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Can a new film help solve Canada's 70-year mystery of vanished US plane?



A Douglas C-54 Skymaster plane was bound for Montana carrying 44 crew and passengers from Anchorage, Alaska, when it disappeared over Canada. Photograph: Filip Singer/EPA

Shortly after noon on 26 January 1950, a United States military transport plane with 44 crew and passengers took off from Anchorage, Alaska. Bound for Montana, the plane enjoyed clear skies

as it flew over the rugged landscape of Canada's Yukon territory. Two hours into the flight, the crew radioed a routine check-in. It was the last time the plane or its passengers were ever heard from.

“Whatever happened to them, happened very quickly. It's not like they had engine trouble and they were slowly easing altitude to turn around and go back. They could have communicated that,” said David Downing, the head of the Yukon's Civil Air Search and Rescue Association.

The disappearance of the Douglas C-54 Skymaster prompted one of the largest recovery missions ever conducted on the continent. But 70 years later, not a single trace of the plane has ever been found.

“As far as I'm concerned, this is the biggest unsolved mystery in Canadian history,” said Andrew Gregg, the director of an upcoming documentary that casts a spotlight on the long-forgotten crash



One of four USAF planes that crashed during the search – this one near Aishihik near Haines Junction. Photograph: Andrew Gregg

Gregg's production, *Skymaster Down*, profiles both the small group of dedicated volunteers in the Yukon who have continued the search for the plane – and the American families still hoping to find out what happened to their missing relatives.

When the plane failed to arrive in Great Falls, Montana, the Canadian air force quickly assembled a search-and-rescue mission.

By chance, war exercises were planned in the area, so nearly 7,000 soldiers joined in the search. More than 80 planes flew missions to scour the landscape.

The Douglas C-54 Skymaster disappeared on its way from Alaska to Montana



Guardian graphic

Three planes crashed during the mission. All crew survived, but the accidents underscored the dangers of the terrain.

“A lot of aircraft that have come up here over the years have come from flat country down south. So we end up with pilots, not familiar with flying in the mountains. That’s led to a lot of grief over the years,” Bob Cameron, an aviation historian and author of *Yukon Wings*.

Cameron was five years old at the time of the search, and still remembers his father coming home each day with news of the search.

The first days of the operation were marred by conflicting and confusing tips from the public.

Recovery teams investigated scattered reports of smoke, explosions and garbled radio signals that spanned nearly 350,000 sq miles. The air force even sent 10 B-29 planes, flying 20 miles apart, to retrace the flight path in search of radio signals, says Cameron.

“I don’t know what messages they may have picked up, but it led to nothing,” he said.

At the time, officials believed large, high-flying planes – DC-3s and B-17 bombers – were best suited to locating the missing transport carrier.



A newspaper report on one of aircraft downed in the search from the time. Photograph: News cutting

“The air force were very good at logistics. They could move a lot of men and equipment and airplanes,” said Downing, who has flown at least a dozen searches for the plane in recent years with colleague Gerry Whitley, a search and rescue expert with a keen interest in the crash. “But they had no concept of defined search patterns. The pilots and the navigators weren’t trained for that.”

Instead, Downing suspects soldiers spent most of their time staring through fogged-up windows.

“They did everything they knew how to do at the time,” he said. “They just didn’t know how to go about it.”

The large-scale search continued until 14 February, when the US air force lost its fifth aircraft in three weeks. That plane, a B-36 bomber flying a separate mission, was carrying an inactive nuclear bomb.



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Captain Franklin Gregory, who left his pregnant wife Marjorie back in Anchorage with their toddler. Their daughter, Barbara Stockton, will be in the film. Photograph: Family Handout

“As soon as that happened, all the resources in the area left and the search was declared over,” said Gregg. “The families said everything stopped after that. They got no explanations about where the plane might be and what might have happened. They just got the death certificates.”

A number of the victims’ family members have petitioned the government to begin a new search, confident current technology could produce a breakthrough – and provide a measure of closure.

“There’s been no major search at all since 1950. We just want to get the story out there and then see what happens,” said Gregg.

Experts believe the plane probably didn’t deviate far from its planned route, meaning it could be resting in a landscape frequented by trappers, Indigenous peoples, geologists and miners.

“Unless there’s a ravine somewhere that everybody’s missed, what initially looks like wide-open wilderness is really well-traveled land,” said Gregg.

Amateur investigators have long theorized the plane may have attempted to land on a frozen lake, and crashed through the ice. But no fuel or debris has ever surfaced in any major bodies of water. A recent sonar scan of the largest lake on the flight path by Gregg’s team turned up nothing.

Gregg speculates the plane could have veered slightly off course and smashed into the towering Saint Elias range, the highest in North America, where it was buried deep in the ice and snow.

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Despite the daunting nature of the search, Yukoners are convinced the plane will be found, ending the territory’s most enduring mystery.

“With global warming and ice and snow fields receding, new crash sites are finally coming to light,” said Cameron. “But it’s still hard for me to understand how it hasn’t yet been found. We’re talking about a large four-engine transport plane. How can that be a crash site that hasn’t been spotted by now?”