

71 years later, missing plane found

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It was snowmageddon only the word hadn't been coined yet. On Dec. 12, 1940, the snow was flying fast and furious in high winds when an aircraft on a training flight from the Royal Canadian Air Force base in Borden went missing over Lake Muskoka.



Ted Bates died on a rescue mission over Lake Muskoka, Dec. 13, 1940

The next day, though the weather was still treacherous and the countryside and lakes still frozen, two aircraft took off to search for the missing plane.

Hours later, the planes, Northrop A-17A Nomads, collided and plummeted into the deep, icy waters of Lake Muskoka.

One plane was found within weeks and the bodies of the two pilots recovered. The other aircraft and its pilots — a Brit, Peter Campbell, 24, and a Canadian, Ted Bates, 27 — were never located - until recently.

The Nomad has been found resting at the bottom of the lake near Browning Island, a few kilometers west of Bracebridge.

It's what 84-year-old Tom Bates, Ted's younger brother, has hoped to hear all his life.

"I'm glad they found the plane," he says. "My parents thought about it often."

About 400 aircraft went missing in Canada during the Second World War, largely during training exercises and transport missions.

Some have been located but a Nomad is a rare find, says Laurel Clegg, casualty identification coordinator for the Department of National Defence. "They were used in the early stage of the war."

The department is working with the Ontario Provincial Police in the investigation. "It's a complex case," Clegg says, adding it isn't known if or when the plane can be raised.

In Guelph, Tom Bates can't wait to see a ring divers found in the wreckage. "It's Ted's . . . I've seen the photos," he says.

Tom was only 14 when his older brother, died, but he remembers how he doted on him. "He took me up in a plane in Brantford when I was 12," he says. "I remember every moment."

Tom says his brother was also well known in his hometown of Guelph because he was a musician as well as a pilot. He played the saxophone and the clarinet with a band that toured in Ottawa and Vancouver.

A commercial pilot, Ted got his wings in 1936 and was based in Ottawa when he was asked by the army, a few months after the war started, if he would teach flying.

Ted, an adventurer, said yes, and graduated Dec. 12, 1940, from a teaching course at the Royal Canadian Air Force base at Borden. He was supposed to go on vacation the next day, but when he heard about the missing pilot he volunteered for the search mission.

On Dec. 13, Flight Lt. Peter Campbell and Leading Aircraftsman Ted Bates climbed into the cockpit of their Northrop Nomad, the last time anyone saw them.

Efforts were made to recover their plane but the weather was still treacherous in the months following the crash, and technology nothing like what it is now.

Nomads, originally built as two-seater "attack bombers," were big aircraft — they weighed about 3,175 kilograms, had a 16-metre wingspan, stood four metres tall — but for a long time, no one really knew where exactly this plane went down in Lake Muskoka. (The lake is more than 30 metres deep in places.)

Then Matt Fairbrass stepped in.

President of Lost Airmen in Muskoka Project, a group dedicated to finding missing aircraft, Fairbrass and his friends learned some years ago that a family of trappers living beside the lake had actually seen the crash and the two planes plunging into the water. Backed by eyewitness accounts and military maps of the crash site, the group started searching.

"I spent hours, hundreds of hours, looking for it," says Fairbrass, who used side-scan sonar. "It's like a golf ball in middle of a football field. Blink and you miss it."

Fairbrass and his friends, Al Bacon and Don Ruud, narrowed the potential sites down to three then called in the OPP.

The provincial police underwater search and recovery unit found the plane last fall.

"It was so good to see that the plane had been located," said Fairbrass. "These men made a sacrifice . . . this is the least we can do for them."

It's not yet clear if any remains of the two pilots have been recovered.

Campbell, from West Sussex in England, came to Canada in 1940 as part of the successful Empire Air Training Scheme to train pilots from the Commonwealth countries and other allies for the conflict.

He had been here only a few weeks when he and Ted took off from Borden to search for the missing plane.