



**Donald William March.**  
**Awarded the Ordre National Chevalier de la Legion**  
**D'Honneur**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> January 2016**



**Donald** was born on the 26<sup>th</sup> July 1925 to Clifford & Alice March, in the village of **Matlaske**, near Holt in Norfolk. His family ran the village Blacksmiths and Undertakers and Donald spent his early years happily at Matlaske School and learning the family business.

As a teenager, he was very aware of the War and Matlaske was home to one of the many important Airfields in East Anglia. At the age of 17' he wanted to "do his bit" and decided to join **The Royal Observer Corps**, where his post would be at **Plumstead**. This gave him the opportunity to learn about observation of both enemy and allied aircraft. His role was to plot, identify and report the appearance of aircraft to No. **6 Group ROC Headquarters** in **Norwich**. During his attachment to the ROC, he worked 4 hour shifts, often at weekends. The story that follows has been seen through the eyes of a seventeen year old, remembered during the past 73 years and told to us by a marvellous 90 year old Donald.

In **April 1944**, unbeknown to the public at large, planning for the **D-Day** invasion got underway and it became apparent that the aircraft recognition experts already in the Services, namely RAF crew and certain anti-aircraft units in the Army, were going to be otherwise engaged. **Air Marshall Mallory's** suggestion of employing **members of the ROC as aircraft identifiers'** was adopted.

This is when Donald became aware that the ROC were looking for volunteers for a **Seaborne** project, although any details were top secret. Donald was very keen to help with this kind of challenge and he along with 795 officers and men of the ROC, temporarily enrolled in the **Royal Navy as Petty Officers**, for this special mission. They were unaware that they were part of **Operation Overlord** – the code name for the invasion and liberation of occupied Europe. On their uniform was the shoulder flash **SEABORNE** and a Royal Navy brassard, with the letters RN. The volunteer's ages ranged from 17 to 70. Donald was amongst the youngest volunteers.

After 2 weeks of intense training, starting on the 10<sup>th</sup> May 1944, and a medical he was accepted into the Navy and ready to meet the challenge. The ROC Seaborne members were taken to **Southampton**, where they were paired up and Donald remembers his partner was a Welsh lad of the same age. They were transported to the base for the **Navy's Home Fleet** in **Greenock**, on the south bank of the river Clyde, which was constantly attacked by The Luftwaffe and they boarded the American troop and equipment carrier, the **Liberty Ship SS Jim Bridger**.

Still cloaked in mystery about the details of their mission, they became acquainted with the African- American crew and made to feel very welcome by them. 2 ½ days later they anchored at Southampton and then left for the unknown destination. Donald and his partner were dispatched to different sides of the ship, with Donald on the starboard and they were given the task of using only their binoculars to identify both allied and enemy aircraft.

It was obvious during their journey that they were part of an immense operation, as hundreds of other sea craft began to converge on their destination and the skies filled with enemy and allied aircraft. They anchored a mile and a half off Omaha Beach Normandy. It was **D-Day !** The enemy aircraft were everywhere and the sea was full of ships that had been hit and there were many casualties floating in the sea. The SS Jim Bridger was under constant attack, as were the whole flotilla and Donald was kept occupied by identifying the enemy and allied aircraft, communicating his observations direct to the ship's captain by radio.

This continued relentlessly, for 3-4 days without any letup and consequently little, if any, sleep. Mercifully, the SS Jim Bridger was able to discharge its troops and equipment with relatively few casualties and damage to the ship, at least, whilst at sea.

After it became clear that the Allied Forces were making progress, the SS Jim Bridger made its way to **Falmouth** to pick up more troops and equipment. When they arrived back at **Omaha Beach**, although they did anchor, it was decided that they were not needed, as the beachheads had been secured. They returned to Southampton and Donald headed home, having served for a 2 month 2 weeks, attachment to the Navy. Three weeks later Donald signed up for the **Army**.

The Seaborne Observers had played their part in **Operation Overlord** by operating in the mine infested waters of the English Channel, often in the most appalling weather conditions. They were subject to attack by Luftwaffe fighters and bombers – some of the latter armed with wire – guided glider bombs and by the submarines and E-boats of the German Navy. Even when anchored in English harbours they came under attack from the V1 flying bomb or “Doodlebug”.

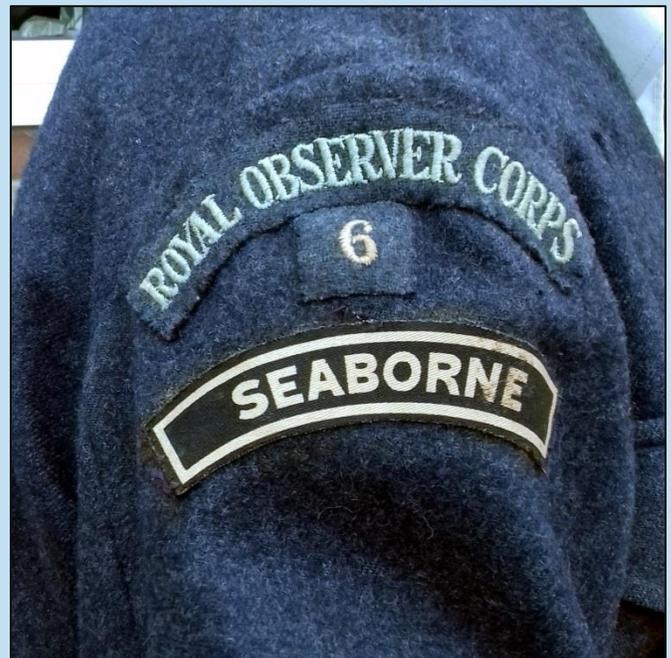
Donald and his family would like to thank everyone who has worked so hard and devoted their time to make this ceremony happen and all of you who are attending to support him. Thanks to our local Consul Honoraire de France, Monsieur Jean- Claude Lafontaine, Chairman of The Spalding Branch of the Royal Lincolnshire and Royal Anglian Association, Ken Willows, who has worked tirelessly for this event to be a success and the Honorary President of the Royal Anglian and Royal Lincolnshire Regimental Association, Lieutenant Colonel Simon Bacon, Janet Doy and The Association Standards Marching Teams. Donald is honoured be here with Tom Fowler and his family and friends.

Donald didn't speak to his family, or anyone about his experiences with Seaborne, but has been a long term member of the ROC Association since and much appreciates all of their work and also in keeping the members communicating with one other. Of the brave 796 volunteers of Seaborne, he is one of only a handful of men, still with us today. He is a very modest man but is very thankful to our French Allies for remembering and honouring him and is very proud to represent the **SEABORNES of the Royal Observer Corps**, in accepting this high honour.



Above: A USS Liberty Ship similar to the Jim Bridger

Below left: Donald proudly wears his ROC uniform once again – 74 years after earning his Legion of Honour medal. Below right: His Seaborne flash





**Monsieur La Fontaine presents Donald with his Legion of Honour Medal 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2016**

**CONGRATULATIONS DONALD from the ROCA.**

*We are grateful to Donald's son – in –Law **Jim Shepherd** who sent us this story.*