

# Donkersley, Harry Woodward

**Age:** 24

**Nationality:** Canadian

**Rank:** Flight Lieutenant

**Unit:** No. 32 OTU

**Occupation:** Pilot

**Service No:** J/8203

**Birth:** 30 December 1919,  
Powell River,  
BC, Canada

**Home Town:** Powell River, BC,  
Canada

**Death:** 16 January 1944

Crash of Beechcraft Expeditor HB100,  
South of Vancouver

**Burial:** Commemorated on Ottawa Memorial,  
Ontario, Canada

**Others:** S/L James G. Flaherty, Navigator, S/L Terence A. Pringle,  
Passenger (RAFVR); P/O Ernest Sowerby, WAG.



## Biography

In 1942 Harry Donkersley was based in Malta, a pilot with No. 69 Squadron flying Torpedo Vickers Wellingtons in the Mediterranean.

He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in November 1942, and the Bar in December 1942.

One citation reads:

*“In sorties against enemy shipping this officer received much success. One night in November, 1942, he captained an aircraft detailed to drop flares over Italian Naval units and accomplished his task successfully. Several nights later he attacked and sank a small merchant vessel. On another night in December, 1942, he participated in an operation against an important enemy convoy in the Mediterranean. As a result other air and surface forces were able to strike successfully, two merchant vessels were sunk and one badly damaged.*

*P/O Donkersley is a courageous leader who displayed great initiative in the face of the enemy. His outstanding work has denied the enemy vital supplies in a most critical stage of operations.”*

The Vancouver Sun of 19 November 1942 contained an article:

‘P/O Donkersley, 22, only son of Mr. And Mrs. H. D. Donkersley, Powell River, won the Distinguished Flying Cross for sinking four enemy merchant ships and damaging a tanker in the Mediterranean.

Donkersley’s citation said:

*“One night in October he attacked a tanker, inflicting severe damage. A few night later he located and attacked a convoy of merchant ships escorted by several destroyers. After making an attack, he returned to his base and made a second attack.” Early the next morning reconnaissance aircraft carried out a search over a wide area in the vicinity of the attack and observed three enemy ships missing. Some nights later, Donkersley attacked one or two ships escorted by destroyers, setting a vessel on fire. Later it was learned that the ship had sunk.*

*The success which attended his efforts deprived the enemy of much fuel so vital to the Battle of Africa”*

P/O Donkersley was born in Powell River and took an active interest in sports there. He enlisted in the RCAF in March 1941 and was awarded his commission the following November.’ (article courtesy of David Archer)

It has been said that P/O Donkersley and his aircrew were the most decorated crew in Malta.



Harry Woodward Donkersley was born 30 December 1919 in Powell River, BC, to Harry Dyson Donkersley and Gladys Woodward. Both parents were born in England and emigrated to British Columbia in 1919. Harry had one younger sister, Rita.

He was educated in Powell River, attending Henderson Elementary School from 1927 to 1935, and Brooks School from 1935 to 1939. Before enlisting in the RCAF, on 9 January 1941, Harry worked as a clerk at Jack Fletcher's Men's Wear. He was a leader in student affairs at school, Powell River Junior Golf Champion and an all-round athlete.



Harry transferred from RCAF Atlantic Ferry Command to RAF during the Battle of Malta. He returned to Canada in June 1943. On 15 January 1944, Harry was pilot of Beechcraft Expeditor HB100 being ferried from Rockcliffe, Ontario to Patricia Bay, BC with a passenger from the RAF. The aircraft reached Lethbridge, Alberta, where the crew stayed overnight. On January 16<sup>th</sup>, despite adverse weather warnings, Harry attempted to fly to Patricia Bay. The aircraft was lost in the mountains east of Vancouver where the wreckage and occupants remain, undiscovered.

Powell River has a website [pruhww2.weebly.com](http://pruhww2.weebly.com) 'Powell River's Unsung Heroes of World War II' with details of Powell River men who served in the war.

## DONKERSLEY

(Continued from page 1)

of the Fraser Valley for the twin-engined RCAF monoplane piloted by Flt.-Lt. Harry Donkersley, Powell River's DFC and Bar hero of Mediterranean air warfare which has been missing since 5:45 p.m. Sunday on a flight from Lethbridge to Victoria.

News that their famous son was piloting the ill-fated craft was contained in a wire received Tuesday by Mr. and Mrs. H. D. Donkersley from Flt.-Lt. Donkersley's Commanding Officer. It read:

**"REGRET TO INFORM YOU  
YOUR SON FLYING OFFICER  
H. W. DONKERSLEY  
MISSING RESULT AIRCRAFT  
ACCIDENT SIXTEENTH JANUARY  
FURTHER INFORMATION  
AS SOON AS POSSIBLE."**

At press time today no trace of the missing plane had been found despite the fact that more than 50 planes from a Fraser Valley and coast air stations have scoured the far reaches of the valley since early Monday morning.

According to an official announcement from Western Air Command to the News, Donkersley was ferrying the aircraft from Lethbridge to a large air base on the west coast. His last radio report came in to headquarters when the ship was approximately 25 miles east of Vancouver. This suggests that the craft came down in the Fraser Valley or in the mountainous Fraser canyon.

At daylight on Monday 50 or more aircraft started the widespread search for the missing plane but weather conditions throughout the week have been very unfavorable.

Flt.-Lt. Donkersley, who spent Christmas with his family, was 24 on December 30.

He won the Distinguished Flying Cross for sinking an Italian tanker in the Mediterranean in October, 1942, while on torpedo-bomber operations. The following month a Bar was added when he sank two ships of an Axis convoy in one day.

He joined the Battle of Malta after transferring from the Atlantic Ferry Command to the R.A.F., and returned to Canada only last June when he was reposted to a west coast air station.

His sister, Rita, in training at Vancouver General hospital, arrived home this morning to be with the family.

## Details of Crash

On 16 January<sup>h</sup> 1944, Beechcraft Expeditor HB100 went missing while being ferried from Rockcliffe, Ontario to Patricia Bay, BC. The aircraft carried a crew of three and one passenger:

P/O Harry W. Donkersley DFC and Bar	Pilot
S/L James G. Flaherty	Navigator
S/L Terence A. Pringle	Passenger (RAFVR)
P/O Ernest Sowerby	WAG

The aircraft departed from Rockcliffe at 11:06 am on 15 January 1944 and stopped over at Winnipeg. It was given a daily inspection at Winnipeg on the morning of January 16<sup>th</sup> and departed for Lethbridge, where it arrived at 1:30 pm. The aircraft was serviced and given a between flight inspection while at Lethbridge by a mechanic of No. 124 squadron. About 1:55 pm the pilot, or some other member of the crew telephoned the Meteorologist for a weather report and forecast. The information was supplied and was unfavourable.

There were strong gusts of wind on the route with very poor conditions over the Western part including solid overcast up to 20,000 ft. and icing conditions with a ceiling of 700 ft. at Patricia Bay. Penticton was closed to both contact and instrument flying and Kimberly just on the limits. These were the only two airports which could be used as alternates. The intermediate range stations were closed to contact. Prediction for Vancouver from 17:30-19:00 hours was solid overcast with cloud 3,000 to 6,000 ft. with tops up to 16,000 ft., from Vancouver to the Cascades, strong winds, freezing level 7,000 ft. with moderate icing above. Ceiling at Vancouver was 900 ft. in rain. Solid overcast dissipated a short distance east of the Cascades.

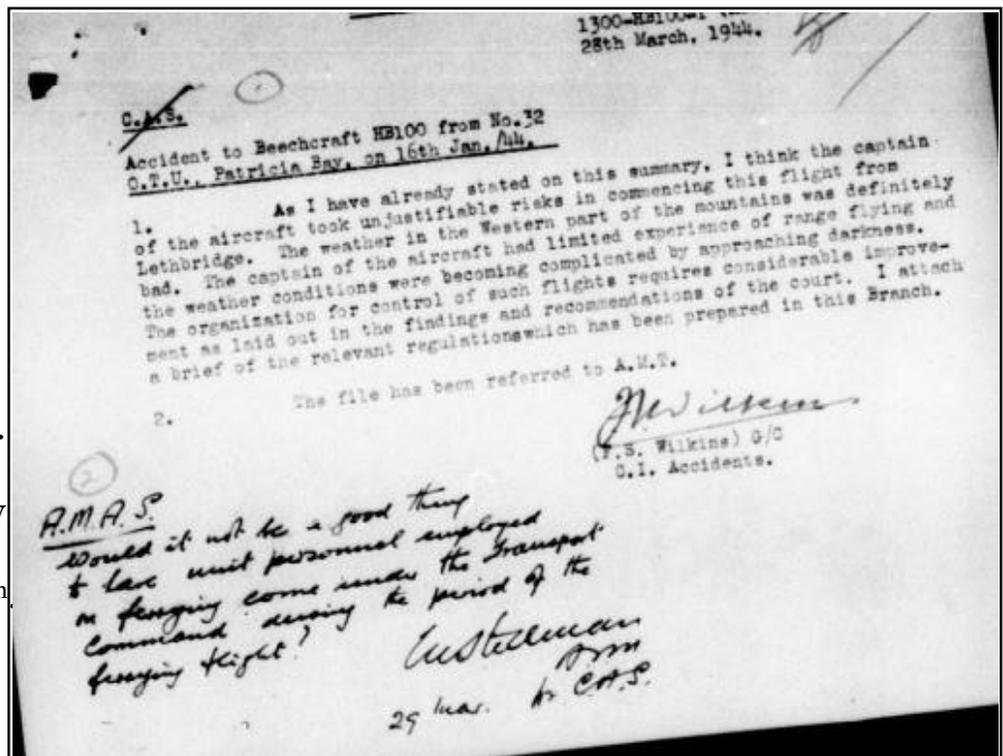
About an hour later, the pilot and the navigator went to the meteorology office and went over the weather reports and forecast. They were supplied with all of the information available but, despite its adverse nature, decided that they could make the trip to Vancouver on instruments. About 2:55 pm the pilot went to the Department of Transport Tower to file a flight plan. The D of T Traffic Officer asked the pilot if he had checked the weather and, when the pilot replied he had and said that it was satisfactory, referred him to the "N" operator, who entered the details of the flight on the traffic record sheet.

A flight plan form was not filled out and the particulars entered in the traffic record sheet did not include the alternate aerodrome, airspeed, fuel endurance and name of pilot. Information on the flight was transmitted as a flight plan to Edmonton Airway Traffic Control Centre for traffic clearance.

The pilot left the tower after filing his flight plan and went to the aircraft. It is to be noted that he did not consult the radio range operator at Lethbridge who he been referred to, who was in a position to advise that the Vancouver radio range was unreliable.

The aircraft applied for and received clearance and took off at 15:15 hrs. It reported over Penticton at 17:17 hrs, estimated arrival at Vancouver 18:00 hrs, and requested Patricia Bay weather. At 17:50hrs, Bellingham heard the aircraft calling Vancouver and giving its position as over Maple Ridge at 12,000 ft. and descending to 6,000 ft. Vancouver did not receive this message.

The aircraft was not heard from by any station thereafter, but base continued to call every three to five minutes. When the aircraft was finally considered overdue, search action was instituted. Air search was convened on January 17<sup>th</sup> and continued daily to January 30<sup>th</sup>. No sign of the aircraft or the airmen aboard was ever found.



The pilot was considered responsible for the accident since it was his decision to fly the plane in what were obviously adverse conditions in which he had limited experience. However, there were discussions and concerns about the control of RCAF flights from civilian airports, and among the recommendations on which action was taken was the staffing of control towers by RCAF personnel.

No evidence appears to have been given as to why an experienced pilot would make such a decision, risking his own and other lives, or what, if any, the urgency of the flight was to cause him to do so.



Beechcraft Expeditor