regina.
Ray Stork, Medicine Hat, Alta.
R. Carter, 4444 Elmwood St., Burnaby, B.C.
K. Laird, 1418 Burke St., South Burnaby, B.C.
B. E. Henderson, 1222 West First Ave., Vancouver.
J. E. Henderson, 1303 Burrard St., Vancouver.
Harold McElroy, 3845 Champlain St., Calgary.
Wang-yue-wah, (W. K. Chup), 1000 10th St., Vancouver.
Constable Entwisle, RCMP, Union Bay, B.C.
Mrs. C. Bart, San Francisco.
Max Bailey, Royal of Mount Royal, Montreal.
D. Holmes, Royal Bank of Canada, Winnipeg.
Miss D. Bernhardt, 3230 Princess Ave., St. Boniface, Man.
Kwan Song, Vancouver.
Yan Gung, Vancouver.
Cheng-sing-chun, Vancouver.
"TCA was able to report only that the five Asians were on board from the Orient to New York," said McElroy.



Yong Wah, 18 on route from Hong Kong to join his family in Regina. The football players were Mel Beckett and Gordon Sturtridge, who played in the game, Mario DeLorain and Ray Stork, who were spectators. Mrs. Mildred Sturtridge accompanied her husband.

If all those aboard the aircraft were killed, it would be the worst aviation disaster in Canadian history.

"They're more to this than meets the eye," said Ldr. G. L. Sheahan, RCAF searchmaster, said today in briefing the crews of 12 search planes.

"We feel the aircraft is likely down in an area southeast of Hope," he said.

Nothing was heard from the plane after 7:09 p.m. when the pilot turned around to come back to Vancouver. He said a motor had failed.

"He could have lost his radio control, he could have blown up," said Sgdn. Ldr. Sheahan.

"You'll be looking for wreckage and the signs of an explosion and in that case you'll probably see bits and pieces of a tail assembly."

"You'll be looking for signs of life, of course. While this is purely conjecture, that is all we have to go on."

Two RCAF Canam returned to their Sea Island base here two hours after their 7:30 a.m. take-off due to turbulent weather.

The extreme turbulence over the mountains is baffling even the biggest planes," said searchmaster Sheahan, "but we'll stick with it as long as we can."

At first light, 18 planes—the 32 RCAF aircraft and six others—left from airports here and in Vancouver Island to search a 100-square-mile area extending from the B.C. coast east to Hope and far south as 10,000-foot Mount Butler in Washington state.

Bomber player aboard

Other stories on pages 3, 5, 11

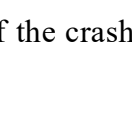
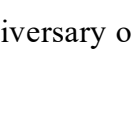
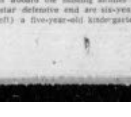
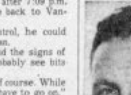
The search will be concentrated in the area within 30 miles of Hope.

Sgdn. Ldr. Sheahan said two radar stations stationed here on an aircraft at 7:19 p.m., a minute after Capt. Allan Clarke, 23, of Montreal, called that he had passed Hope and was heading back to Vancouver. The No. 2 radar—the lower one on the post—altitude was 20,000 feet.

The searchmaster believes the pilot's report was incorrect. The radar lines showed the plane could be up to 30 miles from Hope.

A searchmaster official said that downed, named to 16 All-Canadian teams in 1954 and several times in the following year, was supposed to make an earlier flight but kept to his "squad," assumed the plane was missing.

Jones, only 24-year-old in the Winnipeg roster this year, was last seen returning to his home at 1:30 Sunday night said that the wind was blowing in gusts up to 30 miles an hour and the sky was overcast.



Flying to attend father's funeral

WINNIPEG (CP)—One of the passengers aboard a Trans-Canada Air Lines North Star missing in British Columbia was flying to attend her father's funeral.

Miss D. Bernhardt, 19, a daughter of Mrs. Olive Bernhardt of St. Boniface, went to Vancouver to work in September.

Her father died of a heart attack Sunday.

Drone catching later flight

A drone station that spotted the lost plane reported it just east of Hope at 7:09 p.m. The station is at Burnaby, Wash., close to the Canadian boundary.

The plane disappeared from the radar screen a few minutes later at "blind spot" where planes cannot be tracked.

An RCMP officer at Hope said he would be looking for the plane.

Calgary family on missing flight

MONTREAL (CP)—Passengers aboard a Trans-Canada Air Lines plane missing in British Columbia included a Calgary family of four, TCA headquarters reported today.

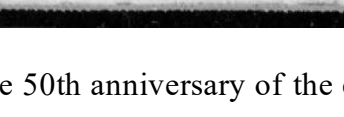
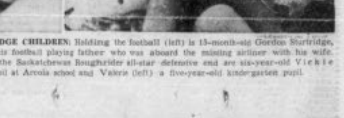
The four were identified as Wally Stewart, TCA station manager at Calgary, his wife, and two children, Russ and Patrick.

Mother of Miss Toronto aboard missing plane

MONTREAL (CP)—Mrs. E. Welch of Toronto, identified as the mother of Judy Welch who was chosen as Miss Toronto this year, was listed today by Trans-Canada Air Lines as aboard the North Star missing in British Columbia.

Manitoba invites varsity refugees

WINNIPEG (CP)—The University of Manitoba and the provincial government have issued a formal invitation to a varsity football team out of Hungarian university to join the University of Manitoba.



STURTRIDGE CHILDREN, holding the football (left) to 13-month-old Gordon Sturtridge, named after his football playing father who was aboard the missing airplane with his wife. Daughters of the Saskatchewan Roughriders all-star defensive end and six-year-old Vicki (center), a pupil at Arcola school and Valerie (right) a five-year-old kindergarten pupil.



THIS NORTH STAR IS SIMILAR TO THE LOST AIRLINER

B.C.'S WORST AIR CRASH

FRASER VALLEY | On a stormy night 50 years ago, TCA flight 810 vanished southeast of Chilliwack, its wreckage lying dormant until spring

WEEKEND EXTRA

BY IAN MACDONALD
and BETTY O'KEEFE

Hheavy with ice and with an engine shut down, the airliner lurched through the howling winds of a violent night heading for Vancouver.

The instrument panel had flashed a fire warning light, and Trans-Canada Airlines Flight 810 had turned around over the towering Cascade Mountains near Hope, aborting its Calgary destination. The date was Dec. 9, 1956, exactly 50 years ago.

Losing one of the four motors on a North Star was an emergency but not a serious one, the dependable TCA workhorse could fly on three. Capt. Jack Clarke, a 35-year-old veteran flier, knew three-engine flying well. He had brought home from flak-filled German skies a sputtering, badly damaged bomber with one motor gone on one of the 47 raids he flew.

His voice was calm as he radioed Vancouver control tower,

**WEEKEND EXTRA
CONTINUES ON PAGE B2-3**

THE DAILY SPECIAL

THE DEATH OF

WEEKEND EXTRA FROM B1

telling them of the swing to the south he was making, and then going back onto Green 1, the 13-kilometre wide main air lane used for east-west travel. His co-pilot, Terry Bonne, 26, also an ex-RCAF flyer, was making his last North Star flight before moving on to pilot new Viscounts. The third crew member looking after 59 passengers was Dorothy Elizabeth Bjornson, 24, a stewardess for only six months. All three lived in Greater Vancouver.

B.C. had just endured one of its vicious winter storms, with howling winds that damaged rail and power lines, and pelting, freezing rain that brought flooding throughout the Lower Mainland, and this was the tag end of numerous dreary days of misery.

The day before, the storm had turned the Canadian Football League Shriners' All-Star Bowl game at brand new Empire Stadium into what writers dubbed the "soup ball." The West, coached by Edmonton's Pop Ivy, slithered to a 35-0 win over the East, with a post-game unanimous view that Vancouver was no place for mid-December football. That same thought had earlier occurred to more than 3,000 people who had bought tickets but decided to stay home rather than face the elements in the largely exposed seating at the stadium.

Five footballers were among those who had boarded the delayed flight at Vancouver Airport. In 1956 the terminal was spartan, with only meager services. Gordon Sturtridge of the Regina Roughriders had played his usual sound game in the slot, as had teammate Mel Beckett. Sturtridge had brought his wife, Mildred, to the coast as a treat, leaving three small children at home with a babysitter. Beckett was eager to get home, his wife was expecting their first child before Christmas.

Two other Roughriders had come to watch the game. Mario DeMarco was a big, jovial American who owned and operated a Regina gas station along with Beckett, also from the U.S. Ray Syrynk was a young player and a University of Saskatchewan student. Calvin Jones, an American with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, had partied after the game, slept in, and missed his early-morning flight. He managed to get a last-minute seat on Flight 810. More fortunate than Jones, as it transpired, was Edmonton star Jackie Parker, who cancelled in order to fly home to visit family in the U.S. Parker died a few weeks ago in Edmonton at the age of 74.

The other passengers on Flight 810 were the usual cross-section of travellers: a family of four who had been at the game; a young boy from China eager to be reunited with his family; businessmen with meetings and tight schedules, returning holiday makers, and some grieving people on trips to see sick relatives or attend funerals.

A milk run

Pilot Clarke, husband of a former TCA stewardess who had flown with him, and father of two boys, was filling in for a sick colleague as was Stewardess Bjornson. Flight 810 was a milk run with stops at Calgary, Regina and Winnipeg where there would be a crew change before flying on to Toronto. At their pre-flight briefing, the two pilots were told that weather throughout the West was bad. They might have to over-fly Calgary and their alternate was Regina or they might have to fly on to Winnipeg. The plane would carry extra fuel just in case.

The North Star, a Canadian-built development of the U.S.-built Douglas C-54/DC-4 with some features of the DC-6, was TCA's first four-engine aircraft. It had performed reliably since entering service in 1946 but by 1956 its days were numbered, with new aircraft and jets coming on the scene. There had been only one North Star accident, a collision in the air between a North Star and an RCAF trainer from the flying school at Saskatoon. Thirty-two passengers and four crew members had died along with two in the trainer. The RCAF's own fleet of North Stars had operated for many years without a fatality.

The Flight 810 aircraft had passed all its regular maintenance inspections. It was configured for economy seating and only three seats were empty when Clarke lifted off Vancouver's runway at 6:10 a.m. on a very dark, rainy, wintry night. There were the usual nervous

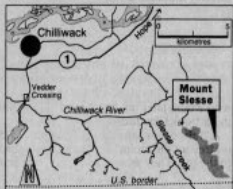


VANCOUVER SUN FILES

Photo taken in 1957 shows wreckage of TCA Flight 810 on Mt. Slesse. The four-engine plane exploded in a flash visible from the ground through the cloud cover one minute after the pilot radioed that the plane was rapidly icing up and one engine was out.

Crash site

Although a U.S. military radar operator noted the disappearance of a blip south of Hope, it would take months to locate the North Star's wreckage.



flyers, but most were happy to be under way. Clarke reported turbulence and icing as the plane headed up the Fraser Valley and into the mountains. The howling winds still slashed through the peaks, bouncing off the granite walls and creating great swirling gusts of snow that plummeted to the ground. For the passengers it was a rough ride.

Forty-two minutes into the flight, the aircraft was at 19,500 feet when Clarke radioed to report that it looked like they had a fire in No. 2 engine. It was never determined if it was actually a fire or an electrical malfunction on the instrument panel. But he immediately shut down No. 2 and headed back for Vancouver, about 100 miles — 160 kilometres — away.

Clarke reported that the heavily iced North Star was losing height rapidly but he believed he could maintain sufficient altitude. The storm also produced atmospheric conditions that affected radio transmissions. There was no more mention of fire from the cockpit or of any mechanical problems.

Clarke and Boone were sure they were westbound on Green 1, but they were not. They were some 19 kilometres south of the air lane. Ahead of them loomed the 2286-metre granite peak of Mount Slesse, the last

major mountain before the lowlands of the Fraser Valley opened up like a fan. Their last transmission was at 7:10 p.m. when the fast moving, gas-filled plane exploded into a brilliant, burning ball, a vivid flash seen through the clouds by several people on the ground who did not know what it was.

The search begins

When anxious air traffic controllers decided the North Star was overdue at Vancouver they alerted No. 121 Search and Rescue Squadron of the RCAF with headquarters at Jericho.

Squadron Leader George Sheahan, a former bomber pilot, immediately launched what was then the biggest air search in Canadian history. A fighter from the base at Comox that was airborne on a training exercise was radioed to overfly the route looking for fires or flares. Through the murk the crew saw nothing.

December daylight hours were short and the weather was brutal, but aircraft took off at dawn, including amateur pilots from Chilliwack Flying Club. Out there in the vast, white waste, somewhere between Squamish and Mount Baker, was Flight 810. This was the era before radar on commercial airways and emergency locator devices carried on today's aircraft. The first break was a report from a U.S. military radar base at Birch Bay in Washington state. An operator reported seeing a blip on his radar screen suddenly disappear near Silvertip Mountain south of Hope at 7:11 p.m., one minute after the North Star's last radio message.

Sheahan concentrated the search near the peak. B.C.'s rugged mountains had swallowed up planes in the past, but this was the first loss in Canada of a large airliner from high altitude. "Try the peaks first and then get down to 100 to 200 feet, but for God's sake be careful," Sheahan told the pilots of the military, police, government and private aircraft in the hunt.

It was a tall order and while it was a large area, he worried about collisions by planes finding the same few holes in the clouds and swooping down.

Sheahan, like most other knowledgeable

THE DAILY SPECIAL

TCA FLIGHT 810



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Flight Lieut. Jack Clarke (second from left) with crew of his Halifax bomber while stationed at Aqr, Palestine, in July 1942. At his pre-flight briefing for TCA Flight 810, he'd been told to expect weather bad enough he might have to skip the scheduled stop in Calgary.

flyers, from the outset knew there was not much chance of a plane landing successfully in a storm, in the dark, in that mountainous wilderness. If they had come down and there were any survivors, they would not last long in that freezing weather. But they had to search, and they had to hold out some hope, however fleeting, for the families of the lost 62.

Vile weather

Search planes were buffeted by howling gusts, one pilot reported even his veteran crew was airsick. A promising sighting on one mountain turned out only to be a snow-blown formation. Continued heavy snow was piling up enough to cover any wreckage. Samples of an oil slick in a lake were analysed and found not to be aviation fuel.

At the search's peak, Sheahan had 60 aircraft in the hunt. He frequently called a halt because of dangerous flying conditions, some of the amateur pilots in the light planes being the most reluctant to come down. Volunteer search parties went out into the bush in a valiant but futile hunt because there was no clear indication where to look. Police had made door-to-door checks in the Fraser Valley looking for information.

Vancouver Sun reporter Tom Ardies and photographer George Diack scrambled up Sumas Mountain, a minor peak in the valley, with the relative of one of those aboard who was convinced that Flight 810 might be there despite the fact that the site had already been checked. Searching ended after Christmas with TCA officially confirming that all aboard had been killed in what was Canada's worst air disaster. The airline said a search for the wreck and bodies would be resumed in the spring when the snow started melting.

In the meantime, one of the mountain rescue team members, Elfrida Pigou, who was a quiet, tiny, single woman in her 40s and an insurance adjuster in North Vancouver, studied all the reports and came to her own conclusions. Her passion was mountain climbing and she was acclaimed the best woman climber in B.C. In early May 1957, she talked two fellow climbers, Geoffrey Walker and David Cathcart, into climbing Mount Slesse, a very difficult mountain to scale near Chilliwack shunned by many mountaineers as too difficult and too dangerous. She had tried it once before but bad weather had forced the party down. She wanted to try it again and she thought there might be leads there to the missing plane.

On May 12 the mystery of the missing North Star was solved. With Pigou in the lead, the climbers near the top of Slesse and found aircraft wreckage, some shredded

carrying down a large piece, which was examined by transport officials in Vancouver and immediately identified as from Flight 810.

The startling discovery made headlines for days. Reporters and photographers rushed up the Fraser Valley to Chilliwack. Vancouver Sun reporter and aviation specialist Ron Thornber flew over Slesse in a small plane. He wrote: "I flew where death wears a snaggle-tooth grimace high atop Mount Slesse almost within sight of the broad and peaceful farmlands of the upper Fraser Valley."

He added: "It is a dangerous mountain even to fly over . . . I've never seen a more rugged or crueler peak than Slesse in many flying hours on air searches over coastal and Interior mountains."

Back up there

The tireless Pigou was in a small group that immediately went back up Slesse, including experienced climbers Fips Broda and Paddy Sherman, a Province reporter who would later tell the story of Flight 810 in his book *Cloudwalkers*.

A helicopter landed them about 1,525 metres up the mountain and they climbed to the top. They ascertained the North Star had struck about 60 metres from the top, suggesting that if it had cleared Slesse it might have made it at least into the valley, but all that was just speculation. At the top they found mangled wreckage, some shredded

personal belongings, and shattered body parts.

Flight 810 had been broken into small pieces. After the initial devastating impact, what was left of the fuselage toppled 2,000 feet down the mountain. Other searchers found more body parts and belongings at the lower level, some of them in crevices on Slesse's jagged, boulder-strewn face big enough to hold a half dozen North Stars. Not one whole body was found.

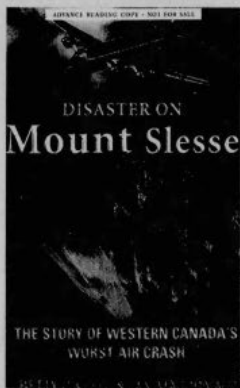
It was dangerous work on the mountain, as warmer spring weather produced avalanches that thundered down near the crash site. Reports that one passenger might have been carrying a money belt with about \$80,000 in it attracted more than the curious. Fips Broda warned that it was no stroll in Stanley Park, no hike up Grouse Mountain, and that Slesse could be a death trap for potential looters and the unwary. Police blocked off the lower road to the mountain. The site eventually was declared to be the Mount Slesse commemorative site, protected by law.

Transport Canada held an exhaustive investigation. Specialists could not determine why Flight 810 was off course in the storm or pinpoint the reason for the crash. They said the North Star was still flying and not in free fall when it hit Slesse. Their best conclusions were that it resulted from either icing, turbulence, subsidence — a descending motion of air in the atmosphere — or a combination of all three.

Sadly, Elfrida Pigou, who found the wreckage, was killed on Mount Waddington, highest peak in the Coast Mountains, four years later, when an avalanche engulfed her party of four. Mount Elfrida has been named after her. The Gordon Sturtridge Football League for youngsters in North Vancouver is named in honour of the Roughrider footballer and is a living memorial to him and all those who died on Flight 810.

In 2004, Vivian Clarke, the pilot's widow, who never remarried, had her last wish carried out when her son chartered a helicopter and took her ashes up Mount Slesse to lie near where her husband died. The skirl of a piper playing *Amazing Grace* on the slopes of Slesse was the end of a great love story.

Ian Macdonald and Betty O'Keefe are both former reporters who since 1995 have been writing historical books on West Coast people and events. *Disaster on Mt. Slesse — The story of Western Canada's Worst Air Crash* (Caitlin Press) is their tenth book, written to honour those who died 50 years ago on TCA Flight 810.



This story about the crash from the Vancouver Sun focused on how the aviation accident effected the life of the pilot's son, who was only nine when he lost his father.

Course of novelist's life altered by father's death on Mount Slesse

AIR DISASTER | Jay Clarke might have followed in pilot-father's footsteps if not for crash 50 years ago

BY LARRY FYNN
VANCOUVER SUN

North Vancouver crime novelist Jay Clarke sits on the edge of his chair in a Lonsdale Quay coffee shop, sipping an extra-hot cappuccino and pondering how life might be different had his pilot-father not died 50 years ago today in Western Canada's worst air disaster, at Mount Slesse near Chilliwack.

"Did the fact my dad was killed in such a traumatic way turn me into a horror writer of pretty hard-edged stuff?" asks Clarke, better known by his pen name, Michael Slade.

"If anything, the trauma was a booster shot, an electroshock treatment in which I learned how to take the stuff I was commercially consuming (reading comics such as *Tales from the Crypt*) and turn it into something creative myself."

Clarke's father Jack was a trained artist who distinguished himself with the Royal Air Force during the Second World War and who later signed on with Trans-Canada Airlines.

He was piloting a four-engine North Star aircraft that developed engine troubles during a storm and crashed into Mount Slesse (officially Slesse Mountain) on Dec. 9, 1956. All three crew members and 59 passengers, including five Canadian football league players, died in the crash.

Clarke, now 59 years old, was just nine at the time of the crash, his dad 35.

Among the memories of his father, Clarke recalls going with him to a drugstore and catching a first glimpse of soldier-of-fortune-style men's magazines depicting South American adventures in gruesome situations.

"There were five or six dugout canoes," recalls the former Vancouver Sun copy boy. "On the front of each, a pole with a severed human hand on it, lured as can be, eyes rolled up in the head, blood dripping out of the eye, werewolves sticking out of the neck, and so on."

It's no coincidence Clarke's first novel was *Jabbarator*, written while on sabbatical from his partnership in a criminal law firm. Since then he's sold at least three million copies of 12 crime novels — he co-writes now with his daughter, Rebecca — based on a fictional RCMP special X squad that tracks outside Canada to solve grisly crimes.

Clarke said if his father had not died in the crash it's quite possible he would have joined the air cadets, learned to fly, and eventually become a commercial pilot, too, rather than a criminal lawyer (but no longer practicing) and a novelist. "I might have been more scientifically than artistically bent," he says.

The North Star crash did not stop Clarke from flying in fact, he repeatedly visited Europe thanks to the airline continuing to provide him with free flights until he finished university.

INSIDE

■ Authors of a new book on the Mount Slesse crash discuss the tragedy, B1

■ Crime novelist Jay Clarke, the son of the pilot, has changed his writing style, C10

■ The sports world was hit hard when TCA flight 801 went down, E3

What Clarke did avoid was visiting Slesse — "the mountain that took my father" — until August 2003 when he chartered a helicopter

to spread the ashes of his mother, Vivian, at the crash site. A beeper-hopper even came along to give his father a proper military send-off.

It was a perfect summer day, he recalls, the prevailing winds not only sweeping pollution out of the Fraser Valley but gently carrying his mother's ashes back to the love of her life.

"Something happened up there. A tremendous weight lifted from my shoulders — coping with the aftermath of that trauma all my life."

It might also be Clarke's last trip to Slesse. "I remained mom and dad, and I faced up to the mountain. I have no desire to go back."

fyynn@vancouversun.com



Crime novelist Jay Clarke displays memorabilia from his dad, a pilot killed in the Slesse Mountain airplane crash 50 years ago.



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Capt. Jack Clarke piloted TCA 810, which went down near Chilliwack on Dec. 9, 1956. Sixty-two people, including Clarke, died in the crash.

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