

The Other Maury Island Incident by Bruce Haulman

We have all heard about the “Maury Island Incident” of June, 1947 when flying saucers allegedly dropped hot molten metal on a fisherman, his son, and dog off of the shores of Maury Island. Few Islanders are aware of the “Maury Island Incident” which took place nine years later when a Boeing 377 Stratocruiser crash landed into Puget Sound off Point Robinson.

On April 2, 1956, Northwest Orient Airlines flight No. 2 took off from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport on its regularly scheduled flight to Portland and then on to Chicago and New York. The Boeing 377 Stratocruiser was a double-decked four-engine airplane that seated 50-60 passenger, and had a lounge where drinks were served on the lower deck. The plane had originally been designed as a military transport and was converted to civilian airline use by pressurizing and air conditioning the cabin.

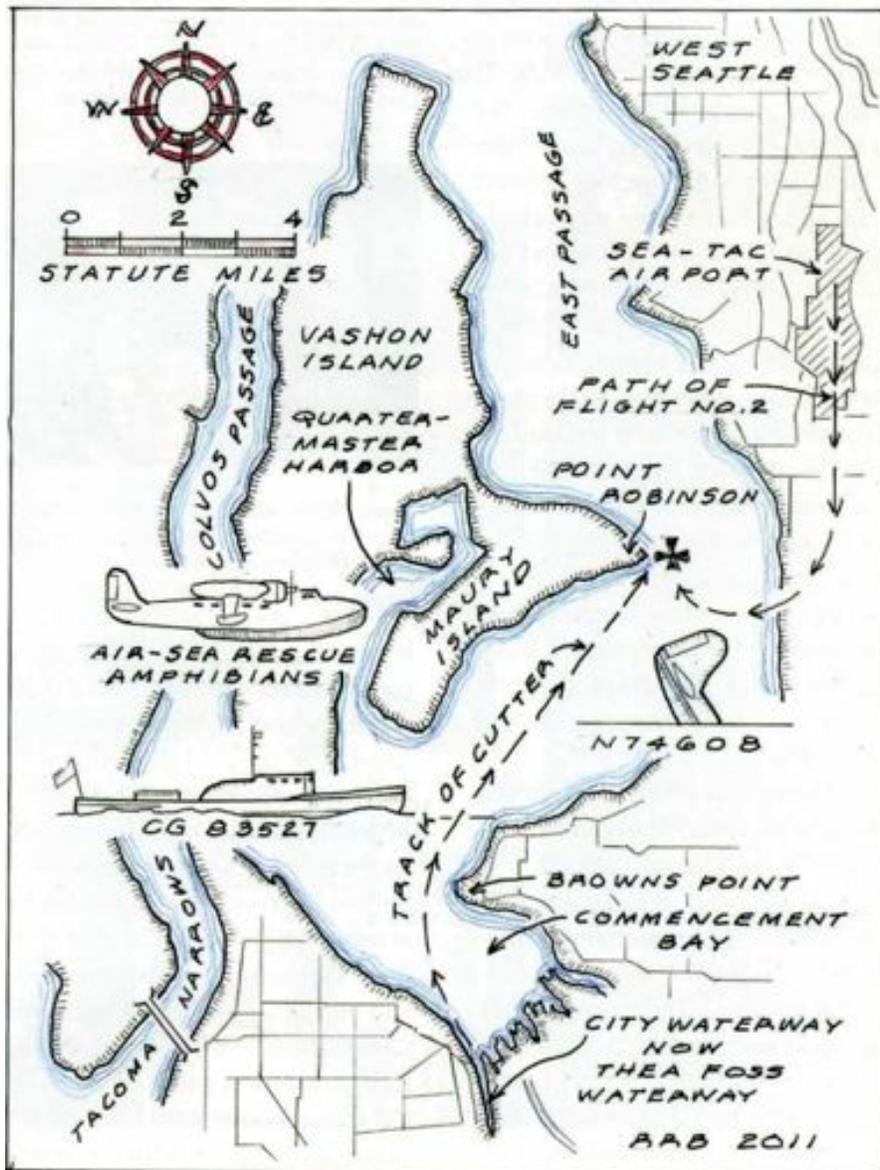


Drawing: Courtesy of Simon Glancey

That fateful morning Northwest Orient Airlines flight No. 2 had 32 passengers and 6 crew on board. The flight took off at 8:06 am and quickly rose to an altitude of about 1,200 feet when the wing flaps were retracted. Immediately the airliner began to shake violently and roll to the left. The pilot, Captain Robert R. Heard, believed the flaps on one of the wings had not retracted properly, and after radioing the control tower was directed to either return to the airport or proceed on to McCord Air Force Base. As the buffeting grew worse and the airliner began to lose altitude, Captain Heard decided to ditch into Puget Sound and First Officer Gene P. Johnson sent out a Mayday radio distress call which was heard by a Coast Guard Cutter and an Air Force amphibious Grumman Albatross rescue aircraft, both of which prepared to help in the rescue.

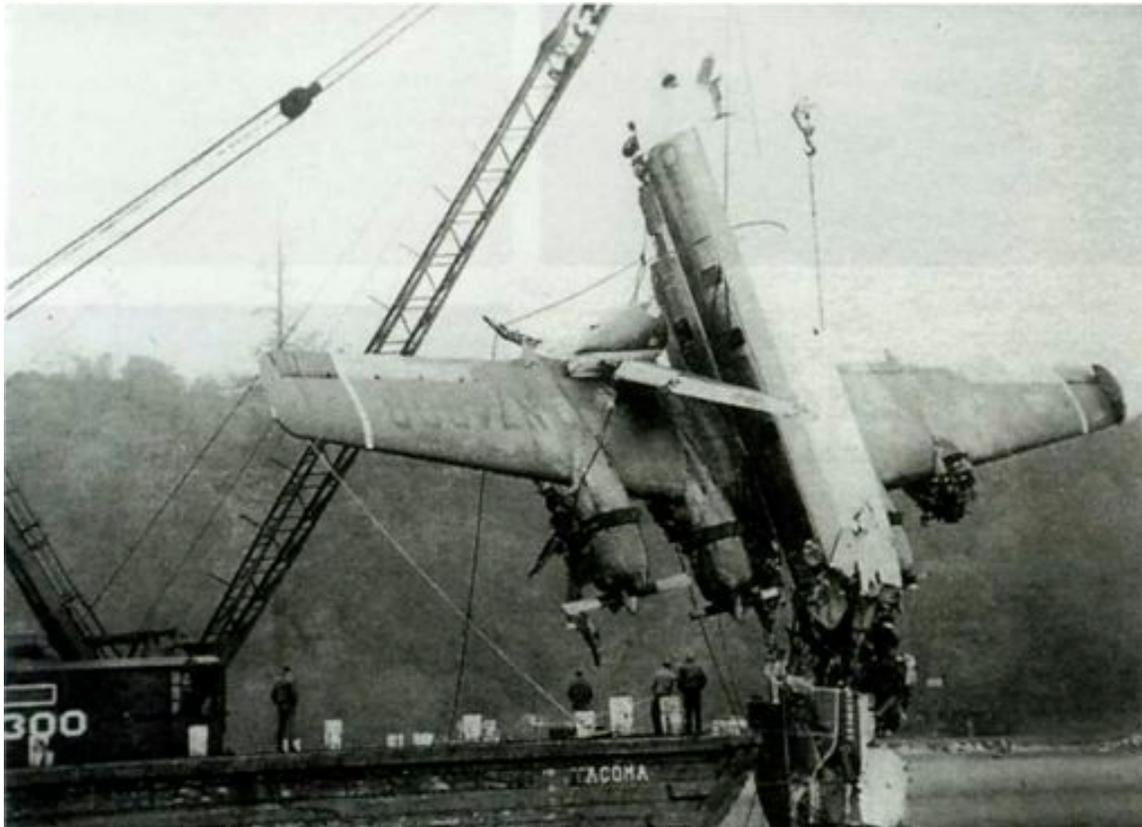
The Stratocruiser crash landed about 500 yards off Point Robinson headed northwest after the pilot had made a sweeping right turn to bring the aircraft in as close to shore as possible. The plane landed at 8:10 am, only four minutes into the flight, and stayed afloat for about 15 minutes before sinking in nearly 400 feet

of water. The Air Force Albatross landed close to the wreck about ten minutes later and the Coast Guard Cutter and the Foss Tug *Brynn Foss* arrived about thirty minutes after the crash. A Northwest Airlines DC-3 cargo plane flew over the site and dropped a twelve-man inflatable life raft. The three Coast Guardsmen stationed at Point Robinson Lighthouse launched their fourteen-foot skiff with a 5-horsepower outboard and headed out to help. In addition, Gary Larson, a sixteen-year-old Vashon High School student and a friend launched Gary's recently completed boat and dragged several survivors to the beach, where they were then taken out to the rescue craft by sport fishermen who had arrived to help and had outboard motors on their boats.



Map: Courtesy of Ronald and Constance Burke and Sea Chest Magazine

Despite the smooth ditching of the plane and the quick response of the rescue craft, not all of the passengers and crew survived. The passengers and crew assembled on the wings of the sinking plane and it was quickly determined that Flight Service Attendant David Razey, who was in the lower deck lounge area of the plane, did not survive the crash. As the plane sank, the passengers and crew took to the frigid waters of Puget Sound with the seat cushions as flotation devices. Hypothermia quickly began to set in and many of the survivors had to be helped into the rescue craft as their arms and legs began to lose the ability to function in the cold. Four of the passengers, Tsui Kinglin, her son four-year old son Vee Song Foon, Paul Wehrnen, and Dr George Hook were lost to hypothermia and, with the loss of David Razey, brought the total to five lives lost.



Photograph: Courtesy of Foss Marine

Ten days after the crash, the wreckage of the Stratocruiser was recovered from the depths of Puget Sound. The wreck was located and dragged into about 45 feet of water just off Point Robinson, where it was then lifted by the steam derrick Foss 330, placed on a barge and taken to the Navy Pier in Tacoma where the CAB (Civil Aeronautics Board) investigators determined the cause of the crash was the cowl flaps which had been accidentally left open after takeoff. In the above photograph you can see the cowl flaps open about half way between the propellers and the wing.

Although the 1947 “flying saucer” Maury Island Incident gets much more publicity and is much better known, even to Vashon-Maury Islanders, the “other” Maury Island Incident – the 1956 crash landing of the Northwest Orient Airlines Flight No. 2 at Point Robinson – is equally as important in our Island’s history, and directly involved Islanders in the heroic rescue efforts that minimized the loss of life.

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