

POWELL, Stephen Bruce (#N/3333)

Stephen "Bruce" Powell had a strong desire to join the Royal Canadian Navy, even before he was of age to do so. He finally succeeded in becoming a member at the age of seventeen, several months before war was declared. He would become Sarnia's first casualty of the Second World War.

Stephen Bruce Powell was born at Royal Victoria Hospital in Barrie, Ontario on January 23, 1922, the eldest son of Ernest John "Ernie" Powell Jr., a railroad switchman at the time, and Cora Irene (nee Court) Powell. Stephen Bruce Powell went by his middle name Bruce, and was known as "Buster" to his family and friends. Bruce's story can be linked to his father, for Ernest or "Ernie" served in the Great War when he was a teenager.

Ernie Powell was born on August 3, 1899 in Waltham Abbey, Essex, England, but was living in Barrie, Ontario when the Great War started. Weeks before his seventeenth birthday, on July 21, 1916, Ernie enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 177th Overseas Battalion at Camp Borden. Ernie was residing in Barrie at the time, and recorded his birthplace as Reading, England, his occupation as expressman, and his next-of-kin as his father Ernest Powell (Sr.) in Barrie, Ontario. Approximately three months later, Ernie was discharged from the 177th, CEF at Camp Borden.

On September 4, 1917, when he was eighteen years old, Ernie Powell enlisted again in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, this time at the Railway Construction & Forestry Depot in Toronto with the York and Simcoe Foresters, CEF. He was residing in Barrie, Ontario at the time, and recorded his birthplace as Middlesex, England, his occupation as chauffeur, and his next-of-kin as his father Ernest Powell (Sr.) at 147 Peel Street, Barrie, Ontario. He also recorded that he had prior military experience, serving for three months with the 177th Battalion. He stood five feet seven and three-quarter inches tall, had blue eyes and light brown hair, and was single. It was also recorded that his mother was no longer alive. Though it was recorded on his file that he was, "not to be sent overseas until 19 years of age", eighteen-year-old Private Ernie Powell embarked overseas from Halifax aboard the *SS Metagama* on December 4, 1917.

Private Powell of the Canadian Forestry Corps (CFC) arrived in Liverpool, England on December 14, 1917, and was initially posted at C.F.C. base depot at Sunningdale. The CFC established its English headquarters at Smith's Lawn, Sunningdale, Berkshire, in the midst of Windsor Great Park. The Canadian Forestry Corps cut trees in England's forests, where the timber was squared, sawed and transported. The cut wood was used on the Western Front including for duckboards, trench construction, railway ties, corduroy roads, ammunition crates, and barracks and hospitals. In mid-July 1918, Ernie Powell was hospitalized at Beech Hill, Englefield Green for eight days as a result of influenza. Private Powell's entire service was in the United Kingdom. Seven months after the Great War ended, on June 7, 1919, he embarked for Canada, where he would be discharged on demobilization on June 18, 1919 in Toronto.

In early 1921, Ernie Powell, 22, was residing at 147 Peel Street in Barrie, Ontario with his thirteen-year-old sister Ellen Laura and their forty-seven-year-old widowed father Ernest Powell Sr. Living in the Powell household was their twenty-year-old servant Cora Irene Court (she had been a house maid since the age of fourteen). In that same year, on August 2, 1921, Ernie Powell married Woodstock native Cora Irene Court (born September 1, 1901) at The Rectory in Barrie, Ontario. Ernie was employed with the railroad at the time. Cora and he were blessed with five children together: the eldest Bruce; Allan John (born October 28, 1924); Robert Grant (born October 28, 1926); and twins Ernest James and Mary Ann (born October 1, 1933) Powell. During the war, both of Bruce's younger brothers also served: Allan with the Royal Canadian Air Force in Newfoundland; and Robert served as a "Boy Soldier" in Canada.

The Powell family moved to Sarnia in 1929, when Bruce was seven years old. They lived at 462 Cromwell Street, and later 433 Lydia Street. Ernie had come to Sarnia to work with the Canadian National Railroad, and later found work with Canada Customs as a Customs Officer at the Post Office. When World War II began, Ernie, now 40, was eager to enlist; however, being a Customs Officer, the government refused to allow him to join.

One of the things he did during the war was on Sunday nights at the Imperial Theatre – he led sing-songs to help raise money for the war effort. During the war, Cora was also active with the local Navy Mother's Auxiliary and the local Red Cross – knitting Afghans and squares of cloth for the inside of soldiers' helmets; wrapping up bandages; and collecting milkweed pods (the silk was used to stuff into life vests or to provide insulation for flight suits). Ernie and Cora Powell also billeted sailors at their home, who were in town to build the sub-chasers at Mac-Craft.

After the war, Ernie Powell spoke to children in their schools about the war. Every year on the Sunday closest to Remembrance Day, Ernie read the list of soldiers who had been killed in action at Canon Davis Church where he was a parishioner. Ernie was one of the originators of the local Sarnia Air Cadets – he was a Flying Officer with the Air Cadets from 1942 – 1955, and was a member of the Royal Canadian Legion, Branch #62, and for a time was on the Board of Directors. He would retire from Canada Customs after 35 years of service. Undoubtedly Bruce, his oldest child, was influenced by his father’s service in the military.

Stephen “Bruce” Powell was educated in Sarnia public schools and then at Sarnia Collegiate for two and a half years, where he completed a course in electricity. Bruce was a responsible student who did well in school and he was also a successful runner. He was a member of the Servers’ Club of St. George’s Anglican Church and was active in much of the young people’s work in the church. He was a member of the 26th Lambton Field Battery, Royal Canadian Artillery, Non-Permanent Active Militia in Sarnia from April 12, 1937 to April 19, 1939. At one point during his militia training in 1938, he was stationed at Petawawa. While there, he wrote the following on a postcard with a two-cent stamp attached, to his grandfather Ernest Powell Sr., in Orillia:

Dear Grampa

This is a typical soldier. Having a good time. Fired the guns for the first time today and fell off the gun seat. I’ll be home Monday. Write.

Bus

Even at fifteen years old, Bruce was eager to join the Navy. In January 1937, his father Ernie wrote the following letter to the Naval Secretary, Department of National Defence in Ottawa:

Dear Sir:

Will you please send me a list of age limitations, educational qualifications and physical requirements necessary for enlistment in the Canadian Navy. If you have application forms will you also send me a set?

In August 1938, Sarnia M.P. Ross W. Gray, wrote the following letter (on House of Commons stationery with its distinctive letterhead) to the Department of National Defence, Naval Service:

Dear Sirs,

I am writing on behalf of Stephen Bruce Powell, a young man of this City who is anxious to join the Royal Canadian Navy. The recommendations from his teachers and all others who have known him intimately are very fine and I desire to add my own recommendation that he be given every possible consideration as soon as his name is reached. Circumstances prevent his being able to return to school this Fall and I am wondering if you can give me any encouragement as to his name being reached before he becomes seventeen in January.

Following is the Assistant Naval Secretary’s reply to Sarnia M.P. Ross W. Gray:

I am directed to acknowledge your letter of 23rd August regarding the application of Mr. Stephen Bruce Powell of Sarnia, Ontario, candidate for entry in the Royal Canadian Navy as a Boy (Seaman Class). As Mr. Powell does not reach the minimum age limit of 17 years required for entry until the 23rd January, 1939, consideration cannot be given to his application until after that date. I assure you, however, that your recommendation of the above-mentioned candidate has been noted and same will be borne in mind when his name is reached and he is being considered for entry.

On February 4, 1938, sixteen-year-old Bruce Powell (“Buster” or “Bus” to his family), standing five feet seven and a half inches tall, completed his “Application for Entry in the Royal Canadian Navy” forms. The application required a written consent paper to be signed by a parent, which his father Ernie provided. More than a year later, on April 24, 1939, seventeen-year-old Bruce Powell became an official member of the Royal Canadian Navy. It was more than four months before Canada declared war on Germany. Bruce stood five feet eight-and-three quarter inches tall, had blue eyes and blonde hair, was single, and was a student residing at home on Cromwell Street with his parents at the time. Initially given the rank of Boy Seaman, he received his Navy training in Halifax at *HMCS Stadacona* base, and on *HMCS Venture* (a three-masted schooner). On August 27, 1939, while still in Halifax, Bruce wrote the following on a postcard to his father Ernie at 462 Cromwell Street, Sarnia:

Dear Dad,

I won’t be writing for a while as it will be impossible.

Love to all, Bus

On November 1, 1939, Bruce attained the rank of Ordinary Seaman. Two months later, on January 11, 1940, Ordinary Seaman Bruce Powell became a member of the crew of *HMCS Fraser*.



Photo of the Powell family (taken at 462 Cromwell St., Sarnia, in late 1939)
 BACK L to R: Ernest Powell Sr., Ernie Powell Jr., Cora Powell, Bruce Powell
 MIDDLE L to R: Robert and Allan
 FRONT L to R: Mary Ann and Ernest James

Beginning on the opening day of the Second World War, the **Battle of the Atlantic** would be the longest continuous campaign of the war, and one in which Canada played a central role. The Royal Canadian Navy, along with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and Canada's Merchant Navy, played a vital role in defending the country's eastern coast and escorting convoys of ships carrying men and essential machinery, arms, fuel and basic resources between North America and Europe.

Even with the protection of armed escorts, it was always a treacherous voyage for the dozens of merchant ships traveling in a zig-zag fashion across enormous tracts of ocean. Captains had to manoeuvre in crowded ranks, without lights, wireless or navigational aids and using haphazard communication. Not to mention the constant risk of fierce attacks by German U-boats or air attack; the danger of collision; underwater mines; rough water; and the hazardous weather—the fog, gales and ice conditions--in the North Atlantic.

The *HMCS Fraser (H48)* was a C-class destroyer built for the Royal Navy launched in September 1931, originally named the *HMS Crescent*. In late 1936, it was sold to the Royal Canadian Navy and renamed the *HMCS Fraser*. Initially stationed on the Canadian west coast, with the outbreak of war, she was transferred to the Atlantic coast for convoy escort duties.

On June 25, 1940, the *HMCS Fraser* was proceeding to Bordeaux, France in the Gironde River estuary to help in the rescue of an estimated 4000 refugees trapped in the area by German military forces. Bruce Powell was an Ordinary Seaman aboard the *Fraser*. Accompanying the *HMCS Fraser* were Canadian destroyer *HMCS Restigouche* and the British cruiser *HMS Calcutta*. At 10:30 pm, in rough seas and in poor visibility, the captain of the *Fraser* decided that the three ships should move closer together and ordered a turn to port to bring his ship behind *HMS Calcutta*. In doing so, the two ships collided, the bow of the heavier *Calcutta* slicing into the side of the lighter *Fraser* and cutting it into three pieces. Forty-five members of the *Fraser* crew and nineteen men on the *Calcutta* lost their lives. Bruce Powell survived this incident.

Following the sinking of the *Fraser*, back in the U.K., Bruce took a course in anti-aircraft gunnery. He had a close call from death on one occasion when the ship he was on was bombed at a London dock and a number of the crew were killed. On September 6, 1940, Bruce and many of the *Fraser* survivors were transferred to duty aboard the *HMCS Margaree*. In October 1940, only one month into her service as the *HMCS Margaree*, the ship met the same fate as the *Fraser*.

The *HMCS Margaree (H49)* was a D-class destroyer launched as the *HMS Diana* in June 1932, originally with the Royal Navy, where she spent most of her career as part of the Mediterranean Fleet. She was transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy September 6, 1940 and renamed the *HMCS Margaree*, to serve as a River class destroyer. She was transferred to the RCN to replace the *HMCS Fraser*, the RCN C-class destroyer, which had been lost in the tragic accident on June 25, 1940.



Seaman Bruce Powell with his mother Cora
(photo taken at 462 Cromwell Street)



River Class Destroyer *HMCS Margaree H49*

On October 20, 1940, the *HMCS Margaree* left Londonderry, Northern Ireland as escort of Convoy *OL8* bound for Canada. She was the sole escort for a small, fairly fast *OL8* convoy of five ships heading for Halifax. The five-ship convoy was disposed in two columns: freighters *MV Port Fairy* and *Jamaica Planter* on the port side and the other three vessels in column to starboard. At over 14 knots, the speed of the convoy was comparatively fast and for that reason *OL8* did not zig-zag. On the evening of October 21, *Margaree* was 1 ½ miles ahead of the convoy's port column and the weather had started to deteriorate. By midnight, in rough squalls and poor visibility, *Margaree* and the convoy had lost track of each other.

Then, at 1:00 a.m. on October 22, as the *Margaree* veered to port, she suddenly appeared crossing *Port Fairy's* bow, much too close for the freighter to avoid her. So only two days at sea, in the mid-Atlantic 450 miles northwest of Iceland, the *Port Fairy* collided with the *Margaree*. The *Port Fairy's* bow sliced through *Margaree* just under the bridge, severing the forward section of the ship. The whole bow and bridge portion of the *Margaree* sank almost immediately, taking virtually everyone in the forward section, 142 seamen, swallowed by the sea in an instant. Of those, 86 of them were survivors of the *HMCS Fraser* collision of just four months earlier. For Ordinary Seaman Bruce Powell, this was the second sea disaster in which he had been involved.

When Lieutenant Bill Landymore, who was off duty in the wardroom during the collision, came forward he heard only the whistling of the wind and the slam of the sea against *Margaree's* hull. He later reported, "There was no noise at all. No shouts even in the after part. Not even the sound of escaping steam." Others recalled the grinding of steel on steel, as what was left of *Margaree* rubbed against the towering sides of *Port Fairy*. Only six officers and 28 ratings survived the collision. The thirty-four survivors were all aboard the aft section, which remained afloat until the men were rescued by the *Port Fairy*. Thirty-two of them scrambled safely up the side of *Port Fairy*, the two others slipped from the ropes and were crushed between the vessels. By dawn, the stern of *Margaree* was still afloat, despite attempts by *Port Fairy's* little four-inch gun to sink it. The wreck was last seen adrift and sinking slowly by the stern.

The survivors were dropped off by the *Port Fairy* at Bermuda. No reason for the collision has ever been determined since all the officers who were in a position to know were in the bridge or bow. Ordinary Seaman Bruce Powell was one of the 142 who were lost in the tragedy. Although the official casualty list cited him as an Ordinary Seaman, he had received his Able Seaman papers while on the *Fraser*, but these records were lost with that ship.

Bruce's parents Ernie and Cora Powell in Sarnia were notified of the loss of their son by telegram from the Minister of National Defence for Naval Affairs, just prior to the release by the Canadian naval authorities of the public announcement of the sinking of the destroyer. A day later, they received a dispatch from Ottawa that drew attention to the fact that errors were possible in the naval list of survivors and the missing, owing to the difficulties

of wireless communication at sea in wartime. The Powell's hoped that their son had survived, but felt the chances were remote in view of the fact that only 31 survivors (at that time) were reported accounted for.

Bruce Powell had been home the previous Christmas. In two letters received by his parent's days after learning of his death, Bruce had expressed the hope that he might get a trip home to Sarnia soon. It was indicated in dispatches that many of the crew of the *Margaree* were looking forward to spending Christmas with their families. Bruce Powell left behind his parents Ernie and Cora, and his younger siblings Allan, Robert and twins Ernest and Mary Ann. Able-Bodied Seaman Bruce Powell was Sarnia's first casualty of the Second World War.

In early November 1940, Ernie Powell received the following letter from the Naval Secretary at his home on Lydia Street:

Dear Sir:

It is with deep regret that I must confirm the telegram sent out by the Minister of National Defence, reporting that your son, Stephen Bruce Powell, Ordinary Seaman, O.N. 3333, R.C.N., was missing, believed killed.

Few details are available, but it is known that H.M.C.S. "MARGAREE" was sunk in collision in the North Atlantic whilst steaming without lights, on convoy duty, and in the submarine zone. 142 Officers and ratings are missing and must be presumed lost at sea.

I am requested to express to you the sincere sympathy of the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services and the Chief of the Naval Staff in your bereavement. Any further information, which is received, will be at once communicated to you.

One month after Bruce's death, a memorial service was held at St. George's Anglican Church, where he had been active in the organizations for the young people in the church. At the memorial service, Rev. F.G. Hardy said, *We will remember Stephen Bruce Powell because of his uprightness and splendid physical, mental and spiritual characteristics.* After speaking of the fact that it is often the youngest and best who are taken from the world, Rev. Hardy quoted from "In Flanders Fields" and urged the congregation to hold the torch high and go out to establish God's Kingdom in society so that war might not happen again.

Even decades later, Bruce's sister, Mary, could still recount the details of her parents learning of Bruce's fate. In the summer of 1940, Mary recalled as a young girl, aged six, the children all out on the street playing when a telegraph boy, in uniform, rode his bike down their street. All the children stopped playing and became silent as they watched the boy go down the street. They waited expectantly to see at which house he would stop. He pulled into the Powell house, and delivered the news that the *Fraser* had been damaged, and that Bruce was O.K.

Mary recalled the events months later when another telegraph boy rode his bike down their street and pulled into their Lydia Street home. Mary entered her home to find her mother Cora slouched in a chair, clenching the telegram and sobbing. Cora ordered Mary to cross the Gordon Street Park and to get Mrs. Worsley, a neighbour. Mrs Worsley came and saw the telegram that informed Cora that the *Margaree* had been sunk, and that her son Bruce was missing. For the next week, Mary and her twin brother, Jim, were sent to live with the Baldwin family, friends from their church.



Ernest John Jr. and Cora Powell
Powell



Ernest John Powell (Jr.)



Cora Irene (Court)

A few months later, around Christmas, Ernie and Cora Powell went out to a local movie theatre. Preceding the movie, as was customary, were a newsreel and a cartoon. On this particular night, the newsreel showed a series of war clips, one of them being a scene of three young sailors in their pea coats (wool outer jackets) on the deck of a bobbing ship in stormy weather, walking toward the camera. One of those sailors was Bruce Powell. Cora Powell fainted right there. The next night, a Sunday in which the theatre was always closed, the theatre manager invited the Powell's back for a private viewing of the newsreel footage and movie.

In July 1941, a Memorial Cross was issued by the Government of Canada to Cora Powell on Lydia Street for the loss of her son. Also referred to as the Silver Cross, it was engraved with Bruce's name, rank and service number. The card accompanying the Memorial Cross read: *This Memorial Cross is forwarded to you by The Minister of National Defence for Naval Services, on behalf of the Government of Canada, in memory of one who died in the service of his Country.* In April 1945, Ernie and Cora Powell received a War Service Gratuity of \$196.42 for the loss of their son.

In the years after the war, British born father Ernie Powell evinced the "stiff upper lip" approach and never talked about the war or his son Bruce. Cora Powell spent much of her time compiling a scrapbook of memories of her son. Until she passed away in 1978, Cora always held out hope that her son would someday return home and walk through their front door.

Cora Irene (Court) Powell passed away at the age of seventy-seven on September 10, 1978 in Sarnia. Ernie John Powell passed away at the age of eighty-six on July 22, 1986 in Sarnia. At the time of his death, Ernie left behind his four children (Mary, Robert, Allan and James), and fourteen grandchildren and twelve great grandchildren. Both Cora and Ernest Powell were interred at Grandview Memorial Gardens. Stephen Bruce Powell, 18, has no known grave. His name is inscribed on the Halifax Memorial, Nova Scotia, Canada, Panel 4.

From: *The Sarnia War Remembrance Project*, by Tom Slater