

A MISHAP AT SEA CAN RUIN ONE'S DAY



June 22, 1936 Score: NORMANDIE - One; RAF - Zero

On a clear and sunny day in June of 1936, a British Blackburn Baffin torpedo plane like the one depicted above and the French luxury liner NORMANDIE, below, had an unexpected encounter. The results were embarrassing and costly to the Royal Air Force (RAF) and also proved expensive for a member of the British Parliament. The French Line was merely inconvenienced, resulting in an uncommonly sanguine and downright sporting attitude on their part about an event which could easily have precipitated an international incident.



Here's how the events that day went down...literally as well as figuratively!

A Sunny Summer Day in the Solent: The Solent is a body of water between mainland England and the Isle of Wight. Sheltered somewhat from the rough waters of the English Channel, the Solent was often utilized in the 1930s by French passenger vessels as a temporary anchorage. Rather than go to Southampton after transiting the Atlantic, they would offload British-bound mail, passengers and their baggage to tenders offshore before continuing on to Cherbourg or Le Harve.

On Monday, June 22, 1936, the NORMANDIE was in the Solent at the position marked by the letter **N** on the map to the right. Alongside her was a tender. The derricks on the foredeck of the bigger ship were being used to transfer automobiles from the liner's #2 hold to the deck of the tender.



The Solent was also frequently utilized by the RAF for torpedo practice. On such occasions a barge used as a target was towed just offshore, convenient to RAF Gosport, a military aerodrome [indicated on the above map by the letter **G**]. The RAF had planned a training exercise for that same day, unaware that the NORMANDIE would be close by.

The weather was clear, the waters of the Solent calm. The NORMANDIE lay about 700 yards [approximately four-tenths of a mile] distant from the torpedo practice range. What could go wrong? Flying Officer Guy Horsey, RN found out...

Flying Officer Guy Horsey: Lieutenant Horsey had joined the Royal Navy in 1932 at age 21 as a sub-lieutenant. Promoted to the rank of full lieutenant in 1935, he subsequently was trained as an aviator, and promoted to the rank of Flying Officer by the RAF on June 15, 1936.

A week after his promotion, Horsey was at the controls of a Blackburn Baffin biplane, engaged in training that involved dropping unarmed torpedoes aimed at the towed target platform. When he took his turn, twelve of his comrades had already made runs, dropping their torpedoes uneventfully. He was 'lucky 13'...

By the time Flying Officer Horsey took off, the NORMANDIE had arrived and had anchored near the torpedo practice range. His flight instructor would later describe this fledging flyer as an average pilot, but inexperienced. A bit of an understatement, considering what transpired on June 22, 1936.

Blackburn Baffin Buzzing Blunder: After dropping his dummy torpedo from an altitude of just 100 feet, Flying Officer Horsey was supposed to climb higher to better observe the results of his efforts before returning to RAF Gosport. He didn't.

Accounts differ greatly as to what happened next. Horsey claimed that he had engine trouble and was trying to crash land in the water when unknown forces pulled him sideways towards the ship. He denied that he flew around the ship to get a good look at her.

Several witnesses who later testified disputed his statements. They were adamant that he had buzzed the ship, passing down both sides of the NORMANDIE and very low over the tender alongside her at an altitude that was below the top of the liner's funnels [roughly 140 feet above sea level].

But there was no disagreement as to what happened next. In Horsey's words:

"I could see the NORMANDIE getting closer and closer. I was hoping I might clear the deck and go into the sea, but I evidently hit some wire and it tore the wing off and pulled the machine right round in the opposite direction.

"I do not remember anything about the crash after that. I jumped out of the plane on the deck. The French sailors, when they saw it was not going to take fire, ran towards me and shook me by the hand."

The wire he mentioned was part of the hoisting rigging for the NORMANDIE's forward, port side derrick. The wire parted under the impact, and an automobile owned by Arthur Evans, a member of British Parliament that was being transferred to the tender came crashing down, damaging it severely.

Arthur Evans was not a particularly memorable political figure...except for the following statement that he once made, while campaigning for office:
"I'm in labour."

Miraculously, no one on either the liner or the tender was injured. Nor was the NORMANDIE damaged; her stout foredeck easily withstood the impact of Horsey's crippled craft. The chagrined pilot was taken ashore by the tender he had so recently buzzed.



But his aircraft was forced to make an unscheduled, albeit brief voyage across the English Channel to Le Harve. The NORMANDIE had a tight schedule to maintain and could not tarry in the Solent long enough for the British to recover the remains of their aircraft. But the vessel's crew did tidy up a bit around the biplane and secured the wreckage before the ship headed for France.

The vehicle in the foreground of the photo on the right, taken as NORMANDIE headed for France is not the one damaged during the incident. However, this image illustrates the extremely clean foredeck of the NORMANDIE.



Had Flying Officer Horsey crashed on the bow of any other liner of that era, the anchor handling gear usually installed near the bow would likely have been damaged. In turn the aircraft might have caught fire and its pilot injured or even killed.

But all such gear installed in NORMANDIE was located below her weather decks, thus adding to her ultra streamlined appearance, as the photo [above, left] of a model of the ship clearly indicates.

But that fortunate circumstance was soon followed by the necessity for an RAF salvage crew to go to Le Harve and retrieve what was left of Horsey's battered Blackburn Baffin. That was soon followed by the inevitable investigation and eventually a court-martial for the hapless Horsey. In parallel, questions were raised in Parliament as to the advisability of further torpedo testing in the Solent.

Consequences: The RAF was not able to salvage much of further use from the wrecked aircraft and had to write off most of its cost. There is no record of how much damage was done to the vehicle that fell to the liner's deck, nor who...if anyone...compensated the car's prominent and undoubtedly irate owner.

The French Line did not press charges to recover damages. Apparently, what harm came to the NORMANDIE's derrick rigging, if any and to her bow, which probably just had a few scrapes of painted areas were very minor. In fact, the French treated the entire matter gracefully and with considerable compassion.

The Aftermath: Flying Officer Horsey did not fare well in his court-martial. His version of what happened was soundly and repeatedly refuted by several eye witnesses who had observed the incident from various advantageous angles. In addition military experts testified that there was no reason for him to have flown so low and so close to the NORMANDIE. Plus, records presented to the court indicated that his aircraft was in perfect condition when it left the aerodrome.

The only positive support Horsey received came from the port representative of the French Line. He sent a letter to the Admiralty which read as follows:

"I learn [sic] that Lieut. Horsey is to be court-martialed in connection with his unfortunate crash. I do not wish to appear to be interfering with the due process of justice, but I would like to state on behalf of the French Line CGT that we think the accident was due to his being unable to extricate himself from a dangerous position. We therefore make a very strong appeal for the clemency of the Court to be exercised in the case against Lieut. Horsey".

The Court was unimpressed by this plea and found Horsey guilty of negligence and needlessly hazarding the public. On September 1, 1936, Lieutenant Horsey relinquished his temporary commission as a flying officer in the RAF and returned to naval duty. During World War II, he was given command of a small passenger vessel converted to military use. In 1943 he was promoted to Lieutenant Commander, his naval career apparently fully restored.

The NORMANDIE, one of the fastest and most beautiful of all trans-Atlantic liners continued to ply the waters of the Atlantic until World War II erupted. Docked in New York when war began, the liner was interned on September 3, 1939, by then-neutral American authorities. She never sailed again; the victim of a suspicious fire and capsizing in New York harbor while being converted to an allied troop ship at the start of World War II.



But one question remains unanswered...did Horsey's torpedo hit its target???