

# Sowerby, Ernest

**Age:** 30  
**Nationality:** Canadian  
**Rank:** P/O  
**Unit:** No. 32 OTU  
**Occupation:** Wireless Operator/  
Air Gunner  
**Service No:** J/36500

**Birth:** 24 November 1914  
Newcastle on Tyne  
England

**Home Town:** Chilliwack, BC,  
Canada

**Death:** 16 January 1944

Crash of Beechcraft C-45 Expeditor HB100  
South of Vancouver

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

**Others:** P/O Harry W. Donkersley, Pilot; S/L James G. Flaherty,  
Navigator; S/L Terence A. Pringle, Passenger (RAFVR).



## Biography

Ernest Sowerby, a car mechanic from Chilliwack, BC, applied to join the RCAF in August 1940. The Medical Officer found him to be a healthy, rugged young man, confident, mature and pleasant. His demeanour and education did not make him an immediate candidate for a commission, but he passed as fit and suitable for flying or ground duties.

The Interviewing Officer's appraisal was very lukewarm:

*“Of working class English parentage. Is not impressive. Has little good experience in civil life and is of mechanic class. Not well educated. English is weak in spots. However he is keen on both flying and to serve and since there is nothing definitely against him, would suggest for air gunner duties.”*

*My estimate of him may be an underestimate but there is too little in his experience to give any strong indications of natural courage or ability. The thing strongly in his favour is he has taken some flying lessons, says his instructor speaks well of his ability and states he likes it. With this in mind, he should be capable of the duties of an air gunner.”*

Ernest was enlisted in February 1941 for wireless operator/air gunner (WAG) training and was to prove this dismissive appraisal wrong. He climbed steadily through the ranks of NCO and was commissioned as a pilot officer in 1943, receiving a post mortem promotion to flying officer. Throughout his service he was reported to be of ‘*very good character*’ and his knowledge of his trade was ‘*superior*’.

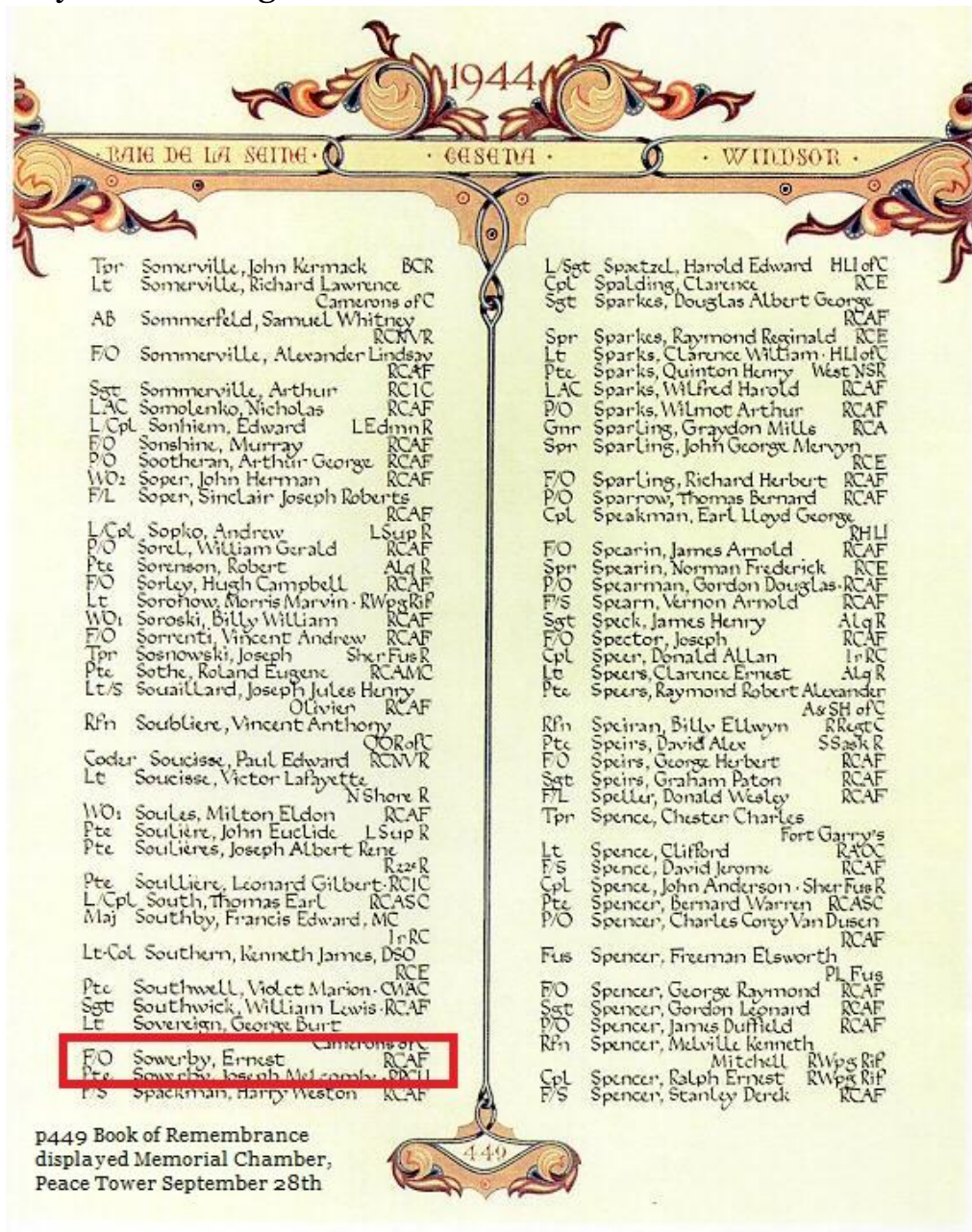
He received his wireless operators badge in November 1941, and his WAG badge a month later. His instructor assessed him:

*“Quick and Intelligent, no difficulty assimilating knowledge, slow but sure, sound knowledge of subject.”*

On 16 January 1944, Ernest had the misfortune to be WAG on Beechcraft C-45 Expeditor HB100 when the pilot chose to fly from Lethbridge to Patricia Bay despite an extremely adverse weather report. The aircraft and occupants disappeared south of Vancouver and were never located.

Ernest Sowerby was born in Newcastle on Tyne, on 24 November 1914, the third child of Alfred Ernest Sowerby and Mary Hannah Telfer. Ernest, his mother, brother Norman and sister Edna left England for Canada in 1919 on the liner 'Lapland'. They settled in Merritt BC. Three more children were born in Canada, Yvonne, Dorothy, and the youngest Raymond, born 1925, who was a LAC at St. Hubert in 1944. Ernest never married.

Ernest went to school in Merritt, completing two years of high school. From 1931 to 1936 he had a string of odd jobs and then found a permanent position as a motor mechanic in Chilliwack, BC, where he remained until he was enlisted. His only stated hobby was hunting.



## Details of Crash

On 16 January 1944, Beechcraft C-45 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' and icing conditions with a ceiling of 700' at Patricia Bay. Penticton was closed to both contact (visual) and instrument flying and Kimberly was just on the limits. These were the only two airports that 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' with tops up to 16,000', from Vancouver to the Cascades, strong winds, freezing level 7,000' with moderate icing above. Ceiling at Vancouver was 900' 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 was in a position, had he been contacted, 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' and descending to 6,000'. Vancouver did not receive this message.

The aircraft was not heard from by any station thereafter, but base continued to call every two to five minutes. When the aircraft was finally considered overdue, search action was instituted. Air search was convened 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.

1300-82100  
28th March, 1944.

C.A.S.  
 Accident to Beechcraft HB100 from No. 32  
 C.T.U., Patricia Bay, on 16th Jan. 44.

1. As I have already stated on this summary, I think the captain of the aircraft took unjustifiable risks in commencing this flight from Lethbridge. The weather in the Western part of the mountains was definitely bad. The captain of the aircraft had limited experience of range flying and the weather conditions were becoming complicated by approaching darkness. The organization for control of such flights requires considerable improvement as laid out in the findings and recommendations of the court. I attach a brief of the relevant regulations which has been prepared in this Branch.

2. The file has been referred to A.M.S.

*J.S. Wilkins*  
 (J.S. Wilkins) G/C  
 C.I. Accidents.

②  
A.M.A.S.  
 Would it not be a good thing  
 to have unit personnel employed  
 on ferrying come under the Transport  
 Command during the period of the  
 ferrying flight?  
 Custleman  
 29 Mar. to C.A.S.





Beechcraft Expeditor