

LIKE A FALLING LEAF - *the 1954 plane collision over Moose Jaw*

At 10:02 a.m. on Thursday, April 8, 1954, a Royal Canadian Air Force Harvard trainer collided with a Trans-Canada Air Lines North Star passenger plane in the clear skies over Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Wreckage and debris scattered over a three-mile radius in the city's northeast end. One of the North Star's engines landed very near the City's Main Street and its fuselage crashed into a house on Third Avenue North East, missing Ross Public School and the 360 students inside by only 166 yards. In the end, 37 people died as a result of this mid-air collision.

At 9:52 that morning, the pilot of Trans-Canada Air Lines' Flight 9 reported that they were flying over Regina. Though the Vancouver-bound plane was 7 ½ hours behind schedule due to inclement weather, there was nothing in this last dispatch which gave cause for concern. At 9:57 a.m., a Royal Canadian Air Force Harvard took off from the runway at the Air Forces Base south of Moose Jaw. This plane was on a cross country, solo, navigation exercise.

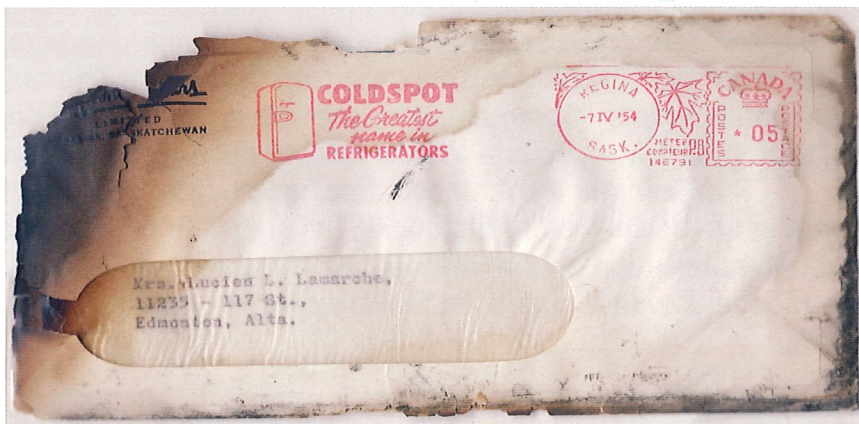
The collision of these aircraft proved fatal for the RCAF training pilot Thomas Andrew Thorrat, the 31 passengers and four TCA crew members on board the North Star and one Moose Jaw citizen on the ground, Mrs. Martha Hadwen.

When the fuselage of the North Star passenger plane directly struck the residence of Gordon and Betty Hume at 1324 Third Avenue North East, the fuel of the plane combined with over 250 gallons of fuel oil in the basement and ignited. The house was immediately engulfed in flames and its only occupant, Martha Hadwen, did not survive.

The collision was witnessed by many of the citizens of Moose Jaw. William E. North, who was one of the eyewitnesses that day stated, "The big plane had been headed west and when I saw it, it was starting to nose towards the earth and flames and smoke seemed to be coming from around the tail end. I also noticed a smaller plane, which I took to be a Harvard. It was travelling in a northeasterly direction and appeared to be lower than the big plane. It was rolling over like a falling leaf. There was another explosion on the big plane just as it dropped out of sight."

Initially, 14 representatives of the Moose Jaw Fire Department were dispatched to deal with that fire. The Fire Chief, upon arriving at the scene and seeing the magnitude of the devastation, issued orders that all off-shift personnel report for duty. In the end, there were 44 firefighters working at the scene of the disaster.

Immediately following the tragedy, officials of the Moose Jaw Canadian Red Cross Society offered assistance to all local civic officers and families directly affected by the disaster. The Society executed such diverse tasks as offering coffee to Airmen standing guard at the disaster scene (a service provided for three nights), acting as a contact centre for families of those on the TCA flight, and providing the official headquarters for all information relevant to the identification of victims.



This is one of many letters which were recovered from the wreckage. There were over 1,000 pounds of mail aboard the TCA plane. This letter was donated by Denise Ross, daughter of Mrs. Lucien Lamarche.

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The community of Moose Jaw grieved for this tragedy. On April 12, over 1,000 political dignitaries and citizens attended a memorial service held at Zion United Church. Premier T C Douglas addressed all those present. That same afternoon another memorial service was held at St. Joseph's Church. On April 13, over 500 people attended the funeral of Martha Hadwen at the Alliance Tabernacle. Full military honours were accorded to Acting Pilot Officer Thomas Andrew Thorrat on that same day at St. Andrew's United Church.

In the days and weeks following the collision, three separate investigations into its origins ensued. These detailed investigations, which were conducted by the Royal Canadian Air Force, Trans-Canada Air Lines, and the Department of Transport, all came to the conclusion that no responsibility for the accident could be determined. Based on the character, accomplishments, and reputation of the pilots involved, suicide and sabotage were ruled out. The only reasonable explanation for the accident was that the pilots of both aircraft either did not see the oncoming aircraft or did not see the impending collision until it was too late to take successful evasive action.

The Community of Moose Jaw has not forgotten this tragedy and it is understood as a significant event in the social history of the city. Its significance has also been preserved through an exhibition and through publication on the internet. At 10:02 a.m. on April 8, 2004, exactly 50 years after this tragedy, the Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery officially opened an exhibition regarding this significant historical event.

essay written by Ross Melanson



The wing of the Trans-Canada Air Lines' North Star can be seen in the foreground and Ross School can be seen in the background.
Photo credit: Lloyd Carr.

The following people lost their lives:

ADAMSON, Cynthia	MATHESON, Donald M.
ADAMSON, Rodney	McLEAN, W.H.
BAUGH, Rupert Don	McVEY, Alex (Sandy)
BELL, I. M.	NELSON, Carol (Lila)
BELZBERG, Abraham	NELSON, Caroline (Carey)
BLANK, Oscar A.	NELSON, Dorothy
BROOKS, W. J.	PENNER, Louis H.
CAMERON, F. Egbert	PIRIE, Mary
CRAIG, M. Allan	QUINNEY, Marjorie
CROSSEN, J.	REID, Marjorie
EDWARDS, Alice	REID, T. M.
FINNEY, June	REID-HUNTER, T. W.
GEORGE, Harry F.	SMART, Andrew M.
GILLET, G. H.	STANTON, George
GOODALL, George R.	SWEENEY, Jean
GOODALL, John	SWEENEY, George, W.
GUTHRIE, Douglas	THORRAT, Thomas Andrew
HADWEN, Martha	WILSON, David
HUTTON, Charles Gordon	

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