

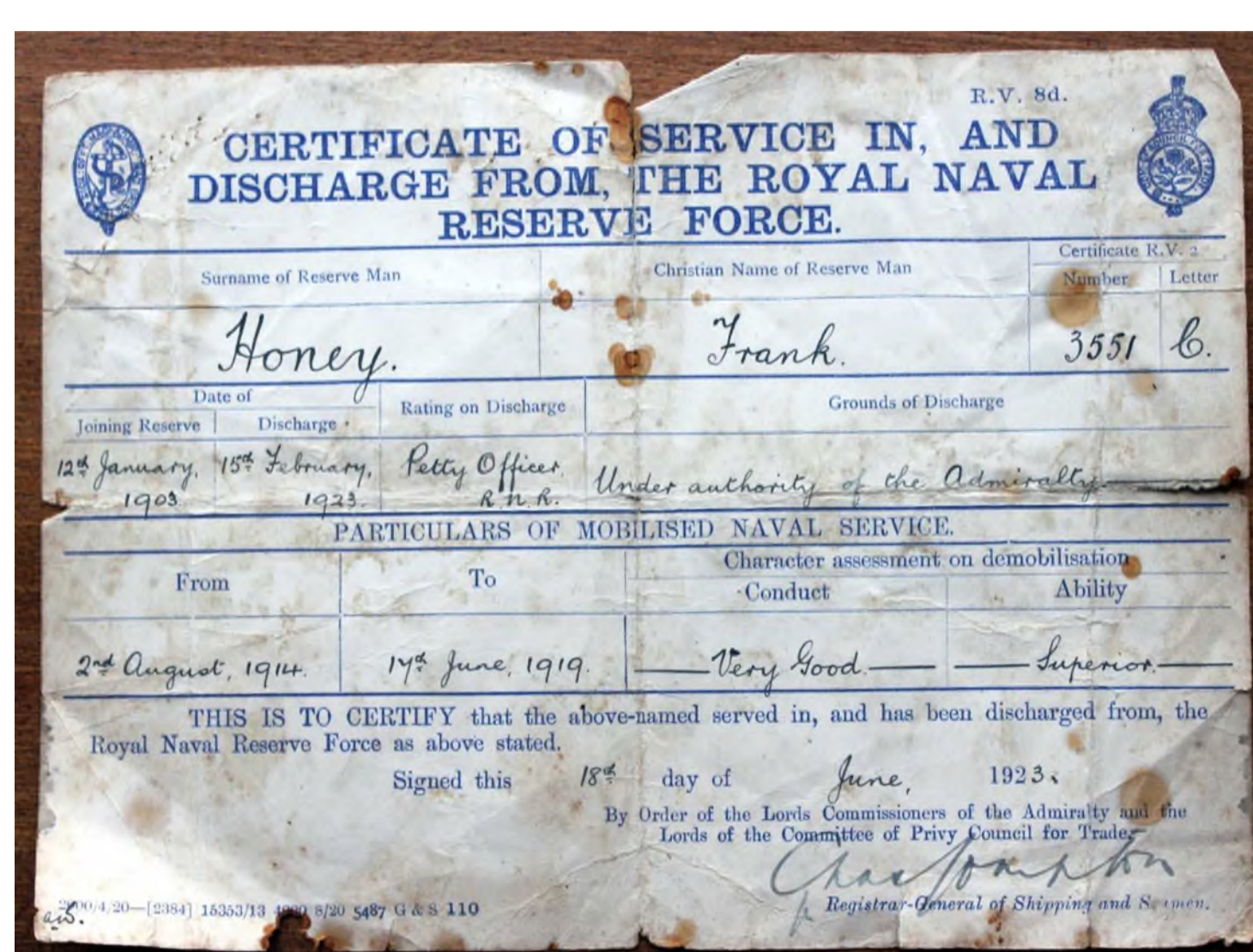
A Survivor's War

RNR 3551C Petty Officer Frank Honey

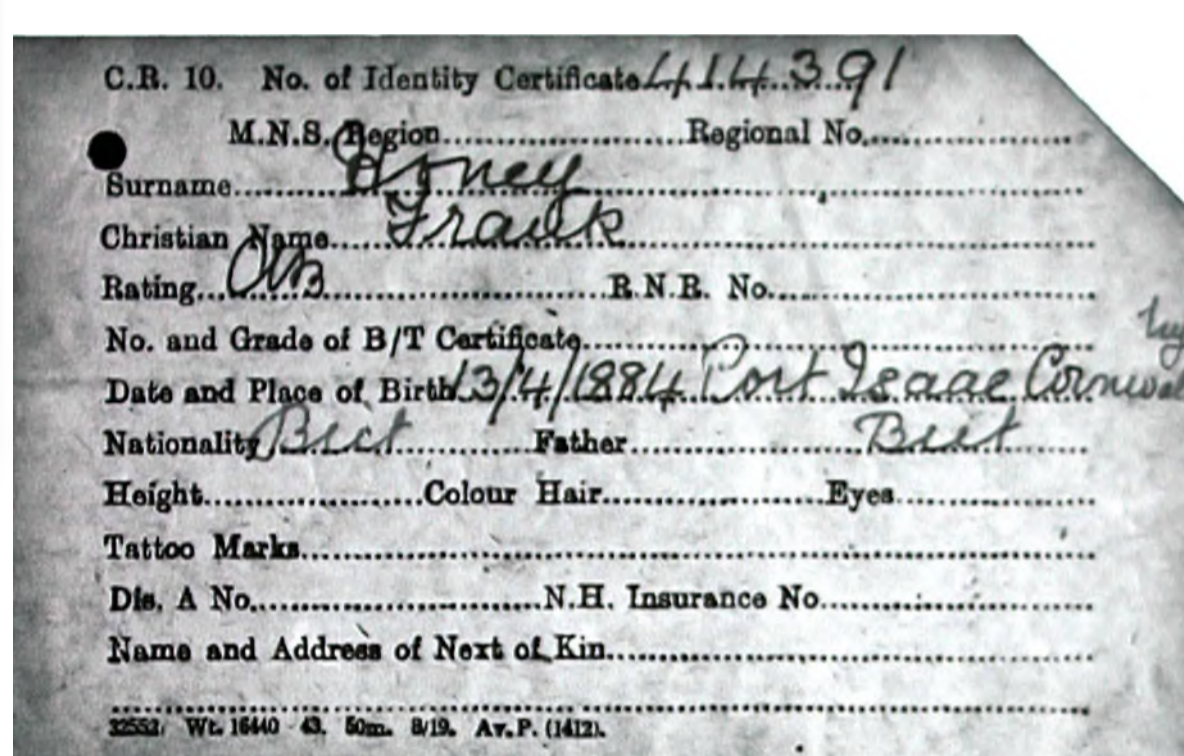
Frank Honey was born in 1884 and served in the Royal Navy in the First World War. He joined the Royal Navy Reserve when he was 18 in 1903 and was discharged in 1923 as a Petty Officer. Frank Honey is Ian Honey's father.



Frank Honey



Frank Honey's 1923 Certificate of Service and Discharge in the Royal Navy Reserve



Frank Honey's identity card from a few years earlier

Between the wars Frank was for ten years the master of the Brixham Trawler 'Best Friend'. His discharge papers say his ability was 'Superior', and such a man soon found his abilities recognised when he became a yachting master for two of Britain's wealthiest men, the Duke of Westminster, and the Duke of Sutherland. Their yachts were a regular feature of the Cowes sailing scene, with Frank as master.

When war came he returned to service life where he was in the Barrage Balloon Brigade protecting Plymouth Sound. Barrage balloons were first used towards the end of World War 1 when London was attacked by German Gotha Bombers. Here, groups of balloons carried a steel net between them to produce a defensive curtain through which the enemy planes could not pass. They were much feared by German pilots. In 1936 the British Balloon Command was established to protect cities and key targets such as ports and harbours. There were eventually 52 Barrage Balloon Squadrons consisting of 33,000 men looking after approximately 2,000 operational balloons. Nets were wieldy and difficult to erect quickly, so the major change in WW2 was to a system of single balloons. After the fall of France, the German planes were little over an hour's flight across the English Channel, and naval ports like Plymouth were particularly vulnerable.

Whilst of little use against high level attacks, they were effective against low level strikes and dive bombers, where the fixing cables were a deterrent to planes. Even where these were not directly effective, they denied air space to the attackers, making the job of artillery somewhat easier as the enemy was confined to a smaller area. Some German planes had devices to cut balloon cables. Refinements were added to counter this. The double parachute link comprised a closed parachute at either end of the cable. The shock of a plane snagging the cable caused the section of cable to be explosively released along with the parachutes. The cable wrapped around the wing, and in theory the drag of two open parachutes would bring it down.



Barrage Balloon being raised aboard a vessel at Sheerness

Frank was the Captain of the vessel Black Joke. This was a 108 ft, 231 ton, yacht originally owned by Commander Adams RN and fitted out in 1925 by the Devon Dock Company at Exmouth. She was rigged as a topsail schooner with two 90hp Parsons engines. When war came she was requisitioned by the Admiralty to become part of the Barrage Balloon Service at Plymouth. As a sleek yacht, she would have been the pride of the Barrage Balloon fleet, which included Brixham trawlers so similar to the one he had mastered little more than a decade earlier - Alessie, Forsetti, Muriel Stevens, Pas de Loupe II, Revive, Snowfinch and Vigilant, as well as the French vessel, Manou.



MS Brecon in Plymouth Sound with a barrage balloon and her attendant vessel in the background



A barrage balloon in Plymouth Sound. Unless its accompanying vessel has sunk, this one appears to be moored to the sea bed!



A Wartime dance on Plymouth Hoe with a barrage balloon in attendance.



The Brixham trawler 'Best Friend', skippered by Frank for 10 years

When winching the balloon up, it must have been tricky ensuring the cables avoided the rigging on a windy day



Almost identical Brixham Trawlers, such as the 'Alessie' shown here, were part of the Plymouth Barrage Balloon Brigade

Frank related an amusing story that happened on the day war ended. The Black Joke was in Plymouth Sound when they heard a bump and were surprised to see a German U-boat surface alongside. The German crew did not know the war had ended, but were short of food, fed up with fighting and had agreed to surrender. Frank went on board the U-boat and relieved the German Captain of his gun before taking him on the Black Joke for interview. When they got back to harbour, Frank put in a claim for prize money on behalf of him and his crew. For capture of a U-boat, that would have been a tidy sum. Unfortunately, some pen pusher in the Admiralty refused the claim on the technicality that the U-boat had surrendered after the war was over.



Frank Honey's 1939-1945 Defence Medal

After his war service he returned to his yachting roots. Frank died in 1951 and is buried at St Endellion Churchyard with his wife Mary Campbell Honey.



Frank Honey's grave at St Endellion Churchyard

Sources

Barrage Balloons in WW2: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barrage_balloon#World_War_II and <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj89/sum89/hillson.html>
 Barrage Balloon Vessels in Plymouth Sound: <http://www.bbrclub.org/Barrage%20Balloon%20Vessels.htm#plym>
 Barrage Balloons in Plymouth Sound: <http://www.cyber-heritage.co.uk/psound/>
 Yacht Black Joke: <http://www.falmouthmaritime.co.uk/id147.htm>
 We are grateful to Ian Honey for the information and mementoes he provided.