

## Lieutenant Charles E. Bonnell, Distinguished Service Cross, O-7460



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Toronto ON, 4 August 1910**
- **Enlisted: Toronto Division RCNVR, 27 September 1939**
- **Civilian Occupation: Sales**
- **Death: Died when HMS P311 sank on 8 January 1943**
- **Distinguished Service Cross**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 9, Memorial at Lakefield College School, Peterborough, ON, & XIIth Submarine Flotilla Memorial, Scotland**

At Loch Erisort, Scotland (source unknown).

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Lieutenant Charles E. Bonnell, RCNVR, was one of two Canadians selected for hazardous duty in chariots, also known as human torpedoes. In fact, they were the first two of twenty-four officers chosen.

At the outbreak of WW2, Bonnell's parents were dead, and he had two married sisters and one brother in the RCAF. He had graduated from the prestigious Lakefield College School near Peterborough, Ontario, in 1925. Bonnell had married in 1931 but later separated from his wife, Eleanor with whom he had a daughter, Barbara, who was seven.

When Bonnell joined up in September 1939, he was already a naval reservist and in command of the Toronto Sea Cadets. At thirty, he was considered an elder and eagerly left his confining sales job for war at sea. Bonnell was fit and a risk-taker.

After RN training in June 1940, Bonnell and his friend, Lt. Alan Moreton, RCNVR, were selected for Motor Torpedo Boats (MTB) and signed up for Hazardous Duty. First, however, Bonnell and Moreton, served three months in HMS *Patroclus*, an armed merchant cruiser, which was sunk by *U-99* off Ireland in November 1940. The Canadians survived — Bonnell said that a cheap flashlight stuck in his cap band saved his life. MTB training completed at the end of 1940, and Bonnell went to the 4th Flotilla in Felixstowe in January 1941 for six months. Later he commanded *MTB 218* out of Dover harassing enemy shipping and rescuing survivors from battered coastal convoys. He earned a DSC for a successful attack on the enemy on November 3, 1941.



MTB 30, sister to Bonnell's 1<sup>st</sup> Command, MTB 29.  
Retrieved from  
[unithistories.com/units\\_british/RN\\_MTBs.html](http://unithistories.com/units_british/RN_MTBs.html)

In February 1942, Bonnell was sent to HMS *Dolphin*, the RN submarine base in Gosport, for diving training and a top-secret operation because of Moreton's recommendation. "What have you got me into this time?" said Bonnell when he and Moreton were reunited.

When they were alone, Moreton confided what Admiral(S) Sir Max Horton, VC, DSO, RN, had told him when he was recruited. Bonnell was stunned to learn about human torpedoes.

Volunteers had to be under twenty-eight (Bonnell was thirty-two), strong swimmers, medically sound, and capable of becoming very fit.

The twosome began an intensive helmet diving course and completed submarine escape training. Bonnell did well. He was interested in everything and took charge of events and subordinates with skill. Were they going to be operating off submarines?

After experiments with rebreathers and pure oxygen, the volunteers at last learned that they would be using chariots and gasped when told their first target was the German battleship *Tirpitz*.

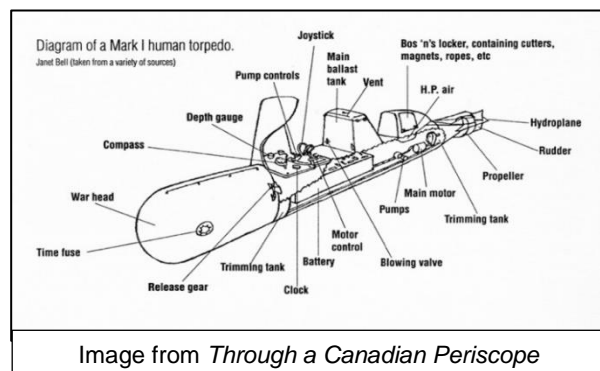
Bonnell and his "number two", AB Seaman Robert Evans, were chosen to dive the wooden prototype first in April 1942. His display of skill encouraged the other charioteers. Their diving suits arrived, and Bonnell learned to tolerate the bone-chilling cold and leaks. Maintaining neutral buoyancy was a delicate art that he had to perfect too.

Spirits rose and the charioteers became more confident until the first casualty — an officer failed to surface, probably because of the effects of breathing pure oxygen.

Bonnell's mood changed from enthusiastic fun to grim determination. But everyone was elated when the first production chariot arrived — they had achieved the first objective: a working model and trained charioteers in three months.

In June 1942, everyone relocated to Loch Erisort, a remote spot in the Scottish Outer Hebrides with HMS *Titania* as their depot ship. The high-spirited charioteers settled into *Titania* and began familiarization with real chariots.

The two-men crew sat astride the chariot which was fitted with a battery to drive the propeller and a ballast and trim tanks. The planes and a rudder were operated with a joystick, and navigation was by a clock, compass, and depth gauge only. The officer sat in front to drive, and his "number two" behind was responsible for cutting anti-submarine (A/S) nets and attaching the 600-lb warhead to the target.



The charioteers trained day and night building their submerged endurance. Later they learned tactics and methods of attaching the warheads and exercised with real ships. All had moments of

terror when things went wrong, and all suffered nightmares. And finally, commando training was added, as well as escape and survival methods.



A chariot on the surface  
(Ferguson collection)

Before the first raid on the *Tirpitz*, Operation TITLE, the crews moved to Kylesku on Loch Cairnbawn as it was more like a Norwegian fjord. HMS *Howe* served as their target, and Bonnell's first attack was perfect.

Bonnell and Moreton were chosen for the *Tirpitz* raid. A Norwegian fishboat, one of the Shetland Bus boats, would take the chariots slung underneath into the fjord. After the attack, the Norwegian underground would help the teams to neutral Sweden sixty miles away.

The charioteers took a short leave in Edinburgh knowing they could not miss the special flight from Inverness to the Shetlands. Bonnell and Moreton were late and missed the plane.

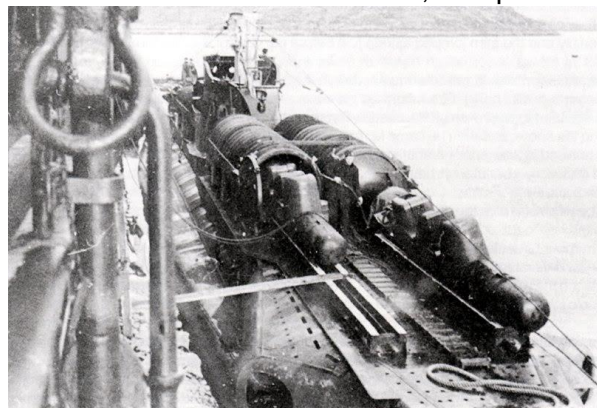
"[It was] a crushing blow," remembered a devastated Moreton

The Canadians trained for another raid, this time in the Mediterranean. The teams would be transported to the targets by T-class submarines in huge containers on the after-casings. Bonnell and a new partner practiced launching their chariot in Malta and, after four weeks, they were ready.

Operation PRINCIPAL was designed to destroy Italian warships in several ports in Sardinia and Sicily. Bonnell was in *P311* and sailed from Malta on December 28, 1942, for the raid on La Maddalena, Sardinia, to destroy two Italian ships. The attack on *Trieste* and *Gorizia*, was planned for the night of January 1-2, 1943.

Early on December 31 while *P311* headed north, she signalled she had cleared the mines in the Sicilian Channel. She was never heard from again.

Three days later no warships had been attacked, and HMS *Unison* found no evidence that charioteers had been at the rendezvous. The Admiralty believed that the chariots were never launched and, when nothing was found later in the Italian records that *P311* had been sunk by A/S patrols, concluded the submarine had been mined. Everyone on board, including Bonnell, lost their lives and were presumed dead on January 8, 1943.



Chariots and their housing on the casings of an unidentified T-class submarine. Retrieved from <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/guest-bloggers/found-wii-submarine-with-71-bodies-on-board.html>

On May 21, 2016, *P311* and the chariots were discovered by Italian divers at 100 metres depth, close to the island of Tavolara, about 50 kms southeast of Maddalena. Severe damage to the bow showed she was mined, but the chariots' containers were intact.

*P311* is now a war grave and Bonnell's final resting place.

For his Service, Lieutenant Bonnell was awarded the 1939-1945 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Defence Medal, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His wife, Eleanor Bonnell, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Lt. Charles E. Bonnell, DSC, RCNVR, is commemorated on three separate memorials, two in Canada and one in Scotland:

- Halifax Memorial, Panel 9
- Memorial at Lakefield College School, Peterborough, ON
- XIIth Submarine Flotilla Memorial Cairn, Garbh Eilan, Kylesku, Sutherland, Scotland

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**Sources:**

- Ferguson, Julie H. *Through a Canadian Periscope*, 2nd ed. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014, Chapter 12 The Canadian Charioteers.
- XIIth Submarine Flotilla Memorial Cairn, Garbh Eilan, Kylesku, Sutherland
- Veterans Affairs Canada:  
<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/2557531?Charles%20Ernest%20Bonnell>
- Commonwealth War Graves Commission database
- Library and Archives Canada Service file for Lieutenant Charles E. Bonnell
- Lost WWII Submarine HMS P311 Found With 71 Bodies On Board retrieved on 18 Dec 2021 from <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/quest-bloggers/found-wwii-submarine-with-71-bodies-on-board.html>