

Dion, Walter Leon

Age: 23

Nationality: Canadian

Rank: Flight/Sergeant

Unit: No. 122 Squadron

Occupation: Pilot

Service No: R/116350

Birth: 11 May 1919
St. Boniface, Manitoba,
Canada

Home Town: The Pas, Manitoba,
Canada

Death: 16 March 1943

Crash of Bristol Bolingbroke 9084
Mill Bay B.C., Canada

Burial: Commemorated on Ottawa Memorial

Others: F/S S.A. Switzer W/ O; WO 1 R.A. Seaker, Observer



Biography

A tall, cheerful, enthusiastic and educated French Canadian, Walter Dion was an ideal candidate for the RCAF. He had completed grade 12 and had spent one year at University studying mining engineering. Since his ambition after the war was to complete his degree and become an aeronautical engineer, it is reasonable to assume that it was due to financial circumstances that he left University after just one year and worked in the Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting mine in Flin Flon, Manitoba, for the two years before enlisting.

Walter passed his Initial Training *“an active, energetic, clean-cut, type of airman, who is dependable and has a good sense of responsibility. He is cheerful but takes his work seriously, applies himself well and is considered officer material.”* He was recommended for a pilot or observer. Given his education and deportment, it is surprising that he was not thought suitable for a commission.

Walter attended Elementary Flying School from September to November 1941. Again he shone. His flying instructor described him:

“Keen, assimilates instruction easily. General flying and airmanship good. No bad flying habits. Instrument flying average. Deportment and punctuality good”

And from his ground school instructor:

“First class student and yet no bookworm. He has a fine sense of responsibility and very good personal appearance and an attractive personality. His deportment was very good”.

At Service Training School, in Uplands, Ontario, Walter's halo slipped a little when he was confined to barracks for seven days for *“conduct unbecoming to an airman”* on Spark Street, Ottawa. However, he passed as high average, slightly rough on aerobatics, above average on instrument flying and the Link Trainer.

Walter received his flying badge on 13 March 1942, was promoted to flight sergeant on 13 September 1942 and was posted to No. 122 squadron, Patricia Bay on 1 November 1942. Between March and November 1942, Walter served a month in Halifax, followed by a period at Sea Island when he was with No. 147

squadron.

On 16 March 1943, Walter was piloting Bristol Bolingbroke 9084, testing calibration, when it flew into a snowstorm and crashed into the sea in Mill Bay. There were two other crew members. Only one body, that of the Wireless Operator, was recovered.

Walter was born 11 May 1919 in St. Boniface, Manitoba, the only child of Isidore Dion and Edna May Bonin. Isidore, a prospector, died two years later and Edna remarried Leon Joseph Dion. There were two children of the second marriage, Lawrence who was 19 at the time of Walter's death and serving on HMCS Prince Rupert, in Nova Scotia, Canada, and Marie Norma who was 16 in 1943. Although Walter was working in Flin Flon at his enlistment, he gave his permanent address as The Pas, Manitoba, where his mother lived.



Details of Crash

On 16 March 1943, at 11:35 am, Bristol Bolingbroke Mk IV 9084 took off from Patricia Bay on a test flight with a crew of three:

Flight Sergeant W.L. Dion	Pilot
Flight Sergeant S.A. Switzer	Wireless Operator
WO 1 R.A. Seaker	Observer

F/S Dion had 370 hours of flying time including almost 15 hours on Bolingbroke. He had no instrument flying in the previous 6 months, but did have 4:30 hours on Link.

The first part of the test consisted of checking calibration of the station. Four points were selected: Active Pass, Duncan, Otter Point and James Island, all in B.C. The aircraft was to fly at 4,000ft., subject to the pilot's discretion.

The calibration was checked at the first two points, a constant R/T contact being maintained. The pilot then set course for Otter Point and 16 minutes later reported that he was running into a snow storm, after which R/T contact was lost. W/T was tried with no success on the same frequency several times. The last R/T communication was at 12:08, the exact message being *"In snow storm, looking for clear spot to continue exercise, will you plot us."*

The acting Captain of a Torpedo Retriever and the Medical Officer gave the following evidence at the Court of Inquiry.

"On March 16, 1943, I was acting Captain aboard the M-11 Torpedo Retriever, named the Nicola. At 1209 hours I was proceeding to position on torpedo retrieving in position of Mill Bay off Saanich Inlet, and sighted apparent plane crash, the water rising from the surface and falling back. The radio operator immediately advised the station that a crash had occurred. We immediately proceeded to location of the disturbance. Arriving at the scene of disturbance, I found one body and debris floating on the surface and one life raft partly inflated, under-carriage assembly and small wreckage. I took the body aboard and shortly after was transferred to the care of the Medical Officer on board the crash boat.

"I am C4961 Flight Lieutenant Donald Spencer Munroe, employed as Medical Officer, at R.C.A.F. Station, Patricia Bay, B.C.

"On March 16th, 1943, at about 1230 hours I was notified of an accident which occurred in the sea in the vicinity of Mill Bay.

"I was taken to the scene of the accident in a crash boat where I found a body which I identified to be Flight Sergeant S.A. Switzer. The identification was made by means of official identification discs and personal papers found in the clothing.

"The injuries were extensive. He was decapitated and showed multiple fractures. Death beyond any doubt was instantaneous.

The scene of the accident was visited at 3:30 pm on March 17th when oil was still visibility rising to the surface. The depth of water at the site was approximately 60 fathoms and the bodies of the other two crew members were never recovered.

The conclusion of the Court of Inquiry was that the cause of the accident was obscure but there might have been icing conditions. Owing to the nature of the accident it was impossible to make any suggestions as to how it could have been avoided or how future accidents of the same type could be prevented.

The following communication is included in the Court of Inquiry records

① D/A.M.A.S. (Br. Ops.)
Court of Inquiry - Accident to
Bolingbroke 9084 from No. 122
Squadron, on 16th March, 1943.

1. There appears to be a serious lack of training in this squadron for which the Squadron Commander should be held responsible. In the C.F.E. there is a regulation that all staff pilots and instructors shall do at least two hours instrument flying per month. It might be desirable to apply this regulation to Home War.

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plus

J. W. Wilson



Bolingbroke Mk IV

