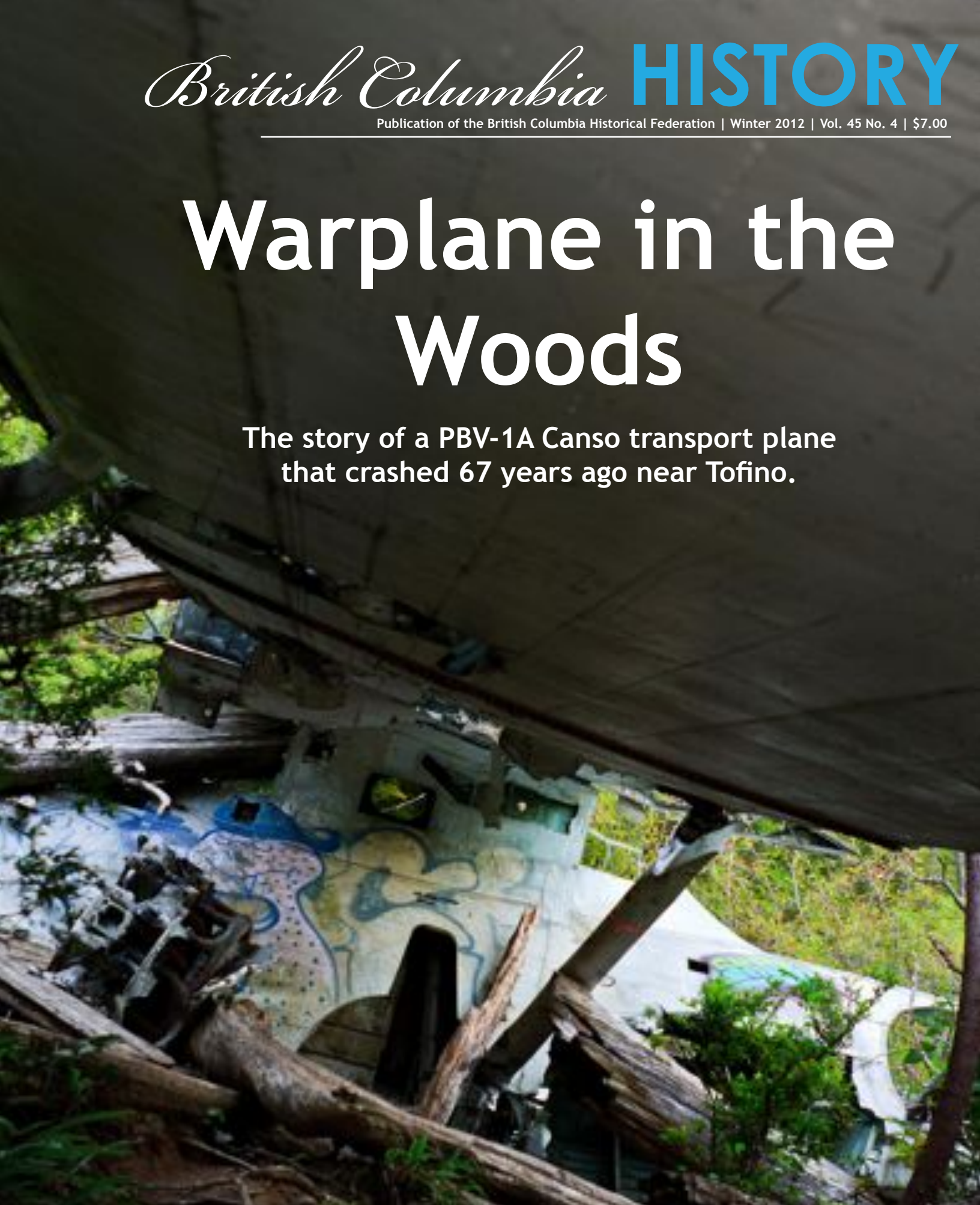


Warplane in the Woods

The story of a PBV-1A Canso transport plane that crashed 67 years ago near Tofino.



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CNR 2-8-2 Mikado engine 3567 shows the white classification lights of an Extra as it halts in front of Boston Bar station for a crew change one snowy night. Perhaps the train is an extra for Christmas. Painting by Max Jacquiard taken from the pages of Train Master: The Railway Art of Max Jacquiard, by Barrie Sanford. See the book reviews starting on page 39.



Cover Image: Wreck of the PBV-1A Canso Serial Number 11007. Read the story on page 5.

PHOTOGRAPHER: MATT WHELAN

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Extract from The Victor © D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd Dundee Scotland

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Warplane in the Woods

by Matt Whelan

Nestled in the forest of the Pacific coast lies a graffiti-covered fuselage — an eerie reminder of the Second World War.

The fused and rusted engines lie listless on the forest floor — one mangled piece of spent machinery at either side of the warplane's torn and twisted fuselage. Other, unrecognizable pieces of blue-grey metal litter the ground, having left jagged perforations wherever they were ripped from the main body as it slammed into the hillside.

This could be a war zone.

But this is no war zone. This is the middle of the woods, about 15 km southeast of Tofino, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, and these are the shattered remains of an aircraft that crashed here on the night of Feb. 8, 1945.

The Second World War first touched the shores of British Columbia on June 20, 1942, when the Japanese submarine *I-26* fired 21 140 mm shells upon Estevan Point lighthouse, on the outskirts of the Hesquiat Peninsula, about 50 km northwest of Tofino. There are some to this day that suspect the shelling was an American conspiracy, cooked up to bolster Canadian support for the war effort, but the crew of *I-26* freely admitted, years later, that they had been responsible for the onslaught, believing the outpost to house a wireless station

critical to allied defence of the northwestern Pacific coastline.

This was but one episode of a long and lesser-known resistance operation that spread from the Aleutian Islands to the shores of Oregon, primarily in defiance of Japanese invasion.¹

Twelve men, four 250 pound (114 kg) depth charges and 750 gallons (3409 L) of fuel were on board for an 11 p.m. takeoff from RCAF Base Tofino (now Long Beach Airport). Had the ugly reaches of the Second World War not been so wide and far as to touch the remote outposts that were 1940s Tofino and Ucluelet, there may not have been an airport there to serve these communities today. It was in 1941, in preparation for potential attack, that land was cleared near Long Beach for the runway from which the ill-fated flight took off.²

The Canso PBV is a fixed wing plane with a large hull allowing for landing on water, and a retractable undercarriage for terrestrial touchdowns. With a wingspan of 32 m, a loaded weight of 16,000 kg, a maximum speed of 300 km/h and a range of 5,000 km, such a strong and versatile aircraft had many roles to play in such a campaign.



Matt Whelan is a Victoria-based writer and photographer whose work has appeared in dozens of publications, including *The Globe and Mail*, and the U.K.'s *Daily Telegraph*.

The wreck of PBV-1A Canso 11017, 2012.



PHOTOGRAPHER: MATT WHELAN

PBV-1A
Canso
Serial
Number
11007

Pilot
F/O Ronnie J.
Scholes

Co-pilot
F/O LC Laker

Navigator
F/O Lace
Knechtel

Crew
P/O CC
Sartouris

WO2 LH
Malcomston

WO2 JB
Campbell

WO2 CH
Henningsen

F/Sgt. RW
Hacker

Sgt. RF Bell

Sgt. WA Hooge

AW1 RJ Pike

Mr. DF Marlett

Force Landed
February 8,
1945

Primarily a patrol plane (PB being an acronym for Patrol Bomber and V signifying its manufacturer Canadian-Vickers) these “flying boats” were also used in anti-submarine warfare, search-and-rescue missions, convoy escorts and cargo transport.

The 12 men were headed for mainland BC, but seconds after clearing the runway, the port engine quit cold. Pilot Ronnie Scholes, realizing he was too low to turn and too short on power to climb, put the twin-propeller plane into a stall attitude just above the trees, before bringing it down to a less-than-gentle landing among them.

Here follows an excerpt from a letter written by the flight’s pilot-navigator, Lace Knechtel, nearly 30 years later:

I personally feel that the majority of us on board owe our lives to [pilot Ronnie Scholes’] sheer guts. I was in the port blister, facing aft, when I realized the plane was in a stall attitude. I looked out to my right and we were down in the trees! We hit, 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 A/C 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 (I think his name was Bell) 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 laying off to the right and on its side. I can still recall seeing the fluorescent instruments and hearing the gyros running!

Three of us were unhurt. Ronnie had a fractured forehead and broken nose.



The [weapons director] had a sprained ankle and the others had numerous scrapes, cuts and bruises— all minor! We moved everyone downhill about 150 feet, set up a parachute for a tent and the three uninjured made trips back to the A/C for the emergency gear (sleeping bags, emergency rations etc.) We bedded down the more seriously injured in the tent and established a watch. We tried the “Gibson Girl” [a Second World War air-sea rescue transmitter] without an aerial, as I wouldn’t let any of the fellows climb a tree in the dark.

About 300 hours we could hear shouting on the airport and then an A/C cranked up. A few minutes later we could see his port running light so I fired a red flare with a Very pistol — he 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 the A/C with the spilled gasoline and bombs (actually D.C.s [depth charges]). It missed everything, however.

All crew members survived the ordeal, and were rescued the following day, but the carcass of this PBV-1A Canso has rested here ever since, and has had plenty of visitors over the decades, as the muddy footprints and garish slatherings of graffiti on its distorted aluminum shell attest.

It is quite the sight, this gaudily painted mess of metal, hanging on to the hillside, abandoned and abused in the wet woodland of the Pacific coast — a rare relic and reminder of the region’s rich military history.

Anyone wishing to see this wartime remnant must hike in from the edge of Highway 4, the snaking drag that links the towns of Tofino and Ucluelet, along the low-lying Esowista Peninsula, on the island’s west coast.



PHOTOGRAPHER: MATT WHELAN

The trail heads straight and steeply up from the highway before passing through an abandoned radar station and then disappears into the gnarled growth and deep mud of the coastal forest. The route is marked every 20 metres or so by fluorescent wisps of flagging tape, and about 100 metres short of the crash site, the land levels out, opening up onto boggy, grassy flats before rising again to the bluff where the old warhorse lies — a surreal shard of the twentieth century's greatest war wedged into the green carpet of British Columbia's temperate, timeless rainforest. •

Endnotes

1. *War On Our Doorstep* - Brendan Coyle
2. www.tofinoairport.com/about.php

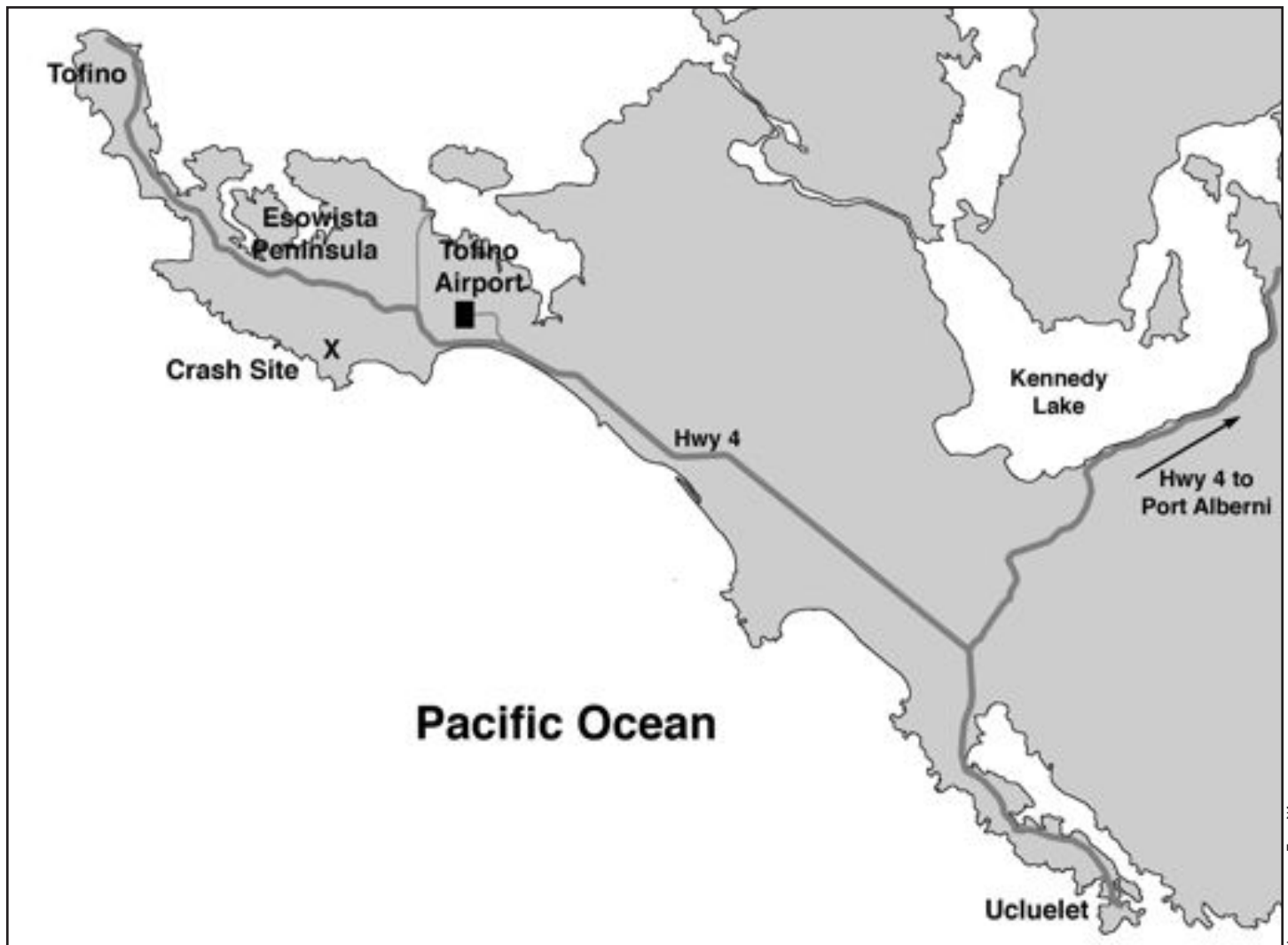
With thanks to local Tofino historian Adrienne Mason and the staff at the British Columbia Aviation Museum.

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Coyle, Brendan. *War on Our Doorstep: The Unknown Campaign on North America's West Coast*. Surrey, B.C., Canada: Heritage House, 2002. Print.

The records of the British Columbia Aviation Museum

Map of crash site.



MAP ILLUSTRATOR: ERICA WILLIAMS