

9.1.81

MULBERRY HARBOUR

NOTES

Mulberry Harbours were a vast undertaking and one of the greatest harbour engineering feats of all times. The design, construction and erection of Mulberry Harbour was a notable military operation and a unique example of cooperation between military and civil engineers.

In the second World War having been driven from the Continent we could not return except by invasion. We did not control any ports on the European mainland and could not plan on capturing any intact. Unless the invasion force was to be supplied over open beaches it was essential to provide sheltered water during all states of weather and tide to enable men, weapons, ammunition and stores to be continuously unloaded on to the beaches. There was only one solution - to build in secret artificial harbours which could be towed across the channel.

On 30th May 1942 Sir Winston Churchill sent to Lord Mountbatten, then Chief of Combined Operations a famous memorandum :-

"PIERS FOR USE ON BEACHES

They must float up and down with the tide. The anchor problem must be mastered. Let me have the best solution worked out. Don't argue the matter. The difficulties will argue for themselves."

Churchill later wrote in 'The Second World War' Volume V

"I kept in touch with the development of this project, which was pressed forward by a Committee of specialist engineers and service representatives, summoned by Brigadier Bruce White of the War Office, himself an eminent engineer".

Although much preparatory work and testing was done as a result of the Prime Minister's memorandum it was not until August 1943 that the Combined Chiefs of Staff at Washington approved the construction in the UK of artificial harbours code named Mulberry. Two harbours were planned :

- A (American Mulberry) at Omaha beach and
- B (British Mulberry) at Arromanches.

In late summer 1943 the actual invasion of Normandy had been planned for May 1944.

The overall organisation, planning, design and especially the coordination of military and civil engineers was led by Brigadier (later Sir Bruce) White, the Director of Ports and Inland Water Transport, a Royal Engineer Officer in both World Wars and in private life a civil engineer.

Whilst prototypes had been made and tested, the mass construction of the caissons did not start until December 1943 so that there were less than six months to complete the basic requirements for the landings. Construction was undertaken at many different sites in the United Kingdom: at one time 45,000 men were employed on these tasks.

The components had to be towed in advance of D day to assembly areas on the south coast and on D Day (6th June, 1944) towed over 100 miles, in storm lashed seas to their destination, the Normandy beaches, at the same time as the assault troops. There they were assembled into the largest artificial harbour ever constructed in peace or war.

The artificial harbours sailed towards their destination on the afternoon of D Day under the command of Rear-Admiral (later Sir William) Tennant who held the title of Rear Admiral Mulberry/Pluto and was responsible for the Cross Channel towing operation and general supervision of the two ports.

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