

Sept 2014

Normandy Expedition Report – Diving into D Day



Alison Mayor

Southsea Sub-Aqua Club

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Foreword

This report endeavours to capture the spirit of our expedition to Normandy, through our new found fellowship with likeminded divers and our growing understanding of the events of D Day and its place in world history in the 70 years since the Allied forces bravely crossed the English Channel seeking to gain a foothold in occupied France.

Our sincere gratitude goes to Catherine Connors and her 'Scuba Ninjas' diving group for the significant contribution in making the expedition such a success. Our thanks also go to the British Sub-Aqua Club for financial assistance through the Expedition Grants Scheme.

Our lasting memories of Normandy will be of the realisation of the sheer scale of Operation Overlord and the genuine sense of gratitude for the heroic sacrifice of so many.

Alison Mayor

Project Leader

Southsea Sub-Aqua Club

Cover Image, Divers gather to celebrate the end of a successful project outside the dive centre at Arromanches.

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Part 1 Introduction and Background

D Day - A Day of World History

On 6th June 1944 after 2 years of planning, the Allied forces launched their daring amphibious assault of the Normandy Coast, an event which was a major turning point in the outcome of World War 2. Operation Neptune was the maritime phase of Operation Overlord ("The invasion of Normandy by sea and the liberation of France"). Almost 7,000 ships and craft from 9 nations sailed in heavy seas to 5 landing points spread over 50 miles of Normandy coastline. Seventy years later the thoughts of many were remembering those who ventured across the English Channel and particularly those who made the ultimate sacrifice.



Figure 1 Aerial photo of ships of the Royal Navy massing off the Isle of Wight before setting off for the Normandy
© IWM (A 23720A)

Neptune 70

Neptune 70 was the BSAC Southern Region initiative to encourage BSAC divers and their Branches to commemorate the importance of Operation Neptune by researching and diving a wreck associated with the Normandy Invasion. Along the South Coast of England in particular there are many ships and craft that were lost to the sea whether or not as a result

of enemy engagement. Many branches visit the south coast to dive and so the initiative was extended to all BSAC Branches through the BSAC web site and social media coverage. It also became evident that the preparations for D Day involved the length and breadth of the British Isles which could also provide opportunities for those in Scotland and Wales. Initial interest was high and I was encouraged by the eagerness of divers to take part. At this stage the focus was to encourage others to investigate wrecks in British waters.

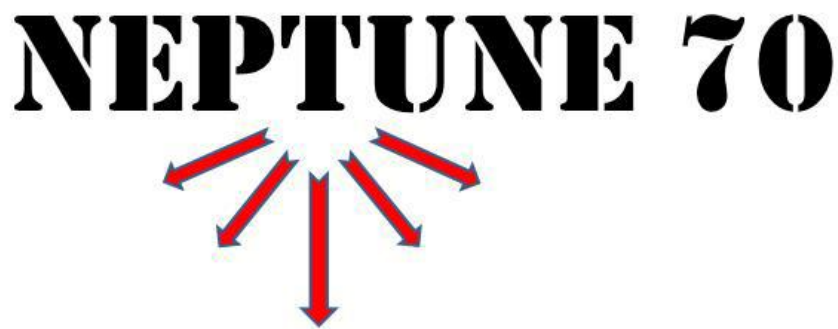


Figure 2 The Logo for Neptune 70 - A BSAC Southern Region initiative.

Southsea Sub-Aqua Club decided to investigate the remains of Mulberry harbour units which assembled in the Solent and also at Selsey, West Sussex in the weeks leading up to the invasion. We investigated and recorded 23 sites in the area believed to be associated with the Mulberry Harbours. For more details please see our report 'Mulberry 70' is available on our web site www.southseasubaqua.org.uk

The publicity of Neptune 70 through the BSAC facebook page lead to contact from Catherine Connors, who leads a group of English speaking French resident divers based in Paris 'Scuba Ninjas'. Catherine has a passion for wreck diving and also owns a house in Normandy. She was very interested in Neptune 70 and was keen to dive with BSAC members. Given her location in Normandy she kindly offered to help organise a joint expedition to dive the Normandy wrecks. This was a very generous offer and took our branch participation in Neptune 70 to a new level. After several years of WW2 wreck investigations associated with the Normandy Invasion we were now involved with 2 major expedition projects within weeks of each other. A total of 14 divers from SSAC joined the Scuba Ninjas for a week of diving out of Arromanches in September 2015.



Figure 3 Scuba Ninjas, A group of English speaking French resident divers based in Paris.

We also corresponded with Chris Howlett from the UK Hydrographic Office (UKHO) who had lead a team of surveyors in a project to chart and record the wrecks of the Normandy beaches. This was featured in a TV programme (Ch5 D-Day's Sunken Secrets). During the survey exercise highly technical equipment was used to record everything on the sea bed over a period of 6 weeks. Although this had provided an enormous amount of data which enabled certain wrecks/obstructions to be identified, the lack of diver presence meant that a number of sites remained unidentified. Chris was able to provide the full suite of data and details of sites that would benefit from a diver's eye view.

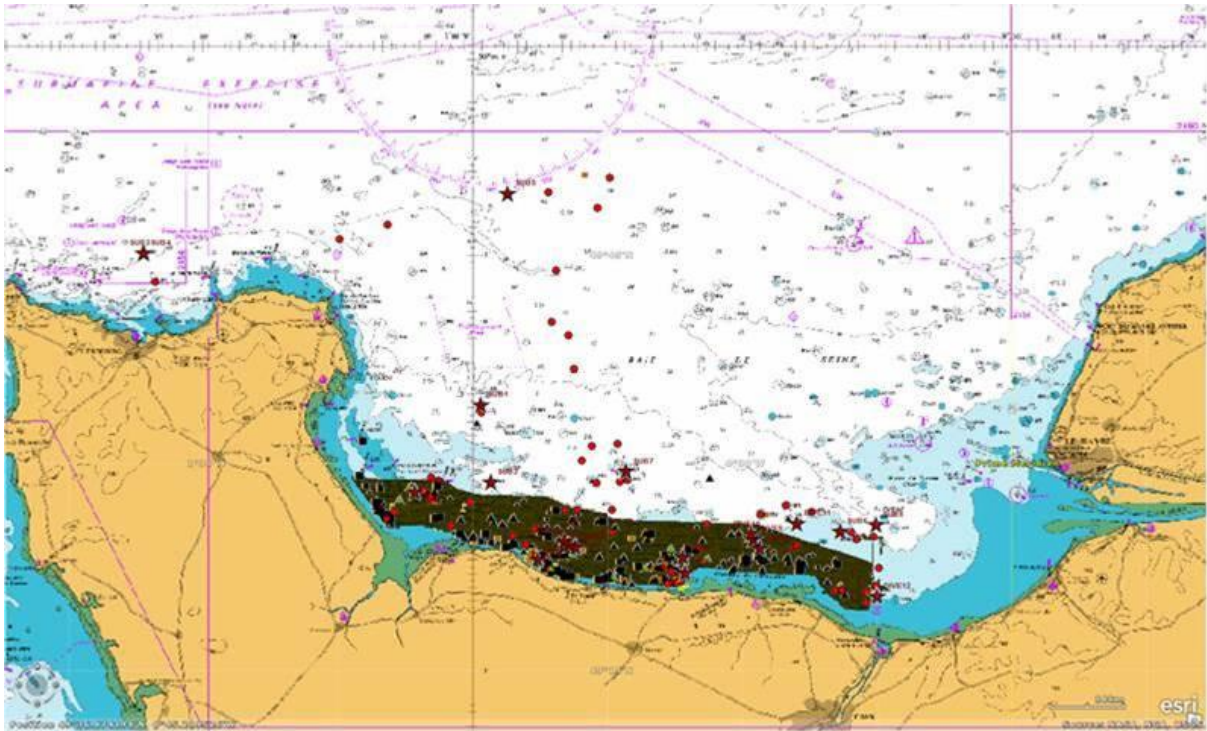


Figure 4 the area surveyed in 2013 by the UKHO and Chanel 5 team. Image courtesy UKHO.

A grant application to the BSAC Expeditions Officer was successful and we were kindly awarded a grant of £1000 under the BSAC Expeditions Grant Scheme. This sum was sufficient to pay for the ferry crossing for 3 large vehicles.

Our home for the week was a 17th Century converted farm in Somerville, approx 5 miles from Arromanches and the dive centre.



Figure 5 Our home for the week, a beautiful 17th century converted farm accommodation. (Alison Mayor)

In such lovely surroundings getting to know one another was very easy. Excitement about the prospect of diving wrecks with such an important place in modern history got everyone chatting and carefully listening to briefings, we were all eagerly awaiting our first dive

Our diving was through a French Federation Dive centre at Arromanches lead by Lionel who spoke very little English. Thankfully there were plenty of people to help with translating briefings and other instructions. Lionel operates two RIBs, launching straight onto the beach at Asnelles which is at the eastern end of the remains of the British Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches.



Figure 6 Our dive centre at Asnelles www.Asnelles-Plongee-Leo-Lagrange.com

This was the first time many of us had dived in France and at times we were surprised by the French Federation diving protocols and operations. All divers had to have a medical certificate signed by a doctor, which we had arranged prior to the trip. To be extra careful we had a BSAC referee sign or medical declarations. Our biggest surprise was that Dive Leaders were not considered qualified enough to dive below 20m without the supervision of a CMAS 3* equivalent (ie BSAC Advanced Diver). This meant that regular dive buddy pairs at Sports Diver and Dive Leader level were split up and matched with others at the CMAS 3* level, even for relatively shallow dives. However this had the advantage of mixing the group up and promoting closer working between us which was great. Thankfully there were enough suitably qualified 3* equivalents to satisfy the French Federation rules. Another observation was that Nitrox is not seldom used, and decompression diving is not normal. Dives were strictly limited to 45 minutes presumably to reduce the likelihood of decompression and to ensure a reasonable second dive. Because of the large tidal range and the shallow beaches it was necessary to launch and recover the boats for each dive otherwise there was the risk of the boats being left high and dry between dives. Lionel had an old farm tractor for the purpose of launch/recovering his boats.

After completing the paperwork and getting our kit together we were keen to start our diving. Strong winds threatened the early part of the week but in the end only impacted on one day. Visibility tended to be better than we were used to on the South Coast of England except in relatively shallow water close to the beach.

We were all very conscious of the tragic nature of the wrecks we would be diving on and our team resolved to ensure that we would not interfere with or penetrate the wrecks but that we would dive on them with respect for those who were lost in the Normandy campaign. The French Authorities have nominated the whole Normandy invasion beaches and their wrecks as a potential World Heritage site and sensitivity is high regarding their protection from unscrupulous divers.

There is a great sense of gratitude from the local communities which you cannot fail to observe and understand to be a part of everyday life in Normandy.

Part 2 Diving into D Day – The Wrecks of Operation Neptune.



Figure 7 Calm seas - Our team of divers ready to start their diving. Note the Mulberry Harbour phoenix Units in the background (left) (Image courtesy of David Spencer)

This part of the report describes the wrecks dived on through the week and their history. One of the days was blown out which meant that 8 wrecks in total were visited. Whilst we had hoped to dive some unknown wrecks in order to report back to Chris Howlett at the UKHO the dive operator was not happy to take us to sites he was not familiar with. In all we visited 8 sites which offered a variety of different vessels which gave us an insight into the varied roles of ships and craft which took part.

HMHS Amsterdam

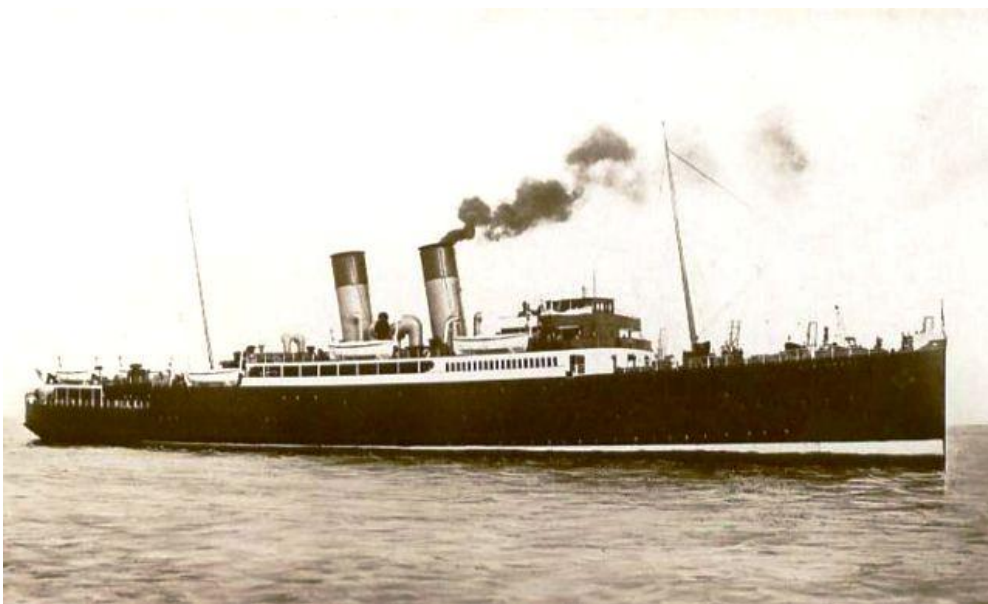


Figure 8 SS Amsterdam (source of www.rollofhonour.com)

The SS Amsterdam was a London and North East Railways ship built in the late 1930s she was requisitioned in at the beginning of the war and converted to a hospital ship becoming HMHS Amsterdam. She struck two German mines on 7th August 1944 off Juno beach as she was evacuating wounded troops and within just 11 minutes sank to the seabed. The casualty list shows that 35 wounded British soldiers plus a number of prisoners of war were lost in addition to 10 medical staff and 35 crew.

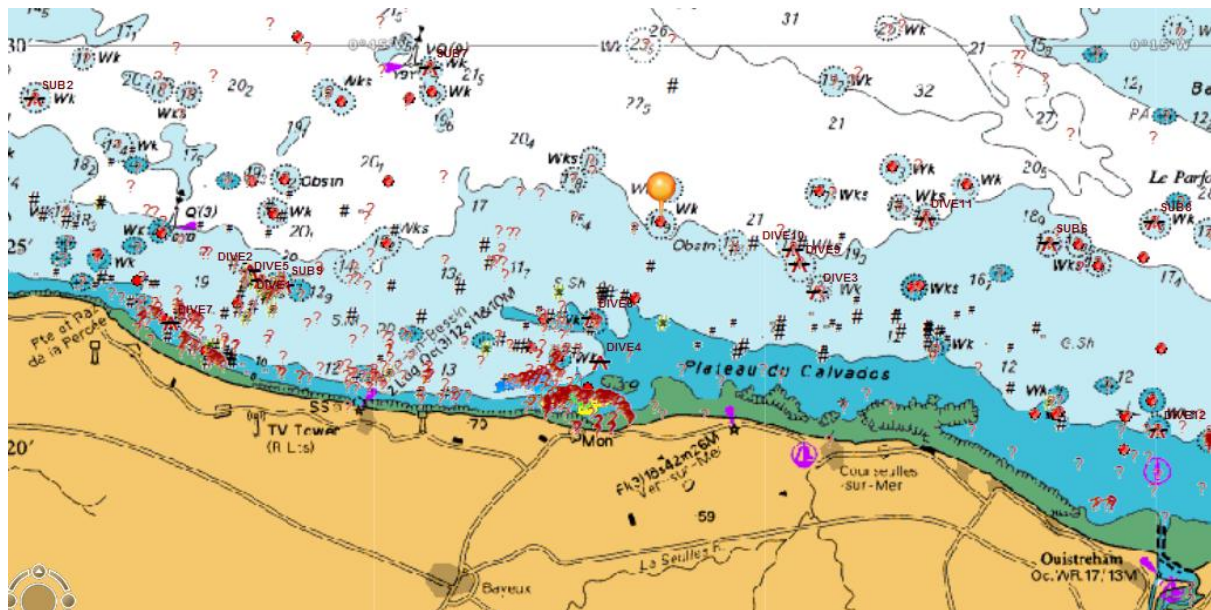


Figure 9 The round orange mark indicates the position of the HMHS Amsterdam. (Courtesy UKHO)

The Amsterdam is fairly close to the dive centre and lies just 5 miles North-East of Arromanches. She is a popular dive site for most Wreck Divers coming to the area. Her general depth is about 20 meters.

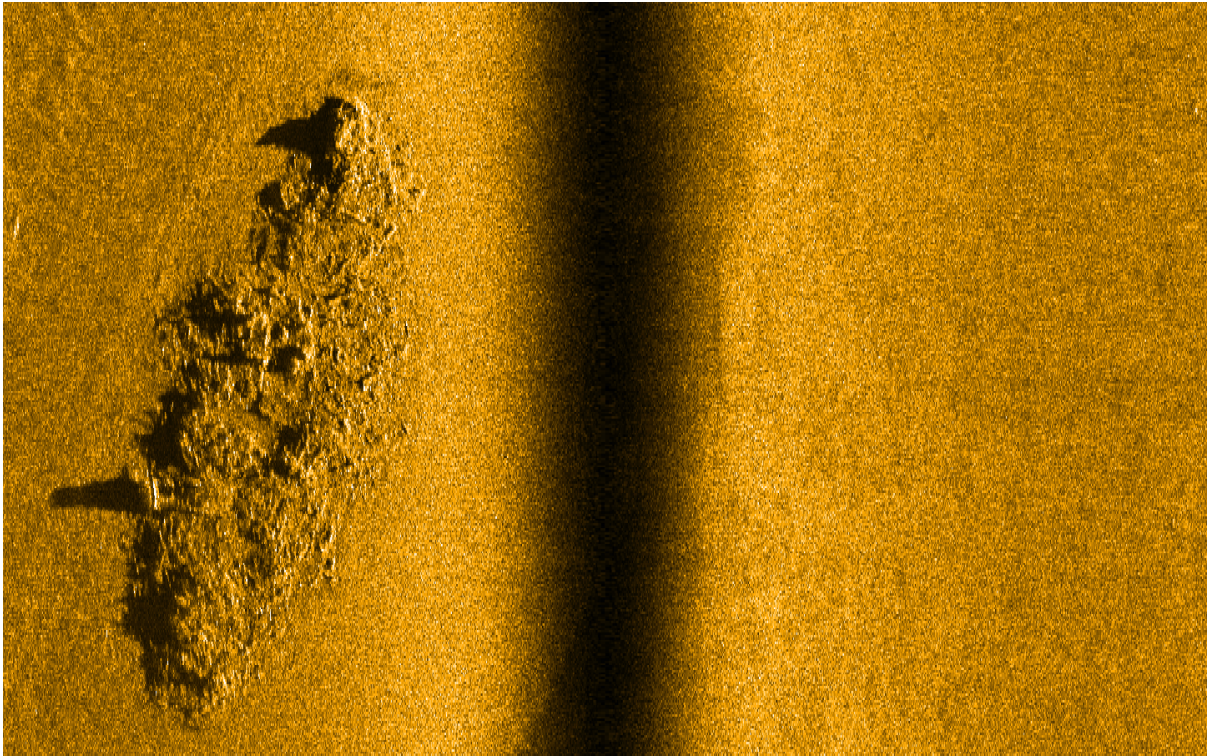


Figure 10 A UKHO side scan image of the HMHS Amsterdam. (Courtesy UKHO)

One of the touching stories of this wreck is that of Senior Matron, Miss Field. Whereas all the medical staff worked untiringly until the last possible minute rescuing the wounded it was only when the ship turned over and sank beneath them did they consider their own safety. Miss Field was last seen going from solider to solider and caring for those too wounded to be moved, she stayed behind with these wounded men and sank with the ship to their final resting place on the sands beneath the waves. A reminder that there were heroic women as well as men brave men lost in the Normandy campaign.

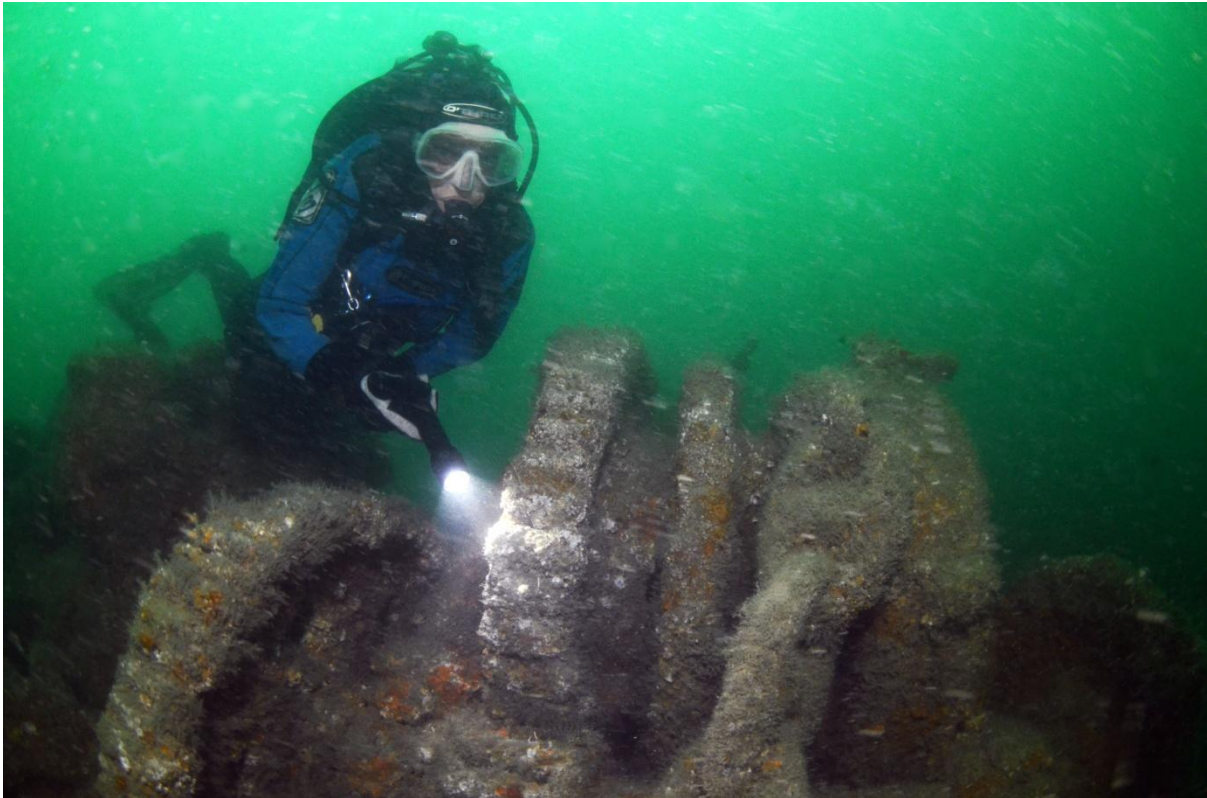


Figure 11 A diver looks at the chain winch at the bow of HMSH Amsterdam. (Martin Davies)

The wreck is well broken up and the poor visibility made it difficult to orientate oneself on the wreck. There are the remains of medical bottles in the wreckage as well as the engine, boilers and bow section.

SS Harpagus

The SS Harpagus was an English freighter carrying military stores which became another casualty of German mines. On 19th August 1944 she struck a mine in front of the Mulberry B at Arromanches. The fore part sank and the stern part was beached but later raised and towed back to England. She was towed to the Tyne, where a new fore part was fitted. In 1946 she was re-launched as the Treworlas. In 1960 she grounded in the Persian Gulf. On her return to Falmouth she was declared a constructive total loss and sold for scrap. She was towed to Briton Ferry (Wales) where she was broken-up.



Figure 12 The aft/stern section of the Harpagus moored in the Tyne. Photo copyright of Laurence Dunn

Our dive was therefore on the bow/fore section of the ship.

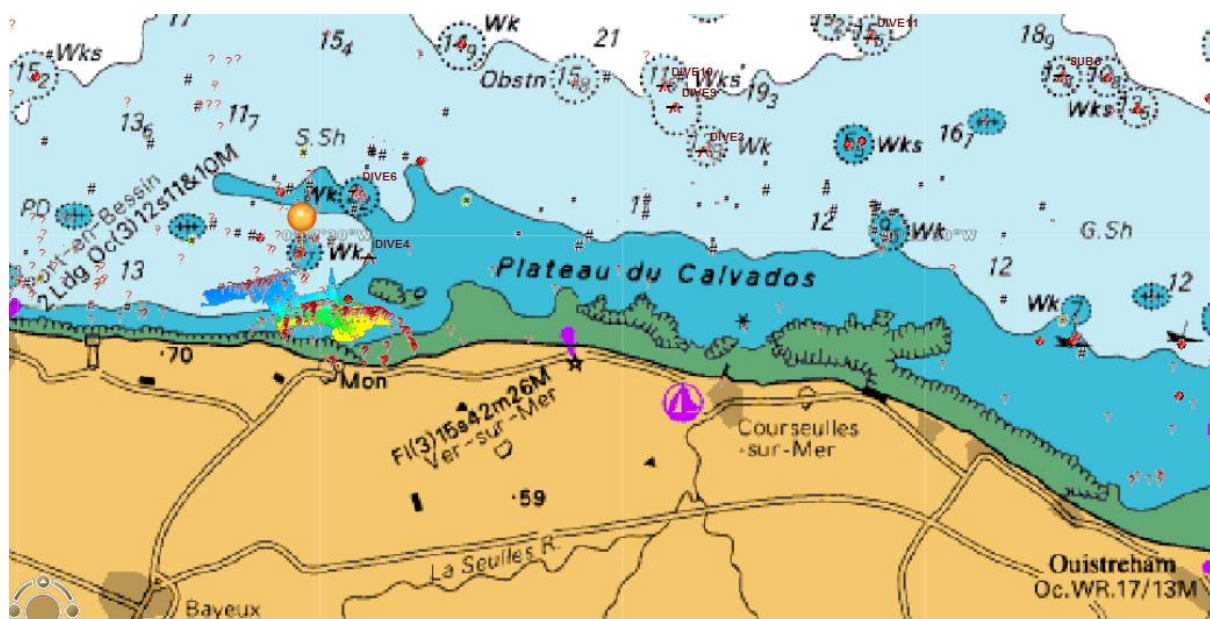


Figure 13 Position of the SS Harpagus (Fore section) (Image courtesy UKHO).

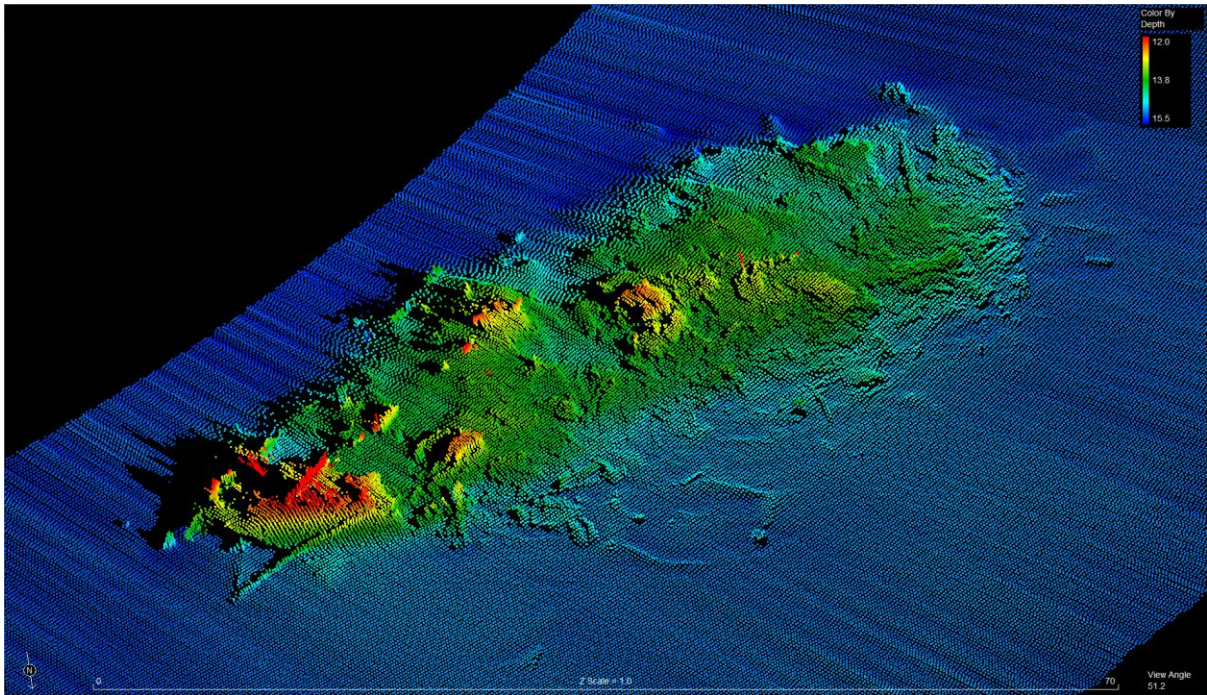


Figure 14 UKHO multi-beam image of the Harpagus (Bow section). (Image courtesy UKHO).

The Harpagus is well known for the bottles of whiskey she was carrying when she sank. She is nicknamed 'Whiskey' by local French Divers. Her mixed cargo included gas masks, webbing for aircraft runways, buckles and army uniform buttons along with whiskey bottles.

Another poor visibility dive reminiscent of the normal Solent diving we have come to know and love.



Figure 15 A whiskey bottle from the Harpagus (Alison Mayor).

Although unplanned our dives on day two took us to two very different dives all be it on the same subject and one which had real relevance to our Mulberry 70 project. We had headed off early to dive the Empire Broadsword, reported to be one of the best dives in the area however when we arrived on site there were a group of spear fishermen on the wreck. We quickly moved to another site before slack water was lost.

Each day we launched from the beach just metres away from the imposing remains of Mulberry B, the British harbour which successfully unloaded hundreds of thousands of troops and their equipment. Mulberry B was vital to the support of Allied forces as they moved inland. More than 200 huge caissons, each 60m long x 19m high Phoenix A units were part of the Mulberry Harbour structures. They were built all around Britain and assembled along the South Coast of England before being towed across the Channel. Two harbours, each the size of Dover, were constructed in order to be able to transport and resupply the invading forces. They were operational at D Day +9.

Grande Pontoon (A46?)



Figure 16 A Mulberry Harbour Phoenix A unit under tow across the English Channel. Note the Bofors gun on the top.
© IWM (H 39300)

We believe that the first Phoenix Unit we dived on was A46 which was lost after hitting a mine. The area had not been covered by the UKHO survey.

The visibility was a good 8m+ and suddenly all the divers forgot about the disappointment of not being able to dive the Empire Broadsword. Having surveyed much broken up concrete in the Selsey area as part of our Mulberry 70 project this Mulberry Unit, was a real treat. Apart from the obvious damage from the mine the Phoenix A unit was complete. The sheer sides were home to colourful sponges and anemones whilst in the break area a large shoal of bib/pouting circled around, parting only at the last minute to go around divers. At the point of the mine impact the steel reinforced concrete had collapsed leaving bent and twisted metal making a lovely swim through. Here too we found cases of the 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun ammunition. We also saw clump anchors (large cylindrical concrete anchors used to hold a phoenix in the event its tow was lost. As Phoenix units had no steerage or power and so would otherwise have drifted.

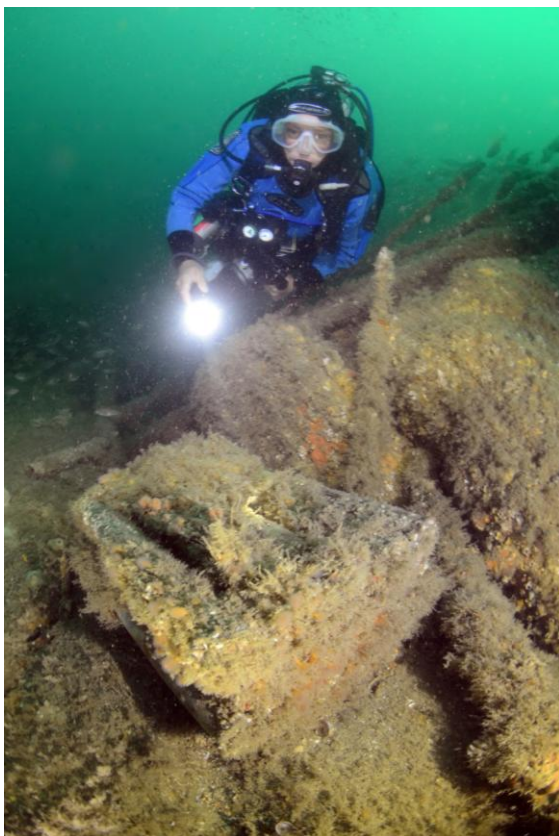


Figure 17 A case of Bofors anti-aircraft ammunition.
(Martin Davies)



Figure 18 The vertical sides of the Mulberry Unit are covered
with anemones. (Martin Davies)



Figure 19 A clump anchor. (Martin Davies)

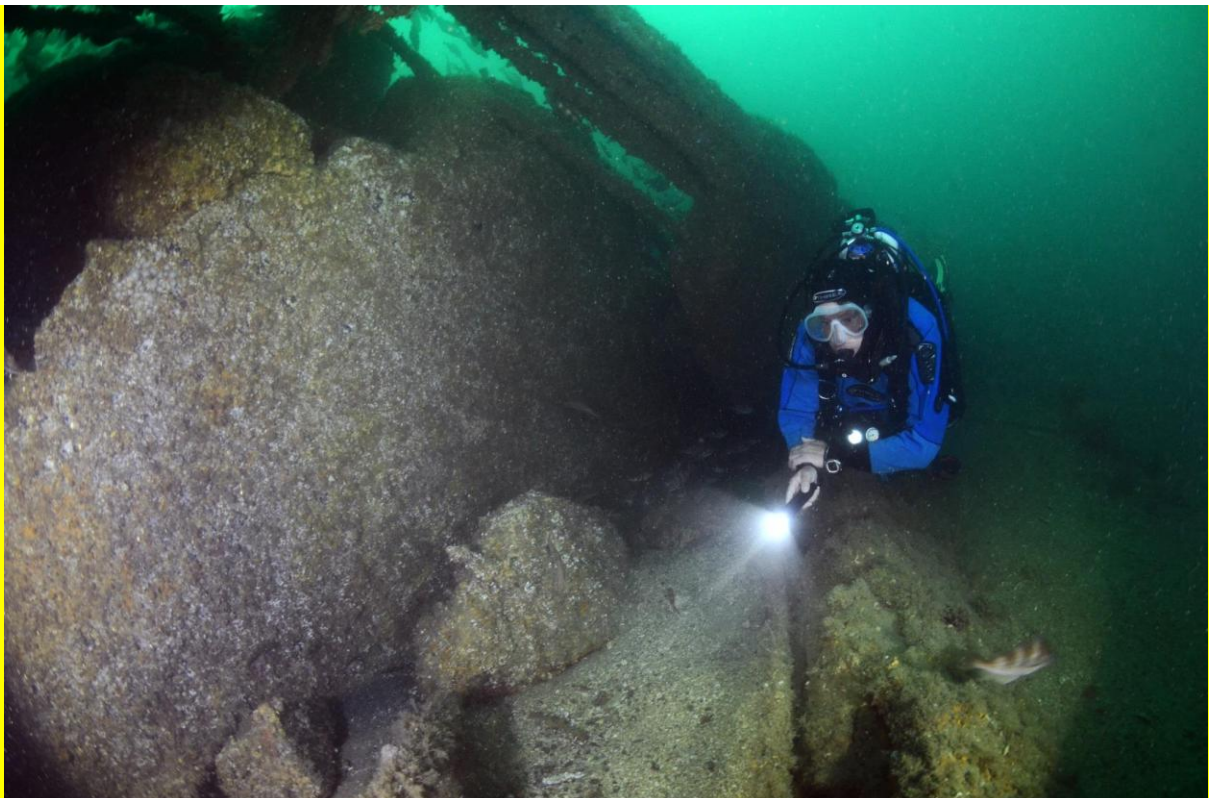


Figure 20 The area which has collapsed - possibly due to the mine impact. (Martin Davies)

Mulberry B – Arromanches

Our second dive took us to one of the phoenix units which formed part of the Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches. Conditions were poor being so close inshore as a result of the wind in recent days. Dropping in on the sheltered, inner side of the unit we soon realised that staying in the top 6m was preferable in terms of visibility. Swimming through to the outer wall through a door shaped cut through we came across the shattered remains of other Phoenix Units as the breakwater has collapsed over the years. However it was still an interesting dive as we were able to appreciate some of the design features. One or two of which we had seen at the Far Mulberry back home in Selsey.



Figure 21 UKHO survey image of the Mulberry B harbour at Arromanches. (Image courtesy UKHO)



Figure 22 Aerial photograph of Mulberry B. © IWM (BU 1024)



Figure 23 Two of the bollards on the Phoenix A Unit. (Martin Davies)



Figure 24 One of the towing point for the Phoenix Unit. (Martin Davies)

German Minesweeper (M39?)

It is believed that this wreck is the remains of a M1935 type minesweeper which was the most common type in the Kriegsmarine. According to the web site www.german-navy.de/kriegsmarine/ships/minehunter/mboot35/ships.html it is likely to be the wreck of M39 which was torpedoed and sunk by a British MTB shortly before D-Day on 25 May 1944.



Figure 25 Minensuchboote 1935 (unknown postcard)

The wreck is located about 7 miles North-East of Arromanches she lies at a general depth of 23 to 27 meters. We found the minesweeper wreck lying on her port side at almost 90 degrees to the sandy sea bed. The wreck is broken in 2 parts, folded back on itself.

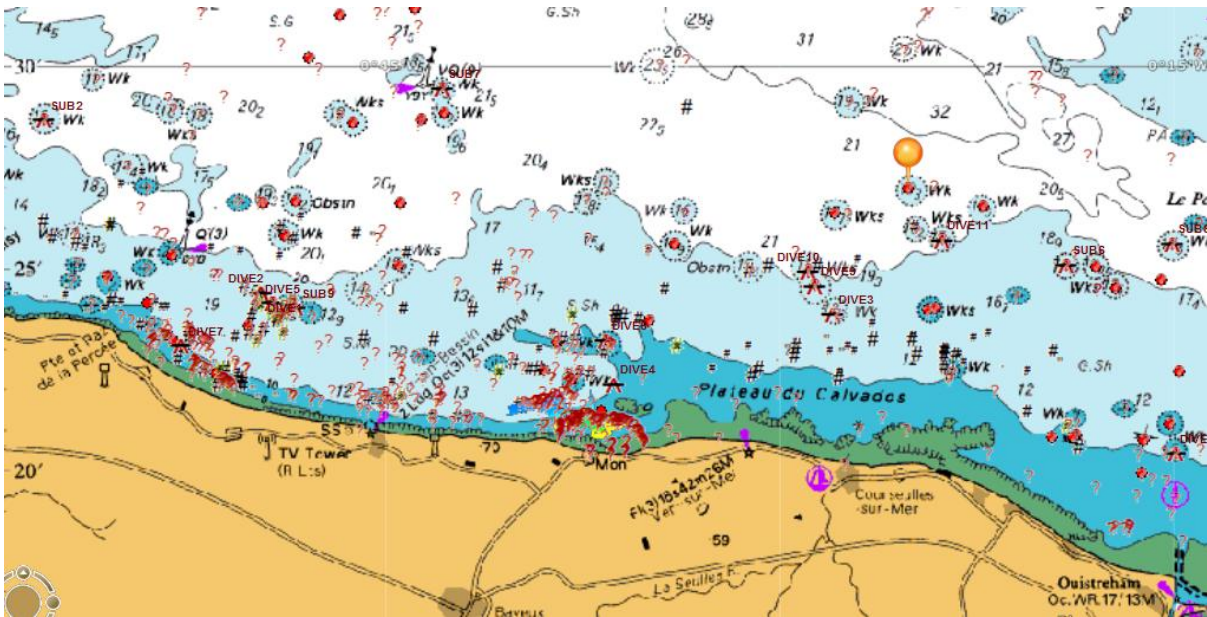


Figure 26 The location of the wreck of the German Minesweeper.

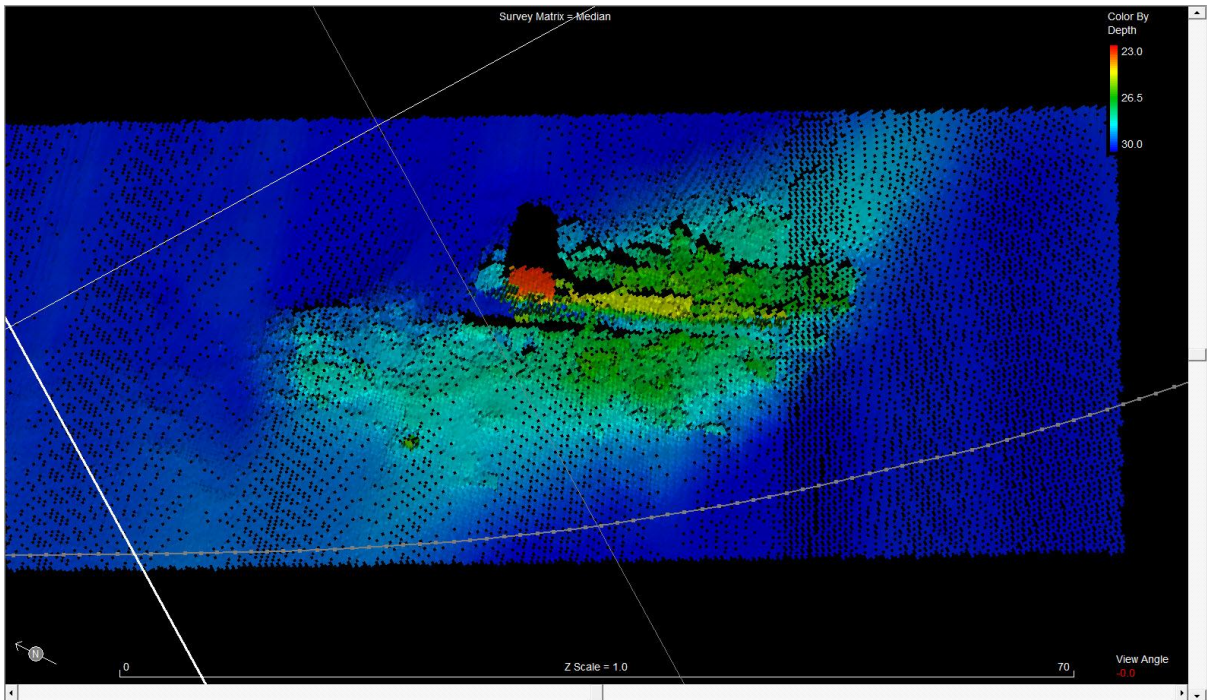


Figure 27 A UKHO multi-beam image of the German Minesweeper. Courtesy of UKHO.

Each part appeared fairly intact, except for the amidships section with her large starboard four bladed propeller still visible as were her double rudders. Her port propeller appeared to be buried in the sea bed.

Visibility on this wreck is generally good although dark and it is an impressive wreck in its own right. Due to the early start in the morning it was still quite dark down there, thankfully we had Martin's lights.



Figure 28 Diver swimming along the hull towards the four bladed propeller. (Martin Davies)

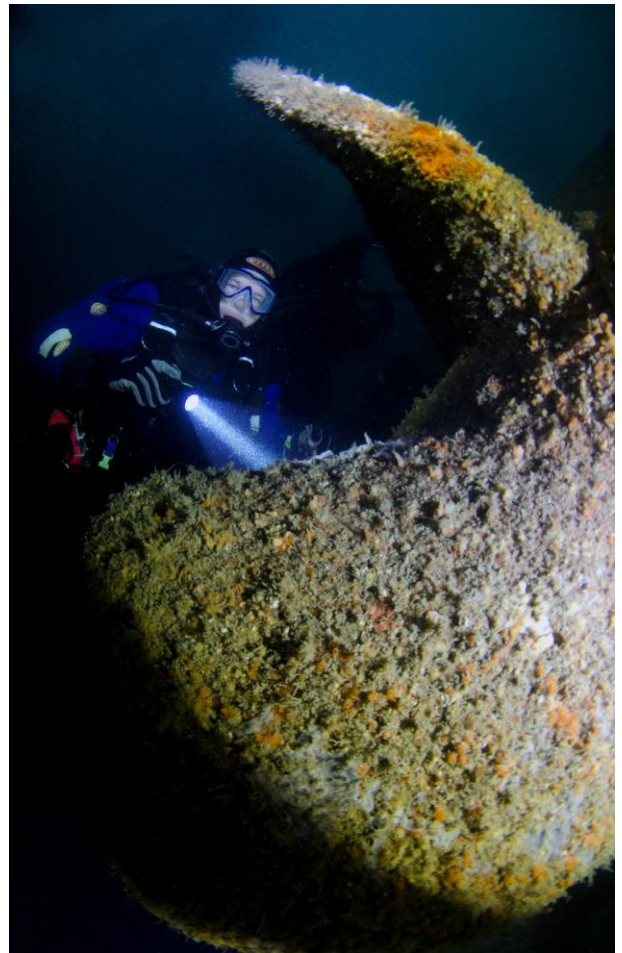


Figure 29 One of the two propellers. (Martin Davies)



Figure 30 The upturned hull of the minesweeper. (David Spencer)

HMS Lawford (K514)

HMS Lawford was built as a US destroyer escort, but was transferred almost straight after launching to the Royal Navy under the lend/lease arrangements and she became a British Captain Class frigate. During the D-Day operations she was acting as the Assault Force HQ of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade. Early on June 8th she was attacked by German aircraft and was reported to have been struck by an aerial torpedo which broke the ship in two. Thirty-seven of her crew died.



Figure 31 HMS Lawford a Royal Navy Captain Class escort destroyer © IWM (A 21817)

The Royal Navy's damage summary report at the time stated that the ship was hit by an "aerial torpedo", which has been taken to mean a torpedo dropped from an aircraft. In 2008 the popular TV series 'Wreck Detectives' investigated the wreck and found evidence that the ship was broken up and sunk by an internal explosion, indicating a hit from one or more bombs or from an early type of guided missile. It is now believed that that the term "aerial torpedo" used in the RN damage summaries was actually intended to refer to guided missiles.^[1]

The wreck lies 12 miles North-West of Ouistreham at a general depth of 23 to 25 meters. Her position is 49°25'43"N 00°23'47"W 49.42861°N 0.39639°W.

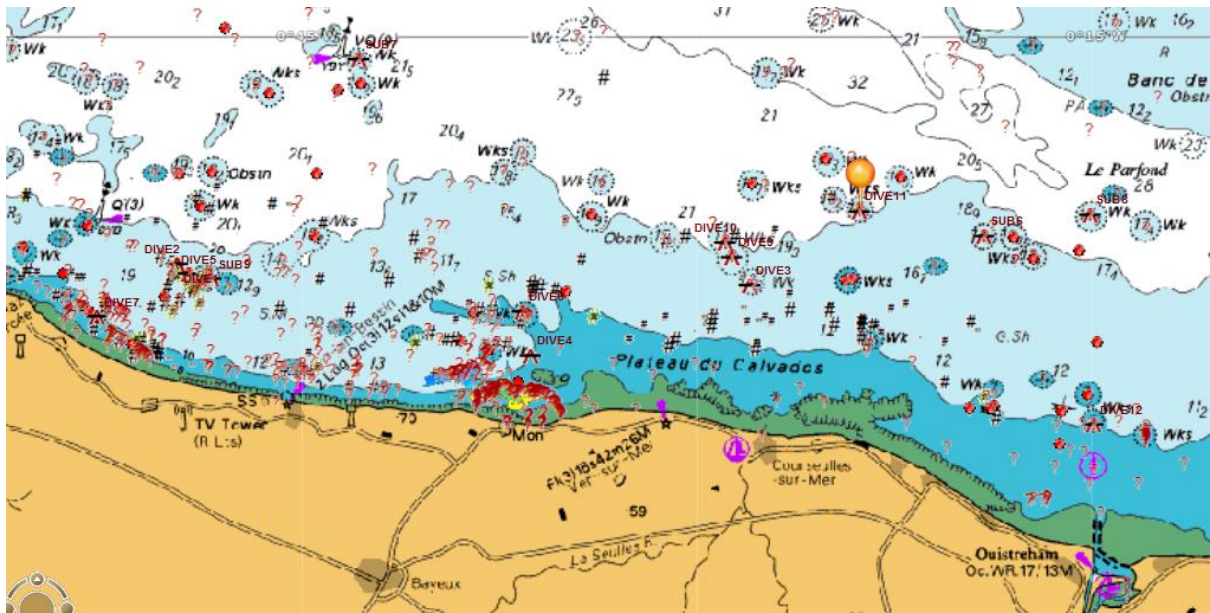


Figure 32 The location of HMS Lawford wreck. Image courtesy of UKHO.

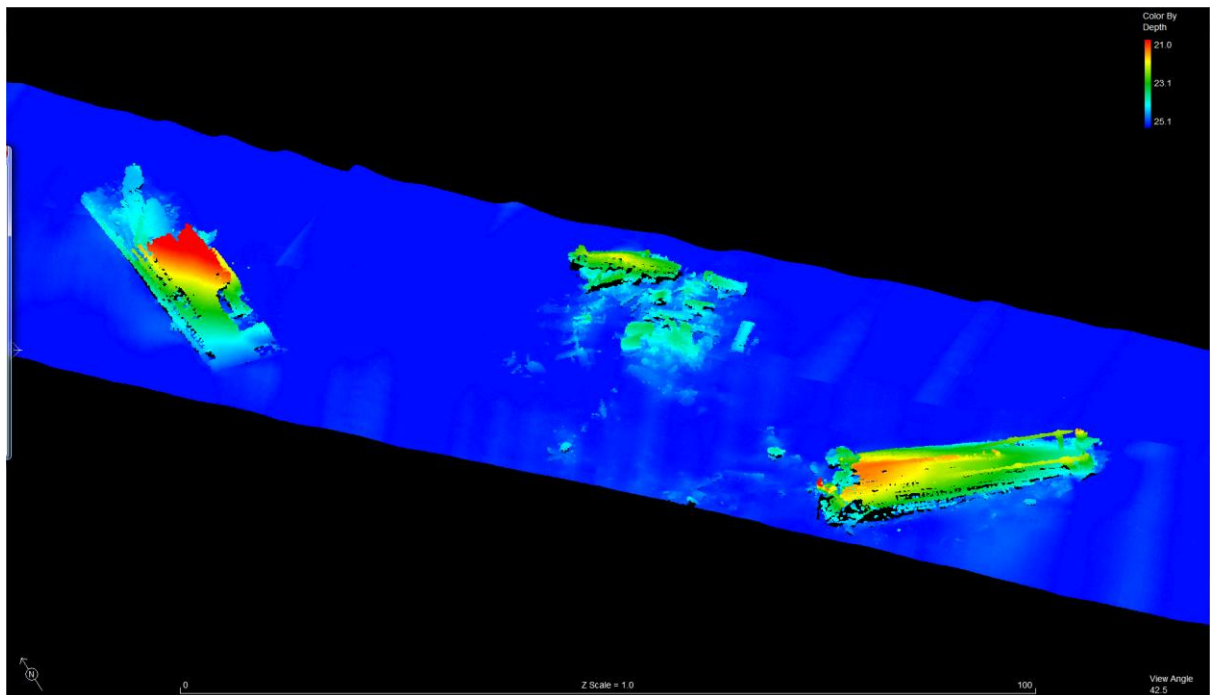


Figure 33 A multi-beam side scan image of the wreck of HMS Lawford. Image courtesy of UKHO.

The two main sections of the wreck are fairly intact with the engine and amidships section in between the bow and stern sections. Because visibility was good the divers were able to explore the whole wreck. The marine life was prolific with large shoals of fish.

A plaque has been secured to the wreck in memory of the crew who lost their lives in the sinking.



Figure 34 The stern with rudder with prop shaft - visibility was particularly good. (Martin Davies)



Figure 35 A diver swims along the upturned hull. (Martin Davies)



Figure 36 Divers explore the amidships section which is teeming with fish. (Martin Davies)



Figure 37 More wreckage from the middle section of the wreck. (Martin Davies)

SS Empire Broadsword

The SS Empire Broadsword was another vessel transferred to the British Ministry of War Transport (MoWT) under the USA/British lend-lease agreement. She was built in California and launched on 16th August 1943 under the name Cape Marshall but renamed Empire Broadsword after control was handed over to the British in December 1943. She had a short career; entering service in December 1943 she was sunk by two mines a few months later on 2nd July 1944.

SS Empire Broadsword was operated by the Cunard White Star line and classed as a Landing Ship Infantry (Large) – LSI(L). She was 396 feet 5 inches (120.83 m) long, with a beam of 60 feet 1 inch (18.31 m) and a depth of 35 feet (10.67 m). Her gross tonnage was 7,177 tons. She was propelled by two steam turbines which drove a single screw via double reduction gearing. Her main armament was 1 x 4 inch gun and 1 x 12 pounder gun. In addition she has 12 x 20mm anti-aircraft guns.



Figure 38 A Landing Ship Infantry (Large) similar to SS Empire Broadsword. © IWM (FL 22265)

SS Empire Broadsword took part in the initial landings on D Day and made several return journeys bringing more troops and supplies to the Normandy beaches and returning to England with casualties requiring medical treatment.

Today she is marked by a large yellow buoy and is understandably a favourite dive site for local divers.

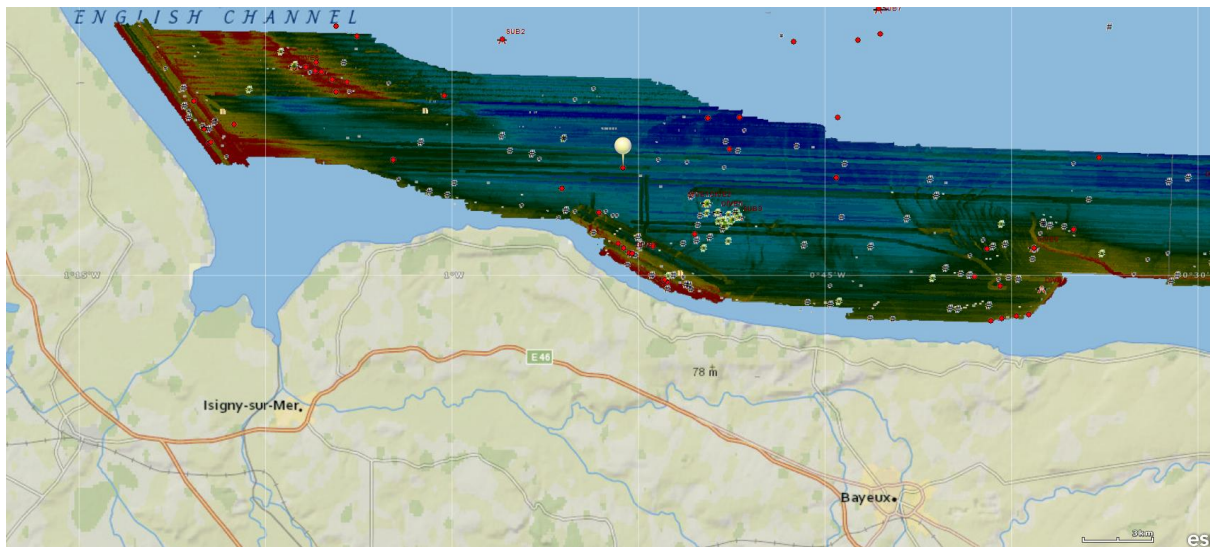


Figure 39 The wreck site is located off Omaha Beach. (Courtesy UKHO)

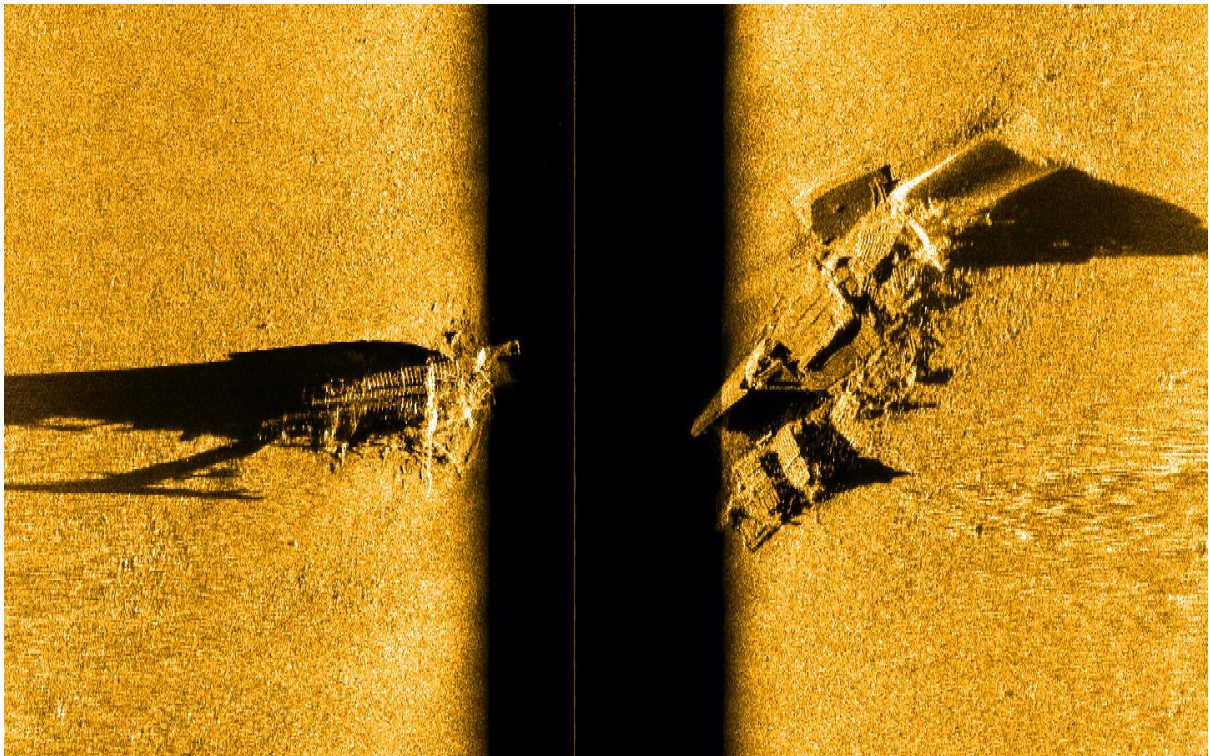


Figure 40 This side scan image shows how substantial the wreck is. (Courtesy UKHO)



Figure 41 A wonderful Play-dough model of the wreck of the Empire Broadsword made by David Spencer (Alison Mayor)



Figure 42 Looking up across the stern section the deck winches are remarkably intact. (Martin Davies)

The wreck now lies in about 25m, and is reasonably intact except around the mine impact areas. At the stern a 4" gun can be found and the rudder is still in position. Ammunition is scattered nearby. The top of the wreck is within 10m of the surface.



Figure 43 A diver examines the anchor, still secured in place at the stern. (Martin Davies)

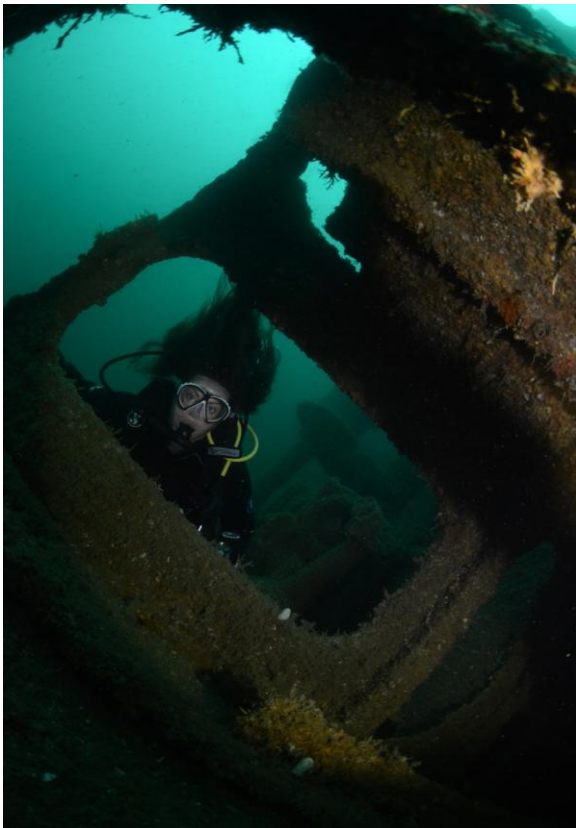


Figure 44 A diver peers into the stern section (Martin Davies).

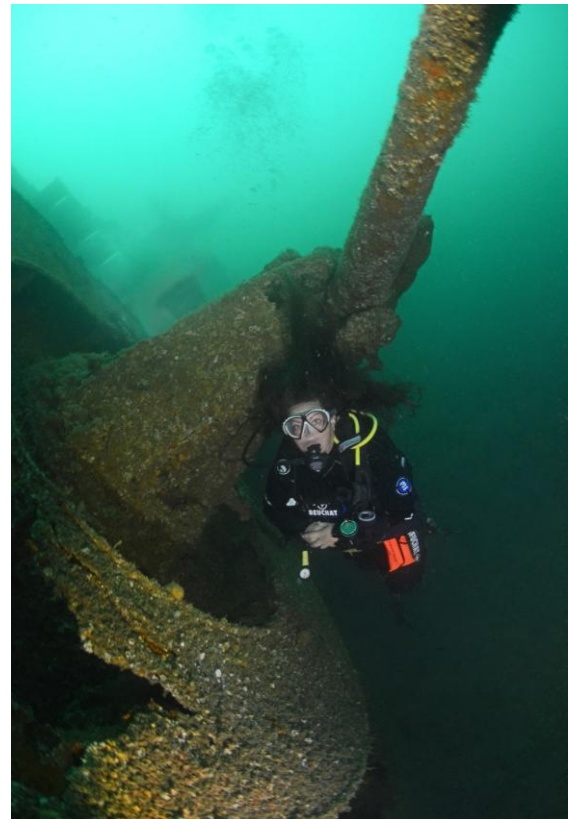


Figure 45 The stern gun is an impressive sight. (Martin Davies)

Charles W Eliot

The SS Charles W. Eliot was a Liberty ship type freighter of 7,176 gross tonnage. She was launched: May 24, 1943 at New England Shipbuilding Corp. The Eliot was delivered to her operator: Coastwise Transportation Corp. on May 31st, 1943.

The Eliot sailed to Juno Beach and arrived off Normandy, France on or about June 26th, 1944 laden with valuable equipment and supplies. On the 28th June she discharged all her cargo and troops and prepared to depart the area the following morning in a convoy heading back toward England. The *Eliot* had just begun to manoeuvre into convoy formation and was only about four miles out of the harbour, when she struck a mine at the after end of number 3 hold. The mine exploded with such force that it lifted the ship completely out of the water. The crew had not even taken a good breath from the 1st mine and they hit another one. This second mine exploded under the stern. The first mine cracked open the hull plates from the bulwark to the waterline on both sides of the ship. The 2nd explosion broke the shaft, ignited the after magazine, and blew the hatch covers and beams off the #4 and #5 holds. Actually it was so bad that the hatch beams, sand (the Charles Eliot was carrying 1,800 tons of sand and shale ballast) and water flew 350 feet into the air.

The Eliot, broke in two just aft of number 3 hatch, and holds 3, 4, and 5 quickly filled with water. The Master: Walter O'Brien, ordered all eight officers, thirty-four men, thirty-one U.S. Navy Armed Guards, and one passenger to abandon ship. In just a few minutes time a first aid boat came along side the *Eliot* and took the most seriously wounded ashore.

Using three lifeboats, all the remaining crew left the Liberty ship. Two British motor boats later picked up these men and transferred them to the SS George W. Woodward. They then were transferred to the LCT-527 and landed in Gosport, England on the 29th. Whilst this rescue was going on salvage tugs moved in and towed part of *Eliot* to deeper water, but the stern settled on the bottom and she was declared a Complete Total Loss.

The German bombers was not going take a chance with the ship being refloated or used for any purpose at a later date so they moved in and attacked the floating part of Eliot's bow and sent her to the sea bed. Out of this disaster, of the huge explosions of two mines and the ship actually breaking in two there were only four report injuries and fortunately all hands survived.



Figure 46A model of a Liberty Ship similar to that of the SS Charles W Elliot © IWM (MOD 954)

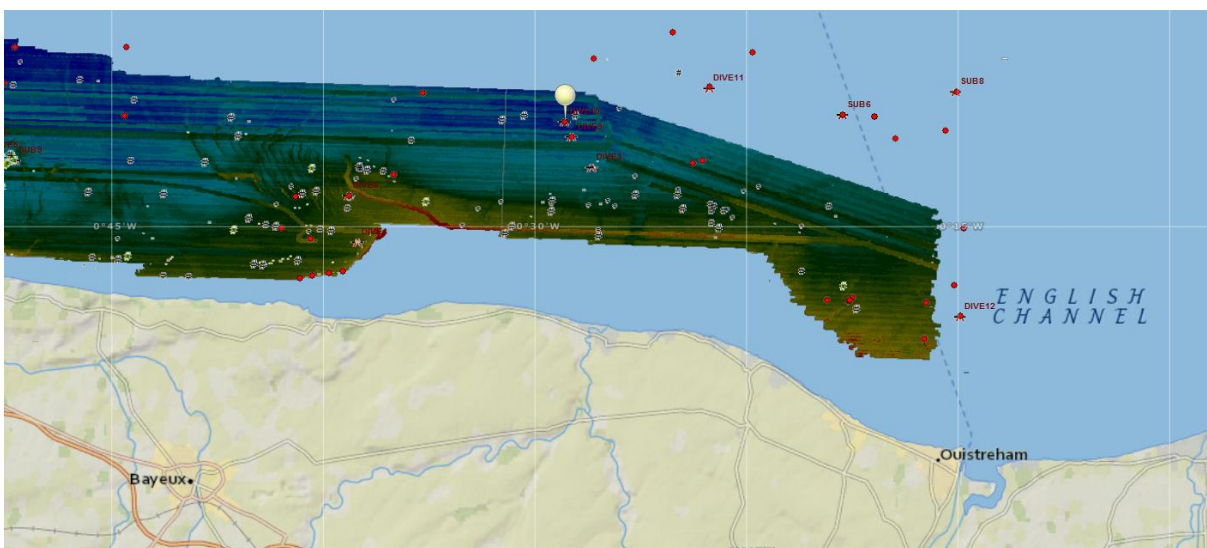


Figure 47 The location of the Liberty Ship Charles W Eliot (Courtesy UKHO)

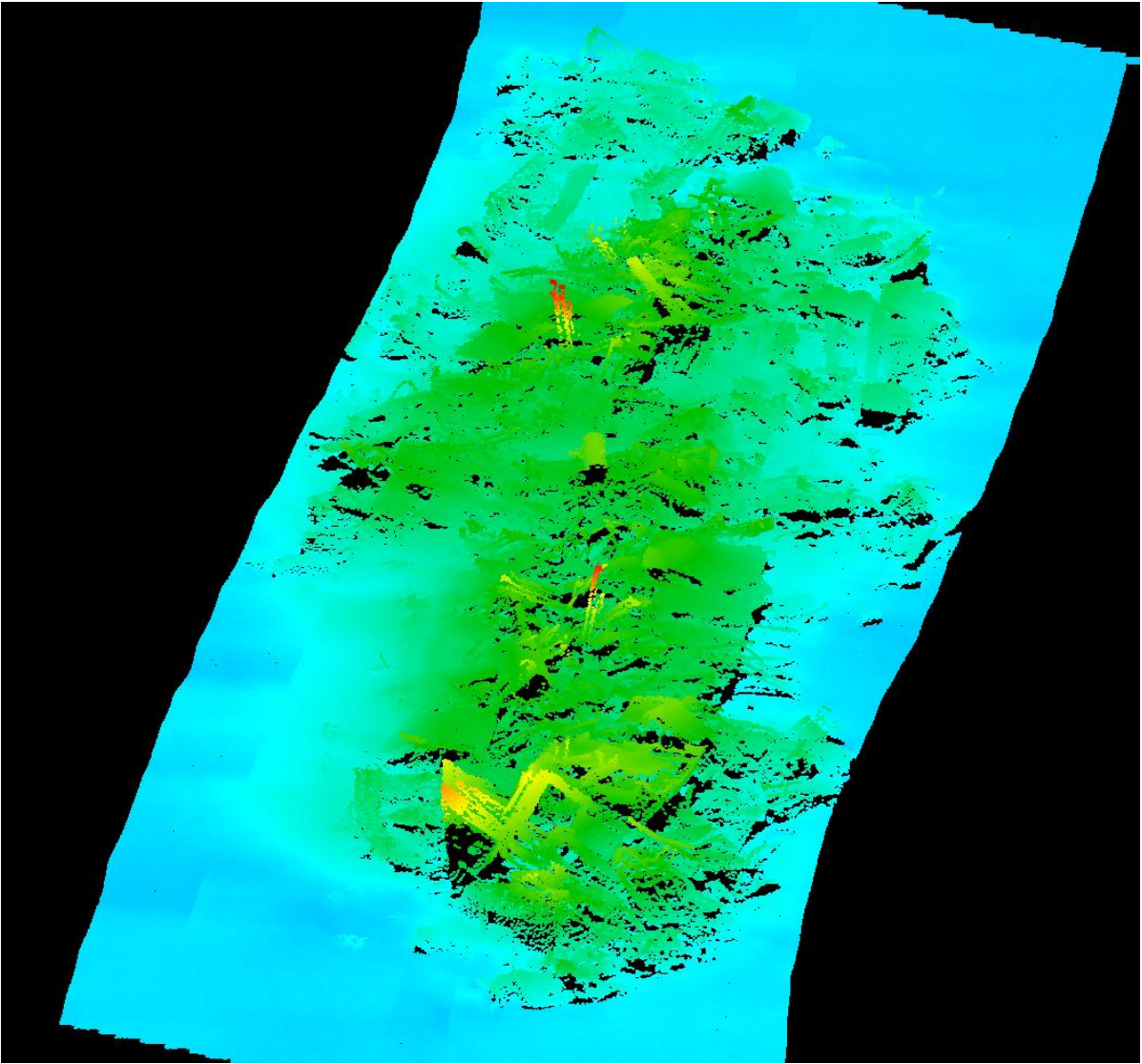


Figure 48 A Multi-beam image of the Charles W Elliot wreck site (Courtesy UKHO).



Figure 49 The wreck site is predominantly flattened metal plates which have become home to a rich array of marine life.
(Martin Davies)



Figure 50 The square design of boilers is typical of a Liberty Ship (Martin Davies)



Figure 51 The boilers are complete with valve assemblies (Martin Davies).

Part 3 Normandy Remembers –

Learning more about the history of the Allied Invasion.

Background - Operation Overlord and Neptune.

Following the disaster of Dunkirk the Allied forces knew that in order to gain a foothold in France they would have to look further west to Normandy and after 2 years of meticulous planning France the daring Allied assault 'Operation Overlord' was given the go ahead by the Strategic Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) which was located in Southwick House in Hampshire just a few miles from the SSAC club house.

The maritime phase of Overlord was codenamed 'Operation Neptune' and involved 6,939 vessels from 8 Navies under the command of Admiral Bertram Ramsay (Royal Navy). Operation Neptune was by far the largest ever amphibious invasion and involved specialist ships including 4,126 landing craft of various sizes, converted barges, battleships, mine sweepers, tugs. Ramsey's plan was relatively simple on paper. Firstly, the vast aerial power of the Allies would ensure that the fleet would be free from a German attack from the air. Thereafter, the armada of ships, vessels and craft would be spear headed by a flotilla of 287 mine sweepers that would clear the way for the ships behind them. Behind them would be 138 warships that would bombard the German beach defences in Normandy itself. The troop carrying convoy would then sail from southern English ports protected by an escort of frigates and corvettes. Over 4,000 landing craft had been assembled and these were in need of protection.

Ramsay also had to plan the movement of 146 pieces of the Mulberry Harbour across the Channel by using a large number of tugs. The Mulberry Harbours was of such great importance to the Allies, that no mistake could be made – and Ramsay had a very specific timetable to keep to.

Delayed for 24 hours by bad weather the invasion force left the South Coast of England on 5th June in heavy seas. Many men aboard were sea sick, and terrified of what was to come.

The invasion began late on June 5th when 24,000 airborne troops parachuted behind enemy lines with the aim of disrupting German supply lines and reinforcements. On June 6th, D-Day began at 3am with 1,900 Allied bombers making their way over the Channel to Normandy where they released 7 million pounds of bombs onto their German targets. Sadly this also involved the bombing of key strategic towns and inevitably many French civilian population suffered many casualties.

At 0500hrs the guns of 18 battle cruisers and 43 destroyers started their Bombardment of the Normandy coastline and the fortifications of the Atlantic Wall. Carefully timed for the ultimate surprise at low water and on a rising tide, the first of the troops started to land on

the beaches at 06.31 and in total 73,000 Americans, 61,715 British and 21,400 Canadians were deployed landing at the 5 main beaches codenamed Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword.

Allied casualties were around 10,000 with 4,572 killed including 1,641 British. German losses were estimated at 9,000. By midnight on D-Day 150,000 men and 20,000 vehicles had landed and had started to make their way inland. The Mulberry Harbours were soon operational and, although Mulberry A was severely damaged in a storm Mulberry B, at Arromanches continued to operate for many months.

Normandy - 70 years on

Although our the main focus of our expedition was to dive on some of the wrecks of ships/vessels lost in the Normandy campaign and the opportunity to share this experience with our French speaking comrades we were soon very aware of how important the events of 70 years ago to everyday Normandy residents. You don't have to look hard to see and feel it, from street names (Rue de Dorset Regiment) to a simple 'merci!' written on a white sheet that hangs next to a British, USA and Canadian flag deep in the rural countryside.

We arrived relatively early to be greeted by Françoise the Gite owner, with fresh coffee, bread and jam and within a short while we had settled in. Keen to explore the area the vehicles were soon back on the road exploring the area and getting our bearings. We headed to Omaha beach and the impressive American memorial/cemetery before heading along the coast to Arromanches where the British had landed and finishing at Pegasus Bridge before heading back to finally meet up with Catherine and her team at the Gite.

Everything we had read about began to take on much more of a physical understanding. Much of the devastation has been carefully rebuilt but if you look a little deeper and you can still see the evidence. Monuments and museums of all different sizes are in every village, town and city. Many stories of heroism and tragedy remain untold but the individual museums, each with their own distinct style, tastefully try to record the events and bring to life as best they can the enormity of the subject. We tried to visit as many points of interest/museums as we could to help us begin to understand and appreciate the many facets of Operation Overlord.

The following images capture a flavour of just some of the places visited during the week.

Pegasus Bridge and Museum

Securing the strategic crossing of the river Orne (Pegasus Bridge) was an early and critical objective for the British in order to stop the German army sending reinforcements which could seriously endanger the Allied forces from establishing a foothold on the Normandy coast. In a daring attack during the first hours of D Day Horsa gliders deployed teams of soldiers just yards from Pegasus Bridge which was successfully secured after an heroic fight. Today the Original Pegasus Bridge has been replaced but has been established in a nearby museum with a replica Horsa glider, one of the few remaining Centaur CSIV tanks and a Bailey Bridge.



Figure 52 The original Pegasus Bridge has been replaced and moved to become the major feature of a new museum. The daring capture of this important bridge by troops arriving at night by glider gave the British control of a main supply route. (Martin Davies).



Figure 53 Pegasus Bridge Museum – A bailey bridge could be assembled in less than 30 minutes. (Martin Davies)



Figure 54 A replica of one of the Horsa gliders used to transport British troops to within yards of Pegasus Bridge in the early hours of D Day. Parts of a real Horsa are also on display. (Martin Davies)



Figure 55 The memorial to those who captured Pegasus Bridge. (Martin Davies)



Figure 56 A Centaur Tank, one of only two remaining on land and a reminder of the two Centaurs we had found back in 2008 for our Tanks and Bulldozers Project. (Martin Davies)

Arromanches Museum, Gold Beach and Mulberry B



Figure 57 The excellent museum at Arromanches where there was a working model of the British Mulberry harbour which helped us to understand the wreckage we had been diving on for our Mulberry 70 project just a few weeks beforehand. (Martin Davies)



Figure 58 Part of the Mulberry harbour in the beach at Arromanches. This is the same as the Inner Mulberry wreck at Pagham, West Sussex featured in our Mulberry 70 project report. (Martin Davies)



Figure 59 More Mulberry remains, this time concrete 'Beetles' - floats used in the construction of a roadway to the pier heads (Whale). Again we came across a number of these in our Mulberry 70 project. (Martin Davies)



Figure 60 A steel bridge 'Whale' on display just behind the museum and just yards from where the floating roadway came ashore. (Martin Davies)



Figure 61 A replica Kite anchor used to provide a secure grounding for the bridge sections. (Martin Davies)

The Arromanches museum has a huge amount of information on the Mulberry harbours which was very useful in providing background to the Southsea Sub-Aqua Club Mulberry 70 project. There are fully working models of the Mulberry B harbour which helped us to understand some of the features we had observed on the seabed back in West Sussex.

There is a very good 360 degree cinema on the top of the hill to the east of Arromanches. From here you can see the remains of Mulberry B and the enormous scale of the artificial harbour.

The American Cemetery and Memorial



Figure 62 The impressive American memorial at the cemetery near Omaha beach. (Martin Davies)

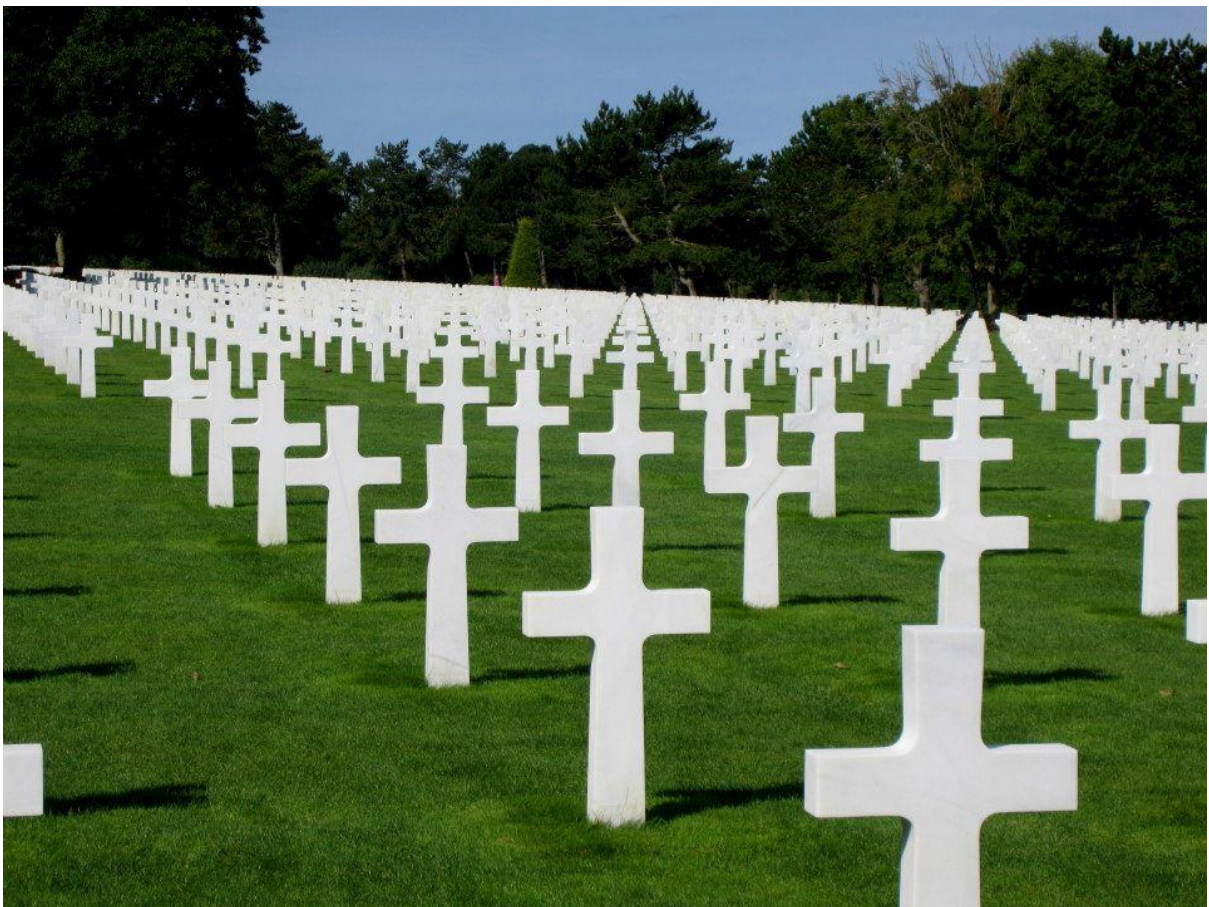


Figure 63 Thousands of simple white crosses mark the graves of many of those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

(Martin Davies)

The Museum and Memorial of the Battle of Normandy at Bayeux and the nearby British and Commonwealth Cemetery

This museum told the story of how Allied forces landed and the fierce fighting that then took place as they advanced through the Normandy countryside, villages and towns. Across the road from the museum is the British and Commonwealth cemetery marking the final resting place of men from many different nations.



Figure 64 The museum at Bayeux close to the British and Commonwealth cemetery. (Martin Davies)



Figure 65 A more traditional 'British' style cemetery with flowers and epitaphs. (Martin Davies)

Pointe du Hoc

Pointe du Hoc was part of the German 'Atlantic Wall' and the site of huge gun emplacements on top of a 30m cliff overlooking the Normandy coast and Utah beach. The guns were a danger to the invading forces and it was critical to the success of D Day that action was taken to disarm them. Following hours of bombardment from Allied ships US Rangers scaled the cliff face at an extremely heavy cost of life. The Rangers discovered that the guns had been moved inland.



Figure 66 Large gun craters pepper the cliff top. (Alison Mayor)



Figure 67 One of the large gun emplacements (Alison Mayor)

As can be seen from the SSAC expedition diary, many other places were visited by members of the group during the week including Omaha Beach and Mont St Michel.

As the week drew to a close it was time to celebrate our achievements. A local press photographer was present to take a group photo outside the dive centre as we celebrated with a local speciality drink of Normandy cider and biscuits. (see front cover)

The following day Catherine kindly invited us to her home near St Lo for a celebratory BBQ.

We set sail the next day, returning to Portsmouth that evening.

Part 4 - Bringing History Home – Sharing our experiences with others.

The collaborative nature of this diving expedition was one of the key features of the whole experience. Divers from many nations, all with a passion for history shared their week as 'buddies' and together learned much more about the enormous sacrifice made 70 years ago for the freedoms we have today. Having shared this experience together it was clear that many others in the diving community would also want to know more and in addition there was a wider community interest in what we as divers were able to see and appreciate under the water. WW2 experts and historians too were keen to hear about what we might find.

In addition to a talk at our own club house to SSAC members and local divers various forms of media have helped share the story of our experiences with the diving community and beyond.

SSAC Web site

Details of the expedition in the form of our Normandy Diary, principally written by SSAC member Alison Bessell but with input from other sources can be found on the SSAC web site www.southseasubaqua.org.uk . (<http://www.southseasubaqua.org.uk/diving-projects/normandy-70/92-normandy-70-wreck-week-expedition-diary>). This expedition report includes a copy of the diary at Annex A).

Social Media, Face book and You Tube

Catherine Connors and the Scuba Ninjas use Face book for general communications and to publicise their achievements/plans. A special Face book page for Normandy Wreck Week was created by Catherine and included many images taken during the week, most notably some excellent photos by David Spencer. These, together with photographs taken during WW2 were compiled into a moving photo-montage which was uploaded onto the YouTube website. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e8ZN6P8Ffc>

SCUBA Magazine

A special edition of the regular 'Wrecked' feature of the BSAC magazine 'SCUBA' was published in the May 15 edition. The main feature was that of the impressive SS Empire Broadsword wreck but the 8 page special also featured the other 7 wrecks that were dived during the week. A copy of the Wrecked feature is also attached as an annex.

Dive Ireland International Dive Show 2015

<http://diveireland.ie/>

Catherine Connors was invited to speak at the Irish Dive show which was being held near her home town and hosted by Lough Derg Sub Aqua Club. Catherine very kindly invited myself and Martin Davies to take part in these presentation with her. Two hour long sessions were planned;

'Diving into D Day' which told the D Day story, the individual story of the wrecks we dived. It covered our experiences in taking part in this joint expedition. (Saturday 28 February); and

'Forgotten Wrecks of WW2), in which Catherine spoke about the wrecks of the SS Susan B Anthony and an unidentified wreck close to the Mulberry B in Normandy and Martin and myself told the story of LCT427 which was lost following a collision in the shipping lane just outside Portsmouth following her return from D Day. (Sunday 1 March).

An outline of the talks can be found at <http://diveireland.ie/category/speakers/>. Unfortunately Corrine Grealish and David Spencer from Scuba Ninjas could not attend.

Both talks were very well attended and received and our sincere thanks go to the organisers for meeting our expenses and for hosting us over a fantastic weekend. This was my first trip to Ireland and it was also a lovely opportunity to meet some of Catherine's friends and family who very kindly and warmly welcomed us into their home.

Television

In the weeks leading up to the expedition BSAC HQ passed details of our expedition to a TV production company (Ricochet TV) who had been commissioned by the BBC to make a short series about the English Channel and how it forms an everyday part of life for people use/live/work along ('The Channel'). Initially the interest was about our Mulberry 70 project on the English side of the Channel but as our plans to dive with Catherine and her Scuba Ninjas developed the production team became very interested in this opportunity. Much time and effort was spent trying to accommodate the production company's wishes but with just a few days to go they informed us that they no longer wanted to cover the diving expedition.

However the Irish Dive show was featured on Irish television and being from the area and returning to speak at the Dive Show Catherine was interviewed about her talks and experiences of living and diving in Normandy.

Sharing knowledge with Subject Matter Experts

Our thanks go to Chris Howlett of the UKHO who has supported us in both our Mulberry 70 and Normandy expedition. Chris has shared an enormous amount of data and knowledge with us as we have sought to record and identify the wrecks we have been diving on both sides of the Channel. We travelled to the UKHO offices in Taunton in October 14 and spent several hours with Chris in the UKHO archive going through the images and sketches we had made. Chris has a keen interest in D Day and in particular Mulberry Harbours and was the UKHO lead for two full surveys of the Normandy coast in recent years. Whilst we had intended to dive some unidentified wrecks whilst we were in Normandy the dive centre did not have the appropriate permissions and were therefore unable to take us to these sites.

We also shared our experiences with Andrew Whitmarsh the curator at the D Day museum in Portsmouth. We have also taken part in a consultation exercise to inform the nature of the D Day museum's redevelopment plans being made possible by National Lottery funding. The aim is to have the museum's displays updated/replaced in time for the 75th Anniversary commemorations.

Part 5 - Closer Collaboration -MV Derrycunihy 2015.

Our joint experiences and interest in WW2 history and the Normandy wrecks has brought us further together in the development of a more challenging in depth project for 2015. Lead by Catherine Connors we are planning to support her in the survey and recording of the MV Derrycunihy wreck site just a few miles North West of the port of Ouistreham. This wreck saw the largest loss of British lives during the Normandy campaign and plans are being put together which will see divers from Southsea Sub-Aqua club, with our boat Southsea Explorer, working alongside Scuba Ninjas and a small team from an Irish Club. Historian Paul Hannan will be also working with us and we look forward to working with Chris Howlett again. The aim will be to determine whether the wreck is that of the bow or stern. There are also a number of unidentified wrecks which, given the opportunity we would like to investigate.

Catherine Connors is currently negotiating with French Authorities to obtain permission to survey the wrecks. If approved we intend to apply for a British Sub-Aqua Jubilee Trust grant to assist in the cost of taking part, primarily the cost of taking the SSAC boat across to France. Much work has still to be done to establish ways of working which will satisfy the French authorities though an indicative/outline plan is being developed for the purposes of the BSAJT grant.

Part 6 – Summary

Our Normandy expedition to dive the D Day wrecks with Catherine Connors and the Scuba Ninjas was a fantastic experience for everyone. Catherine's hard work in planning is to be commended and her generosity of spirit made everyone feel so welcome. Meeting and diving with people from many nations and sharing our passion for wreck diving soon developed into lasting memories and friendships. This year we hope to build on these relationships and discover new information which will help with the public record of these historic wrecks.

We also discovered that the interest in the Normandy wrecks extends far beyond the diving community and that we can help play a part in improving the knowledge and understanding of the events of June 1944.

Whilst our respective diving Agencies and Authorities may operate under slightly different processes and procedures we showed that our common passion for diving can bring us all together in our appreciation of our underwater world in a way that we can then share with others.

Thank you to all who took part and gave their time and efforts so freely and to the British Sub-Aqua Club for BEGS Grant which assisted in the cost of ferry transport to Normandy.

Alison Mayor

Southsea Sub-Aqua Club

BSAC Branch 009

May 2015.