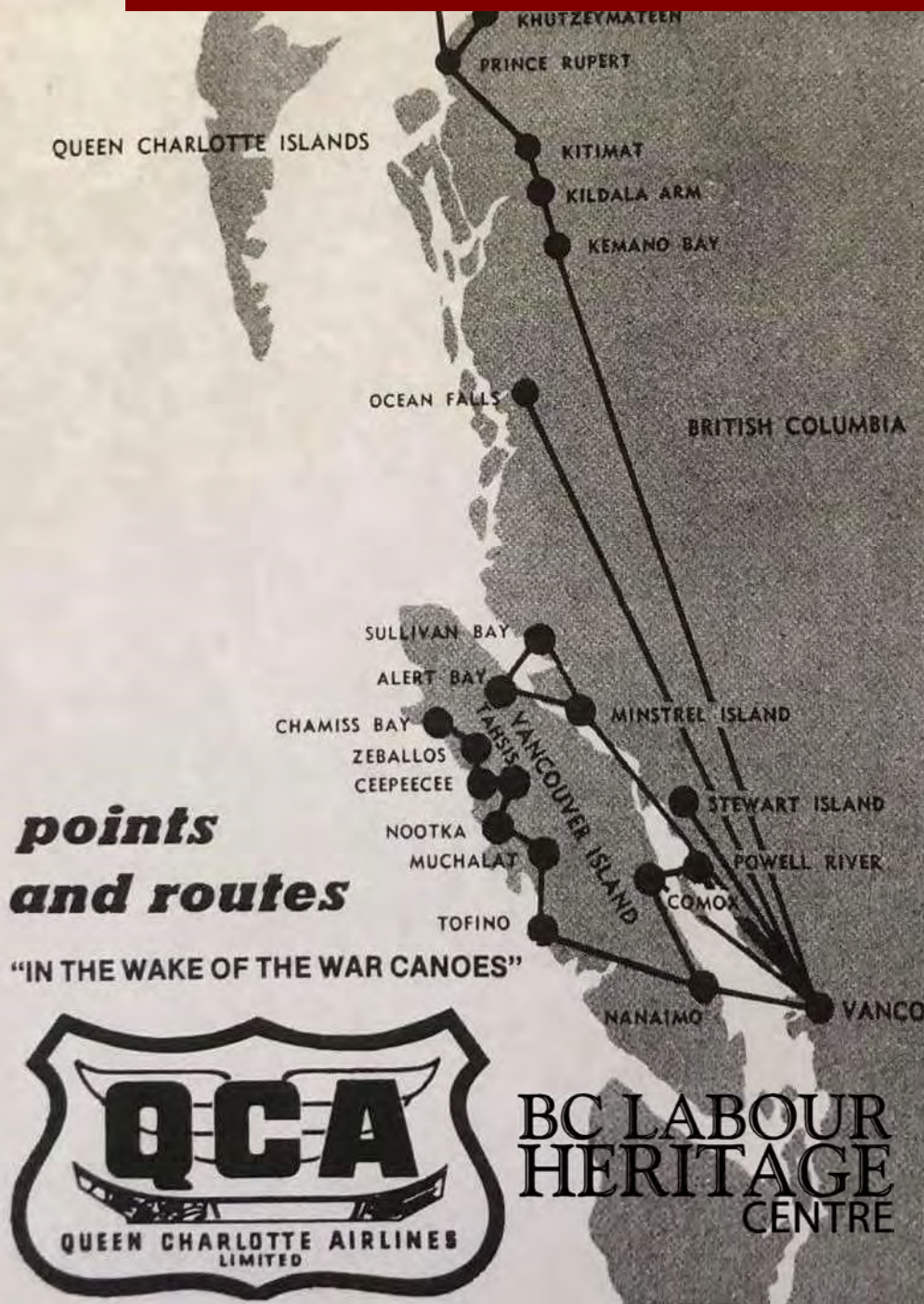


# Mt. Benson Crash Remembered

By Janet Nicol



# Mount Benson Airline Crash Remembered

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Mt. Benson c. 1940 Nanaimo Community Archives, 2018010A-P37

Queen Charlotte Airlines Flight 102 was at full passenger capacity on October 17, 1951, when a three-man crew headed out of Kitimat on a 400-mile run to Vancouver. The airline's pick-up locations for employees working at the Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan) were known as the "three K's"—Kitimat, Kildare and Kemano. On that fateful afternoon, seven men boarded from a floating dock at Kemano and thirteen more at Kitimat.

The passengers had been recently hired on the Alcan mega-project. Production of aluminum, considered the

“metal of the future,” required huge amounts of hydroelectric power for the smelting process. Work sites spread over 800 square miles accommodated the building of a dam, tunnel, powerhouse, transmission line, smelter, and the town site of Kitimat. By the project’s completion in August 1954, the company would hire more than 6,000 employees, including female staff starting in 1952, many nurses and office workers.

Canadians viewed the post-war years with optimism but industrial “progress” at Alcan came at a cost. British Columbia’s northern landscape would be forever



Workers lived in bunkhouses, tents and trailers in seven main camps.  
BCLHC Archives, 2016.1.1.9, Bill Shukalak fonds, BCLHC.



Alcan construction workers line up outside post office. BCLHC Archives, 2016.1.1.4, Bill Shukalak fonds, BCLHC.

altered, settler homeowners re-located and several First Nations groups, including the Haisla and Kitlope people, significantly impacted.

In April the first barges and towboats arrived with pile drivers and bulldozers. Workers lived in bunkhouses, tents and trailers at seven main camps. The physical labour was demanding and often dangerous. Above-average wages helped compensate for employees' long shifts, isolation and sparse living quarters.

By October, the groundwork of the massive enterprise was underway. The twenty men heading home on Flight



102 included 14 tradesmen and labourers, a trade union business agent, four engineers (two of them out-of-province consultants) and an accountant. They were on board an amphibious two-engine Canso, re-purposed after the Second World War for commercial use and part of a fleet servicing employees in logging and mining camps up and down the BC coast.

Among the tradesmen on the flight was **Joseph Charles Morin**, aged 38. An



Mark Gordienko photo, [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com)

electrician, he was employed with Mott Electric in Vancouver and a member of the Electrical Workers Union, Local No. 213. The 2,000-member local was founded in Vancouver in 1911, operated its own meeting hall and published a monthly newsletter called "*Live Wire*". Members were planning a 50th anniversary on November 6 with a banquet and dance at the Commodore Ballroom. Morin had worked for three years at Mott Electric when his employer won a contract with Kitimat Constructors and he was hired on Alcan's 16-person crew.

Morin's roots were in Riviere-du-Loup, Quebec, where he was born to French Catholic parents, the third of seven children. By 1921, the family had moved to Timmins, Ontario, his father working as a bookkeeper at the local gold mine. At age 17, Morin joined his father's workplace, employed as a miner. During the Second World War, the young Morin moved to Sarnia, Ontario, tasked with war work in the building of the Polymer Camp for production of synthetic rubber. In 1948, he travelled to the west coast, settled into his job at Mott Electric and married Vancouver-born Marjorie Signer, the couple residing in East Vancouver. Now, after four months working on pole installations at Alcan, Morin was heading home for a break.

**James Walter McDowell**, aged 19, was the youngest passenger on Flight 102. He was hired by Kitimat Constructors as a labourer and chokerman the latter job requiring him to wrap cables around logs in preparation for yarding and hauling. He was born in Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan to Walter and Laura McDowell, his father a grain farmer.

McDowell stayed at the Washington Hotel in Vancouver before heading north to the Alcan site. The eight-story

building on East Hastings Street, now named Hotel Maple, had been catering to a largely male travelling public since 1912. Services included a pool room, a gentleman's clothing outlet, and a restaurant. Now on his return flight, McDowell could enjoy the city with his hard-earned wages.

Passenger **Joseph Eric Melanson**, age 36, was a civil engineer hired by Kitimat Constructors as

Supervisor of Construction. Originally from Bathurst, New Brunswick, he was of Acadian heritage, his first language French. Melanson married Mona White, also of Bathurst and during the Second World War, they moved to the west coast. As part of the war effort, Melanson worked for the Department of National Defence in the building of Royal Canadian Air Force



Hotel Washington on East Hastings Street in Vancouver catered to male travellers. City of Vancouver Archives, 1935 Hot N65.



Jiginder Singh Johl stepping into the cockpit of his plane, c. 1948. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive 2021\_04\_02\_008 .

sites, including the Coal Harbour station on northern Vancouver Island.

Later Melanson worked at the University of British Columbia. In 1949, he joined the Vancouver architectural firm, Sharp, Thompson, Berwick and Pratt as a field supervisor. In August 1951 Melanson started work at Alcan, overseeing the planning and design of construction sites. Now he was returning home to assist his wife and five children, aged 2 to 14, in moving to a new house on the city's west side.

**Jiginder Singh Johl**, age 23, had been flying planes for three years when he joined the crew of Flight 102 as



First Officer. He was single and resided with his parents, five sisters and three brothers on Twigg Island. The farming community along the Fraser River was part of the district of Lulu Island, later re-named Richmond. Johl's family was of the Sikh faith, their ancestors from the Punjab region of India. Growing up, Johl may have developed a passion for flying because of his home's proximity to the Vancouver airport at Sea Island.

In March 1950 Johl received his commercial pilot's licence and that same month was hired by Queen Charlotte Airlines. Days later he was involved in a harrowing accident as First Officer of a plane carrying 18 passengers, mostly loggers. The pilot was forced to land on Johnstone Strait in blizzard conditions.



Jiginder Singh Johl being helped from aircraft after emergency landing in Johnstone Strait, March 1950. South

Asian Canadian Digital Archive

2021\_04\_02\_013.

Johl and three others stood on the tip of wing, enduring icy winds for 40 minutes to balance the aircraft and prevent it from rolling over. Johl's hands blistered and froze as the pilot steered the plane to safety. Next day the newspapers reported the incident and underscored Johl's heroic action.

On this October 17 assignment, Johl was flying alongside an experienced Second World War pilot, Doug McQueen, aged 32 and radio operator Edward

***“Routine radio reports were transmitted to the control tower in Vancouver. The last radio report was 6:48 pm.”***

Williams, aged 31.

The plane took off from Kitimat at 3:30 pm. The expected arrival time to the Vancouver airport was 6:10 pm—20 minutes after night fall. During the course of the flight, routine radio reports

were transmitted to the control tower in Vancouver. The last radio report was at 6:48 pm. The plane's estimated position was 'on course,' 32 kilometres west of Vancouver.

In fact the plane was 60 kilometres west of the flight

path, in the vicinity of the city of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island and operating under conditions of darkness, rain and heavy mist.

Witnesses on the ground at various locations around Nanaimo reported seeing the plane circle the city twice then veer to the west, barely clearing the power lines of a transmission station. It would later be speculated that the crew had mistaken the lights of Nanaimo for Vancouver. Ten minutes after the last radio report, the plane flew into the side of Mount Benson and exploded into flames. The sound of the impact was heard far and wide.

A rescue mission of 18 men, led by Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers, drove 8 kilometres in back of Nanaimo to the base of the 1,023-metre mountain. They divided into four groups and climbed different trails, armed with flashlights. It took about three hours for the first group to reach the crash site, located at the 490-meter elevation level of Mount Benson on the north side.

The rescuers approached a scorched path with trees and stumps burning from the fragmented wreckage, fuel and



Newspapers in British Columbia and elsewhere reported the tragic details.

oil. Broken and seared bodies were scattered up to 152 meters from the point of impact—a rock outcropping. Personal items were strewn on the ground, including a wristwatch stopped at 6:58, a machinist's micrometer, bricklayer's union membership cards and pulp fiction novels.

Only six bodies were identified by the search parties that night. Next day at 8:30 am, the full recovery work began. A field morgue was set up at the base of Mount

Benson. More than 90 officials and volunteers climbed to the crash site, carrying back the victims' remains on stretchers. In all twenty bodies were recovered and ten bodies positively identified. Three were missing and presumed to have been incinerated. The RCMP then had the grim task of notifying the families.

Reporters and photographers were also on the scene. Newspapers in British Columbia and elsewhere reported the tragic details of the accident as well as the inquest held October 23. The jurors decided on an open verdict, stating in part, "the probable cause of this accident was the continuance of the flight by Visual Flight Rules (VFR) at night and under weather restricted visibility."

The *Labour Statesmen*, a newspaper of the Vancouver and District Labour Council, extended condolences to the families of victims in the building trades. Included in the list was electrician Joseph Morin. His wife Marjorie Morin requested his body shipped home, as did members of nine other bereaved families. Joseph Morin was buried at Ocean View Burial Park in Burnaby. The gravestone reads in part, "Ever Remembered, Ever Loved." Marjorie would eventually re-marry. She took her second husband's surname but in

a gesture of remembrance, also kept Morin's surname.

The authorities had difficulty locating the next of kin for 19-year-old labourer, James McDowell. Vancouver's missing person bureau placed a notice in the local newspapers, asking any relative or friend to contact the police. McDowell's parents were eventually traced to Saskatchewan. They agreed to have their son's remains buried in a mass grave at the Bowen cemetery in Nanaimo, along with those of 12 other crash victims.

***More than 200 mourners attended the Nanaimo Service. Officiants of the Catholic, Protestant and Sikh faiths performed funeral rites over twelve caskets.***

Mona Melanson had also requested her husband be buried in the mass grave. She would carry on, remaining in Vancouver and raising her five children. When she died in 2001 at age 87, the inscription on the gravestone read: "Melanson - Eric (1914-1951) Mona (1913-2001),

Together again, remembered by their five children and their families."



On October 25 the Singhs travelled to Nanaimo for the mass burial service which included their son Jiginder Singh Johl. They were accompanied by Maney Singh, an officiant from a Sikh temple in Vancouver. Engraved on a separate gravestone for Johl, is the Queen Charlotte Airlines logo with its pair of wings and a canoe.

More than 200 mourners attended the Nanaimo service. Officiants of the Catholic, Protestant, and Sikh faiths performed funeral rites over twelve caskets. A plaque noted the date and place of the crash—the worst aviation accident in BC at the time. An additional plaque has been mounted by the BC Labour Heritage Centre, BC Building Trades Council and Nanaimo Historical Society in remembrance of the tragic event and to acknowledge the valued contributions of working people.

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Janet Nicol is a Vancouver-based teacher and writer with a passion for labour history. She has been collaborating on BC Labour Heritage Centre projects since 2014.

# Passenger

Name	Union	Occupation	Age	City
Tim Bone			52	Vancouver
Patrick Arthur Brisson		Labourer	46	Ontario
James Angus Campbell		Chief mechanical superintendent		Washington
Mike Carney	Building Laborers Local 602	Business Agent	33	Vancouver
Philibert Jean- Paul Daigneault	Building Laborers Local 602	Stoker in merchant marine	31	Vancouver
Cyril DePauw	Carpenters 2213	Carpenter	53	Mission
Jack Bernard Ferguson	IUOE 115	Mechanic/welder	31	Parksville
Gordon Graham	IBEW 230	Electrician	30	Victoria
Denis Edward Guillemin	IUOE 115	Machine Operator	42	Burnaby
Jiginger Singh Johl		First officer/co- pilot	24	Lulu Island
Kenneth Edwin Krug	Machinists 692	Pipefitter	40	West Vancouver
James Walter McDowell		chokerman	20	Saskatchewan
Robert Webster McFadyen		Cook	25	Vancouver

# List

Name	Union	Occupation	Age	City
Douglas Duncan McQueen		Pilot	34	Vancouver
Eric Melanson		Chief project engineer	37	Vancouver
Charles Morin	IBEW 213	Electrician		Vancouver
Carl Oscar Nedel	Building Construction Materials Drivers, Local 213	Truck driver		Kamloops
William E.B. Perry			36	Winnipeg
John Redding	Building Laborers Local 602 and IUOE 115		43	New Westminster
A. Roland		Engineering consultant		Edmonton
John W. Watson		Comptroller	38	Cowichan Lake
Ray Williams	Aircraft Union Local 1857	Radio operator		Vancouver

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### **Newspapers**

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(Describes Alcan project and workers)

The Vancouver Sun, October 18, pages 1 and 2.

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"BONTO" SINGH FAMILY FONDS > SOUS-FONDS 2:  
JIGINDER SINGH JOHL  
BC Archives genealogy - on line  
<https://search-collections.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/Genealogy>

Vancouver directories, accessed through VPL Digital Library;  
BC City Directories  
Richmond directory, 1947 (Richmond archives sent a photo of  
the page in the directory showing the Singh family on Mitchell  
Road, Twigg Island)

Link to history of Hotel Washington in Vancouver -  
[https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?  
id=8289](https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=8289)

### **Archival Documents**

Jim Spilsbury fonds - UBC Special Collections  
RBSC-ARC-1517  
Boxes 9, 11

Ian McDonald fonds - UBC Special Collections  
RBSC ARC 1783  
Box 1 and 5. (info on Electrical Workers Union, Vancouver local

Passenger list, Queen Charlotte Airlines Ltd, October 17, 1951,  
compiled by BC Labour Heritage Centre.

The BC Labour Heritage Centre Society preserves, documents and presents the rich history of working people in British Columbia. The Society engages in partnerships and projects that help define and express the role that work and workers have played in the evolution of social policy and its impact on the present and future shaping of the province.



[www.labourheritagecentre.ca](http://www.labourheritagecentre.ca)

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Mt Benson plaque sponsored by:  
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