Tragedy claims life of publishing luminary

We lost a colleague and partner last week.

John Collison, 56, along with Jane Ferguson, 45, her niece Kirsten Ferguson, 20, and her cousin Rascal were killed instantly August 29 when John's plane crashed into a ravine 14 km north of Pemberton. The trio were on route to Calgary from Vancouver Island and had just stopped in Pemberton to refuel. The cause of the crash is not known.

John worked out of the office next to me in his capacity as president of Madison Publishing, a division of Madison Venture Corp., where he had been a partner since its establishment in Vancouver in 1976. Madison Publishing owns an interest in Business in Vancouver Media Group, as well as owning community papers in Whistler, Squamish, Lillooet, Powell River and the Sunshine Coast. He was formerly president of Lower Mainland Publishing, a joint venture with Southam Inc. that owned numerous community papers and the Real Estate Weekly in the Lower Mainland. Lower Mainland Publishing grew out of John's idea to have Madison invest in College Printers.

It was that initial investment in the printing business that kindled John's love of publishing. "He was a hard worker, meticulous, acquisitions and staffing were his strengths," said Pierre Kwisnamun, vice-president and group publisher at Madison Publishing. A UBC math graduate, John joined Arthur Andersen in 1969, worked in a management consultancy, but then became one of the original partners in Madison. As president of Lower Mainland, he oversaw more than 800 employees generating revenues in excess of $110 million.

"He was an outstanding individual and a great partner for 31 years," said Sam Grippi, president and CEO of Madison Venture Corp. "He was one of those people who had tremendous intellect, but who gave people who worked with him the opportunity to flourish. Most of the people who worked closely with him are immensely loyal to him.

"He had a great mind and loved to solve complex problems," said Grippi. "He was tireless in working things out, finding ways to make things work. You could count on him 100 per cent to do what had to be done."

Brad Alden, president of the Burnaby Chamber of Commerce and publisher of the Burnaby Now newspaper, formerly part of Lower Mainland, was a long-time personal friend who saw him as a "trusted aide" in John that was hidden to those who thought of him as a solid workhorse. John had been known to go to his office on Christmas Day because it was a quiet time when he could clean up his desk with- out being disturbed.

"He was the straightest friend I ever had, but he had a wild and crazy side that was as much fun as anyone," said Alden. He spent holidays scuba-diving, riding his Harley-Davidson and, most recently, flying. After flying extensively in small planes in the 1970s, John renewed his license about 10 years ago and became a part-owner of Albatross Aviation Ltd., a Pitt Meadows flying school. He recently bought the amphibious De Havilland Beaver aircraft used in the Harrison Ford movie Six Days, Seven Nights. It was the plane that crashed.

For all his business experience, few people ever remember John wearing a suit, a sports jacket or anything but a checked shirt. Quiet, shy and reserved, he never carried a business card until last year, when Kwisnamun brought some for him.

He was in the midst of hiring a live-aboard "aircraft carrier" (he had the word "yacht") that would carry his plane and enable him to realize his dream of living on a boat with his plane. He did not live to see that dream fulfilled, but he did live long enough to enjoy the fruits of many years of hard work. He died doing what he loved. •
By Orest Smysnulk

"Anyway, at either the first or second Presidents Club, John got up to give his "speech" and the first thing he said was "I'm only up here because Grippo won't do this" or words to this effect. I can't remember exactly. It broke the house up!!

John always had a great number of electronic and other gadgets on his belt. Someone in the group dubbed this the "LMPL communication belt" and we debated whether this should be standard issue for all LMPL managers."

By Peter Speck

"I flew with John a few times, in the Beaver and before that in various light aircraft. John was a pilot and I must say a wannabe pilot, but I fly a lot as a passenger in light aircraft and John, in my opinion, was a careful and meticulous flyer. He was very proud of that Beaver and took excellent care of it.

I remember a flight with John, in a Cessna over Armstrong, B.C., about three years ago. John was intent on his navigation. When John was focused on something, he was really focused. "What's that place down there?" I asked.

John replied "That's Armstrong".

I said, "You know, that is quite the dairy town." John didn't say anything.

"They make cheese there", I added. John said nothing.

I kept talking. "They're sending the cheese to Israel."

"Is that so?" said John, with map in hand as he peered out the window. "Yes," I said. "They're calling it Chemos of Nazareth."

I thought it was a pretty good joke, but John was so absorbed in flying the aircraft that it took a long time for it to sink in."

1969
Graduates from UBC with degree in Math and joins Arthur Andersen in Vancouver

1973
Transfers to Arthur Andersen in Chicago and helps develop United Airlines System

1974
Earns first pilot's license

1975
Acquires the infamous Suburban - brand new - outfitted for travelling

1975
Traveled to South West US and Mexico for 3 months with Brad Alden

1975
Returns to Vancouver and begins to work with several groups including Madison
I had the great pleasure of flying dozens of times with John in that Beaver. Back and forth to Powell River was our most regular run. I remember when he asked me point blank, "Want to fly?" "Yeah, sure" I managed to get out, as he told me to grab the controls. What an experience! The last time I flew with John earlier this summer he even let me set it down on the river by the Seair base. His hand was of course steady on the other set of controls but my heart was running at 120+.

John gave me chances to publish, to manage a publishing company, to own a share of a newspaper and fly his plane amongst many other things. I owe him much. Thanks for the experiences, John.

I will always remember the many fun times and great laughs we had together. I him miss dearly.

— Peter Krarastra-m

John treated family & friends to a Hawaiian holiday

John & friend, Patti

1976
Becomes partner in Madison Venture Group

1980
Madison makes first investment in printing & publishing with purchase of College Printers Ltd.

1987
Madison Buys Real Estate Weekly and John becomes company President

1990
Lower Mainland Publishing formed with John as President

1994
Renew pilot's license and invest in Altair

1995
Acquire first Harley - Stegos special edition — stole same year in front of the Real Estate Weekly
Bill Lang’s Memories of John

Our paths first crossed some twenty-eight years ago when I was working at The Courier and John was helping with some accounting and planning matters. It was after the paper failed in its attempt to go daily when I really got to know John. He saved my backside from a very sorry mess as well as providing me with another opportunity. Morris Belkin was exercising his ‘paw’ on the interest I had in College Printers and I had ninety days to respond. Being totally shellshocked from what had happened at The Courier I was not dealing well with the situation. John came to my aid and devised a very creative scheme involving the late Charlie Bowll and an unknown (to me) entity called Madison Venture Corporation. At the eleventh hour and much to the amazement of Belkin we bought him out of his very fine enterprise, College Printers. As a result of this John and I became business partners. Ever since then John has been there to help me whenever necessary. You never needed to ask John for his help. He somehow sensed when it was needed and then quietly set about solving the problem. He had a key to the office I’m in but could only be found there late at night or on a weekend. On the occasions that I would be in the office when he was there I loved getting an update on his fishing, monocycling and flying exploits as well as how his bear building was progressing. Recently he told me the boat would be ready by Christmas and joked that I could join him out on board for Christmas dinner. That’s a date I’ll be sorry to miss.

How Can I Possibly Describe My Big Brother in a Few Words?

“The highest reward for a man’s soul is not what he gets for it, but what he becomes by it.”

John Ruskin (1819-1900)
Writer, Social Thinker

Our next-door family of four lived in a wonderful home on Angus Drive in Vancouver. We did all the normal childhood things... hockey for John, skating for me... we both attended public schools, and went onto UBC while we lived at home. Overall it was an even-keel good childhood, with no devastating disasters or remarkable happenings. We were very fortunate John was a pretty typical brother; he’s the honest one – he wasn’t a nincompoop, but I adored and loved him.

Our parents retired to Vancouver Island in 1971, I was 19 and John 23. We didn’t understand... as John put it, “we gave them the best years of our lives and then they moved away.” However, from this somewhat ‘normal, conventional, traditional’ upbringing emerged a more remarkable and complex man.

He loved people but he tended to be shy and reserved.

He loved to help people but he was very self-sufficient and intensely private.

He loved the simplicity of nature, spending time either out on the water or up in the air, but he loved solving complicated problems. He was seemingly irreligious yet surprisingly altruistic.

He didn’t believe in celebrating Christmas Day (that’s the day he cleared his office) but he basically portrayed St. Nick the other 364 days of the year.

In my eyes John was brilliant and he was also loyal and dedicated to whatever he was doing. His relationships with people were important to him, both personally and in business, and through each and every one of those relationships he grew to be the man we know today. Patti and John spent many years together and this time period helped shape our John. Patti kept kindly chumming away at that gruff exterior, hoping to let the teddy bear out for others to see. The Madison boys, his business partners, and his employees were his heartbear. His friends were his pulse. John and his dear friend Joe shared a love of nature. Flying, being on the water, and a love for the intricacies of business. Through Jane’s dedication to a facility which dealt with addiction, John developed an interest in her goal, and enjoyed helping her keep the doors of EDGEWOOD open. Although a dedicated workaholic, the journey was the destination. Perhaps through the years, the addiction center had impacted on his addiction to business, as he was starting to take some time to enjoy the fruits of many many years of labour.

Although John was frequently annoyingly irascible he turned out to be a truly altruistic guy. I am so very proud of him. As a younger sister still defining my older brother I acknowledge what a remarkable man he was – with wonderful friends, tremendous accomplishments, and a huge sense of adventure... I will aspire to follow in his footsteps. I just wish he didn’t wear a size 13.

Ellen Collison...the little sister...over and out.
Dear John,

Finally, I can't believe you have me writing a
one-hour love letter. You always did make me do the 'dry-wet' work!

I want to thank you for all the
many things that you taught
me, for your guidance and for the opportunities that you gave me. You have
been a wonderful and very special friend. As
many of us at Real Estate Weekly
and Kodak Press have experi-
enced, if you had any ounce of
belief in someone, you led us, encouraged us and
supported us as wherever the next step was.

You always had a way of taking your shots at
me. I can still hear you saying, "What is that
that you're wearing?" or "What happened to your hair?"
I often wondered how you got the position of
fashion police.

It's been said that the definition of a true friend
is someone that holds your hair back when you're
tossing your cookies.

You didn't realize I wasn't feeling well after eat-
ing a assorted seafood at dinner. I tried to save you
by attempting to end the conversation but as usual
you continued talking. The look on your face when I
went running behind your truck and buckled
over. With my hair pulled back
with one hand you talked to
Jane on your cell phone trying
to figure out what to do with me. Afterwards when you
picked me up and put me in
your truck I remember being
embarrassed, thanking you for
taking care of me and apolo-
gizing to you all at the same
time. Although I think you were
quite horrified yourself, I recall
you saying, "Don't worry about
Debbie, you would have done the same for me.

When you called to see if I made it home you said
that you really knew I was going to be okay when
I had responded, "No, I wouldn't have... you have
no hair to hold back."

John, if this had to happen and we had to lose
you, I am somewhat comforted by the fact that you
left us doing something that you loved and with
people that loved you. I will certainly miss you.

Your friend,

Debbie

Ellen Collins says "Now I know why my neck is always sore!!"
Craig Leonard's Memories of John

When a Father should be...strong, guiding, supportive...that's what John epitomized to me.

He made such a strong impression on me when he first came to Altair. He was earnest, friendly, and keen to learn; the perfect student. He and I spent many hours together as he worked on becoming a better pilot. That was just the beginning of our relationship. When Altair came up for sale John was the first person I approached about joining me in the venture as my partner.

There was little doubt in my mind that I could succeed in making Altair a going concern with his backing. Ultimately, he was the only person that did believe enough in me to do so. Nine years later, and many "hurdles" since, Altair is still around, much to the thanks of John for his guidance and support.

Since those first few years of our friendship, John went on to do many other things. However, he and I always remained in regular touch. His visits to Altair were always quite brief, and usually liberally interposed with conversations on one of the subjects that were most dear to him...airplanes. He was never at a loss for suggestions on things to improve Altair. I too found him to be a tremendous "bouncing board" for my own ideas.

However, he always left it up to me to decide what would be the next path for the company. Through it all, his faith in me was unwavering. In that, I will always be grateful to him.

I believe a legacy is measured in the people you touch, not the things you leave behind. And in that, John certainly has left behind a richly blessed world. I count myself very fortunate to be one of the people he touched in his life.

If I was asked to come up with one trait of John's that most exemplifies his character to me it would be the way he started every telephone conversation with "Hi..." That greeting represented the way he started everything...with an enthusiasm that left you knowing the upcoming conversation was going to be fun and exciting, and would leave a smile on your face once it was over.

Well, I will never hear that "Hi..." again in my lifetime, but I expect that shortly after I leave this Earth, I can look forward to getting a quick call that starts with "Oh Hi...", telling me about what a great adventure is awaiting me.

Collison Remembered

by Rod Thompson

On May morning in the early 1990's, when John was scheduled to pay a visit to the Abbotsford office. Although it was a nice day the early morning temperatures were still cool, which led John to the conclusion that riding his Harley to Abbotsford was a good idea, and wearing his full leathers was too. I remember a visibly shaken receptionist reporting to me that there was "a big biker" at the front counter to see me. She was not the least surprised when I introduced John as my boss!

I recall riding in the back seat of "the beast" to an Abbotsford Airshow one year and flying to Comox with John and Lisa in the Cessna 182 he flew from Altair Aviation. I believe it was on that same trip that John was, as always, staying in the "Boathouse" at the water's edge and I was in the "Our House" just down the beach. After a night of typical revelry, John and I made our way to the beach to turn in. It was one of those beautiful nights where the stars were myriad above and the temperature cool but not unreasonably so. The two of us stood on the shore listening to waves enjoying the evening and talking for almost two hours. There was no great epiphany or revelation in what we spoke of, but rather just getting to spend some time with John Collison the man was a rare opportunity much appreciated, for as we all know John was in many ways a very private person.

I also remember John in tense circumstances, during some major personnel changes in our organization, which led to some decisions John found difficult, but none the less carried forward. Such was the nature of the man that he was at critical times, able to set aside his personal preferences and loyalties to achieve better decisions.

In my experience no idea was thorough enough that John couldn't find a way to add several layers of complexity. The simplest of ideas was examined from so many different angles that it felt like we sometimes lost the original idea in the ensuing discussion. As frustrating as this could be to those of known as "pathetic ink-stained wretches", the examination of alternatives did yield unique solutions. Some so unique they infuriated us even more!

Many will be feeling the loss of a friend and colleague, whose life was cut short, but I am reminded that most do not have fate determine their passing doing something they loved.

Farewell John and may you enjoy fair weather and strong tail winds.
John and his float cabin fly-in

by Joyce Carlson, Publisher, Powell River Peak

"Collison here," said the voice on the other end of the phone. "I'm thinking about coming to visit you at your cabin. Can you send me a map?"

Joyce Carlson quickly sketched out a map of Powell Lake showing Hole in the Wall, a sheltered area with a narrow entrance where her family cabin was located. How would he be able to find it, she wondered.

On the specified evening, she and her husband Don looked out into the bay, keeping an eye on the sky. Before the plane came into view in the wider area of the lake, noise from the engine echoed throughout the bay. It was a lovely late summer evening when the lights cast a golden glow across the water; through the trees and up the mountainside of the large island opposite the cabin.

It reminded her of a movie (don't know why) as the distinct red and gray plane skimmed its way across the lake waters that were more familiar with boat arrivals than aircraft sightings. As John paddled the boat closer and closer to the cabin, the plane began to shift and in wing was coming directly overhead of a group of people standing on the deck. It looked as though their hands would be decapitated but they all ducked in time, except for Don Carlson. He kept up and grabbed a rope hanging from the wing and pulled it back, just before it would have sliced through a wooden post holding up the sun deck.

"John was grateful the wing had not been damaged," explained Joyce, "and Don was just as grateful that his cabin was intact."

Needless to say it was the most dramatic entrance any visitor had made to the cabin in 17 years and it's still talked about today.
John Collison: Boss – Friend – Missed

When a de Havilland Beaver plane owned by John Collison crashed near Portnicton on August 29, it claimed the life of the former boss and dear friend of the Real Estate Weekly and Kodiak Press staff. Also lost in the tragic mishap were Jane Ferguson, her sister Kristen Ferguson and Jane’s co-pilot, Sascha.

In the publishing world, John was known and respected as an outstanding businessman. Among other accomplishments, John was the previous president of Lower Mainland Publish-

ing, which at the time included the Real Estate Weekly and Kodiak Press.

Here at the Real Estate Weekly office, however, we have our own warm memories of a gen-
erous, hard-working man with a big heart who cared the respect and devotion of everyone in the company.

In many ways John was a contradiction. His quiet demeanor belied a love of adventure. He liked to ride his Harley Davidson motorcycle, scuba dive, head out on fishing trips with the crew from the pressroom and fly airplanes. And, while he avoided the spotlight, he would join in all our staff social activities, from the annual dragon boat races to stuff picnics and barbecues.

John was able to manage the delicate balance of being the boss when he needed to be and being your friend otherwise.

We will remember him toshopping with us at the park across the street from the office. And, when a sudden snow storm hit one winter, we recall how John drove staff members home in his crusty, rusty 1974 Suburban and picked them up the next morning to bring them safely back to work. The faithful old yellow truck — which John called The Beast — was the focus of much good-natured kidding.

A few years ago, John came into the office just grinning, telling us that he’d just had the Beast detailed and he speeded no expense. As we rolled our eyes wondering why he would even consider spending money on it, one of us asked how much he spent. With a proud grin, he replied “$500 including 4 new tires, well at least new to the Beast.”

John would often lend the Beast to a friend who wanted to ferry his terrified kids to activities. It was not totally altruistic. The interest, he confided, was to adjust the children’s perspective and provide a solid grounding in valu-

es.

Through his 15 years as Real Estate Weekly and Kodiak, John Collison fostered a close family-like working environment with a rare mixture of hard work, humour and mutual respect. Today that environment, and our gratitude, sur-
vives him.

One Friday afternoon, in summer at Grandview, Ed Brouwer and I were having a conversation about our past summer vacations with our kids. Both of us had traveled the Oregon coast in previous years. We agreed the highlight of our trips was renting dune buggies and traversing Sand Dunes National Park. We related our experiences of speed and daring along with the adrenaline rush that occurred in these open air motorized chariots.

John was intrigued to say the least. He said that he had never driven one nor been to this area before.

In less than an hour John had arranged a plane, reservations at a hotel and rented dune buggies in Oregon. Ed, John and I left the next morning from Pin Meadows bound for Oregon and the dunes. We spent Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning whipping across the sands and acting like teenagers on a wild weekend. Man did we have fun.”

— Spence Lineau

1997

John acquires amphibious de Havilland Beaver flown in Six Days, Seven Nights

Mistaken for Harrison Ford at Anchorage in Wyoming

The Suburban is semi-retired to the back of REW – used only for special occasions

1998

Lower Mainland Publishing sold and John moves to Madison Publishing

1999

A “mild” heart attack prompts new exercise regime

2000

The first year John doesn’t go in to do the annual Christmas desk clean up

2001

John begins work on his aircraft carrier

2002

Aug 29, 2003

John makes his last flight, going down outside of Portnicton while flying to Calgary.

COLLISON John, born February 3, 1947, died Unexpectedly on August 28, 2003. John died in a plane mishap near Portnicton, BC, while on one of his many excursions on his cherished de Havilland Beaver amphib C-GHAF. John’s close friend Jane Ferguson of Nanaimo, her sister Kristen Ferguson of Calgary, and Jane’s best pal, her loyal cairn terrier, Rascal, also died in the accident. John is survived by his sister Ellen Collison, John joined Arthur Andersen & Co. and went on to work in Arthur Andersen Consulting as a Management Con-

1976. John and several partners formed the Madi-

son Group where he spent most of his time in the printing and publishing division of Madison. For many years John served as president of Lower Mainland Publishing Limited, which was a partnership with Southam Inc. He will be for-
evver missed by his sister, his many friends, business partners, and employees. HOTEL ALPHA POXTROY...over.