

# A Survivor's War

## Leading Seaman Horace May



Leading Seaman Horace May - the badge on his right arm signifies he is a Torpedo Coxswain



Horace at old Bodannon Farm with Gran May and sister Bess

Horace May ran old Bodannon Farm in Trewetha with his mother and sister Bess. In the 1911 census, Horace is recorded as a 4 year old living at Bodannon with his father Tom (54 - farmer) and mother Mary (30) with brothers Thomas (20 - farmer's son working on farm) and Robert (3) as well as his sisters Madeline (13 - school) and Bessie (1). 18 year old Samuel May was also living with them, recorded as a servant/cowman. Horace joined the Royal Naval Reserve in 1935 and was discharged in 1948 as a leading seaman with very good conduct and superior efficiency.

Interestingly, apart from the expected war service from 1939 to 1945, his mobilised naval service also includes a week from September 28th 1938 to October 4th 1938. This would have been at the time of the Sudetenland crisis between Germany and Czechoslovakia. On September 22nd Adolf Hitler and Neville Chamberlain had talks on the crisis. At 1.30am on September 24th they concluded the talks and Chamberlain agreed to put Hitler's demands to the Czech government. They rejected his demands, as did Chamberlain's government. On September 26th Hitler gave a vitriolic speech defying the world and implying war with Czechoslovakia would begin at any time. On September 28th Hitler invited Mussolini, Chamberlain and the French Premier Edouard Daladier to one last conference in Munich. The Czechs were not invited. On September 29th the former military attaché in Berlin was told by Carl Goerdeler, a German politician and opponent of the Nazi regime, that Britain's mobilisation of the Royal Navy had badly damaged the popularity of the Nazi regime as the German public realised this might lead to a world war. The following day Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich to give his infamous 'Peace in our time' speech.

Horace was in the Royal Navy Coastal Force, where he was the Coxswain of a Fairmile Type B Motor Launch ML171 in 2nd Motor Launch Flotilla, based at HMS Mantis in Lowestoft.

Coastal Force mainly operated in the English Channel and North Sea, attacking German Convoys and their E-boat escorts, as well as carrying out convoy escort duty. Some carried out clandestine raids and picked up secret agents. By 1944, Coastal Forces numbered some 2,000 craft, with 3,000 officers and 22,000 ratings.

Date of		Rating on Discharge	Grounds of Discharge	General Character & Efficiency in the R.N.R. up to date of mobilisation shown below.	
Joining Reserve	Discharge			Very Good	Satisfactory
1935	1948	Leading Seaman	Completion of service	Very Good	Satisfactory

  

From		To		Character assessment on demobilisation	
				Conduct	Efficiency
28 <sup>th</sup> September 1938		14 <sup>th</sup> October 1938		Very Good	Superior
31 <sup>st</sup> July 1939		5 <sup>th</sup> November 1945			

THIS IS TO CERTIFY that the above-named served in, and has been discharged from, the Royal Naval Reserve Force as above stated.

Signed this 11<sup>th</sup> day of November 1948.

By Order of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty and the Minister of War Transport.

*A. Spence*  
Registrar-General of Shipping and Seamen.

Horace May's 1948 Certificate of Service and Discharge in the Royal Navy Reserve



Fairmile B Motor Launch ML303 during the Normandy Invasion in June 1944

he thought they were lacking in seamanship or motivation. I recall only one man to whom Horace deferred amongst the crew and that was "Scouse" a man a little younger than Horace and who I believe had a fairly long naval career behind him. Scouse (from Liverpool of course) was the "flunkey". "Flunkey" was the nick name given to the officers steward, tall in height and quick speaking with a Merseyside accent. Being the "flunkey", he enjoyed something of the authority which rubbed off on to him arising from his wardroom connections! The "wardroom" by the way is the name given to the officer's quarters, down aft near the boat's stern.

ML171 was Lieutenant Drabble's first command. He was very grateful for Horace's experience, referring to him as 'an incomparable coxswain, Leading Seaman Horace May, a God's own fisherman from Port Isaac'. His excellent First Lieutenant left shortly after he arrived (to be replaced with 'a wimp of a boy whose total ineptitude I shall have difficulty in delineating', who left after setting light to the wheelhouse cushions with a Verrey pistol whilst 171 was on night patrol looking for E-boats!), and Drabble stated 'Had it not been for the reliance I could put on the coxswain, 171 would not have become the ship I was proud of' - Praise indeed!

John Lucas mentions that Horace was a good friend ('oppo') of his boss, Frank Dixon ('senior sparks'), and the two of them would often go ashore together to the pub, or at sea they might help each other out with tasks. John's recalls the day he was handling communication flags in force 7 winds and the halyard and clip flew up and caught in the pulley attached to the yard that crossed the mast near the top. Horace barked "Go up and fetch it down", and a petrified John froze in terror at the thought of climbing the mast in such winds with nothing to hold on to and then shinning along the yard to free the clip. Frank Dixon came along and Horace relented to countermand the order. A common phrase on the boat to ratings not thought to be pulling their weight was 'Where do you think you are - on your father's yacht?' Like many Port Isaac seamen, Horace was no doubt well versed in crewing the big racing yachts and had seen the upper crust lounging about on daddy's yacht. Such a man brooked no nonsense with slackers.



Horace May (centre) on ML171. Uniform was not the usual dress, with the crew often in overalls

Crew of ML171. Horace May is on the extreme left, half cut off. Lieutenant Dick Staddon, bottom right, is the skipper

On a cold open deck in a gale, hot drinks were a life saver, and John recalls Horace appearing on deck clutching in one hand a hot steaming brew whilst he hung on to anything he could with the other as the boat tossed about like a cork in a storm. Often this was 'Pussers Kye' (a thick cocoa), but he was renowned for his 'Horace's Specials', where he would raid the provision store for cans of various foods, typically soup, but sometimes including jam or marmalade as well. Horace would also thrust a cup of his brew into John's cold hands with a hearty "Get this down you, Young'un".

Horace was also responsible for dispensing the daily tot of rum, with the standard measure in a small copper jug. King's Regulations required it to be watered down, 2 parts water and 1 part rum. Horace gave out neat rum, or 'neaters'. Many saved the ration in a bottle for a later celebration when a few mates were invited over for 'sippers'. Food on board was usually good, but, like most naval galleys (and home kitchens at that time), cockroaches were a problem and would occasionally land in the stew. On one occasion the cook's comb also made it into the evening meal. The officers had the same fare, but a little more decorously served.

In Nelson's day there was no official uniform, and sailors were expected to make their own clothes. The custom was started that officers could give the men time to do this chore, known as 'make and mend' time. This must have come as a relief from the arduous grind that was 19th century naval life. Naval customs have a habit of persisting over the years, and 'make and mend' time was still the norm in WW2. John mentions that Horace was pretty good at wheedling such a break from Lieutenant Dick Staddon. This was a man who looked after his men.

In August 1942 ML171 took part in the raid on Dieppe, where 5,000 Canadians, 1,000 British commandos, and 50 US Rangers, carried out a frontal assault on the beaches without any preliminary bombardment. It was called off after less than 6 hours, with 3,367 Canadian and 247 commandos killed, wounded or taken prisoner, a staggering casualty rate. The lessons learnt at such a cost in Dieppe heavily influenced the planning for the D-Day landings two years later. For much of the war ML171 carried out escort duties on convoys along the east coast from Lowestoft to the Humber, as well as carrying out patrols searching for enemy convoys and e-boats.

At D-Day itself the ship missed the 'big show', as she had a problem with her steering. The 'powers that be' decided a motor launch zig-zagging towards France did not set the right air of confidence, so she had to drop out of the convoy moving down the east coast. She remained off Southend Pier until the steering was fixed. A few days later she was ordered to escort a small convoy of merchant ships on their way to Portsmouth. It was not until a week after D-Day that ML171 set sail for France escorting a convoy of American liberty ships to the giant concrete Mulberry harbours on the Normandy beaches. Surprisingly, some crew members took a jaunt into Normandy and were able to travel around without much hindrance. Another task in Normandy was to operate the smoke screens used to protect the battleships HMS Nelson, and the monitors (floating bombardment ships) HMS Roberts and HMS Erebus who were all pounding the Germans.

John Lucas mentions a few more unusual exploits of the motor launch. Apparently, the skipper used to take her out 'fishing' to get a tasty fresh meal, ostensibly as anti-submarine training. It only took place when they were out alone, and the 'fishing' was done with a 300lb depth charge! Few fish were caught in practice. Another task was the carrying of confidential papers and other items, where the boat could be really opened up to race across the channel at full speed. On one occasion their 'special delivery' was a jar of coffee to the officer commanding Dieppe. At the cost of a few hundred gallons of precious petrol, that was a very expensive cup of coffee! On another occasion, ML171 was slowly moving on a run around Portsmouth harbour, in broad daylight, going nowhere in particular, when she was rammed by the Gosport Ferry. After all the acclaim of Horace's seamanship, it is to be hoped it was his day off!

In January 1945 ML171 was ordered to Larne, Belfast to help in the search and destruction of German submarines attacking the convoys in the northern approaches to the Irish Sea. This was a long journey made in stages by day, staying in a port overnight. The trip from Portsmouth involved stops at Weymouth, Dartmouth, then a long trip round Lands End and up to the difficult harbour of Appledore with a narrow entrance and sandbanks to catch the unwary. John Lucas records ...the skill of the seamen, Horace May at the wheel, the skipper's judgment, John Whitehead's navigation, and the engine room's response to power requirements, all proved up to the task. "Well done lads." It was then a short hop across to Pembroke Dock, but they had an accident as they pulled away the next morning. They were tied up to the hull of HMS Warrior, Britain's first 'Ironclad' (now in Portsmouth as a museum ship). As they moved off, the wind caught the boat and blew her against Warrior, where a projection ripped off a depth charge that sank into the harbour. This loss had to be reported and the depth charge recovered. This led to an inquiry for Lieutenant Dick Staddon, where he was confronted by a crusty old RN Officer of high rank. Dick was chastened to be told that "Those damned motor boats are more trouble than they are damned well worth". Such was the view of the old school, who considered 'Coastal Forces' to be more Coastal Forces. They finally got to Larne, and it was whilst he was there that Horace May left ML171 in March 1945.

Only four Fairmile B motor launches survive, and one is in regular use in the West Country. RML497 has recently been restored to its wartime condition and colours and operates the Greenway Ferry service from Torquay and Brixham to Agatha Christie's house on the River Dart.

Horace finished his war service in November 1945, and returned to Bodannon. He married Beatrice Down in November 1947, farming Archer Farm, Trewetha for a short while, then farms in St Columb Road and Grampound Road. He subsequently returned to Port Isaac and died in March 1963.

### Sources

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Coastal Forces: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coastal\\_Forces\\_of\\_the\\_Royal\\_Navy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coastal_Forces_of_the_Royal_Navy)

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