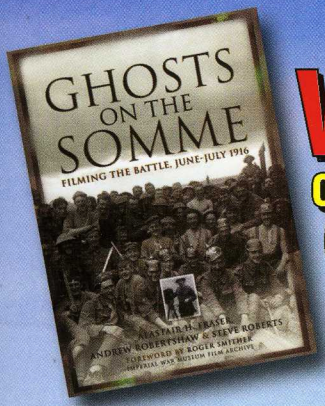
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DIVING INTO D-DAY HISTORY

Lying at a depth of twenty metres some eight miles off the West Sussex coast near Selsey Bill is an unusual assortment of Second World War armoured vehicles. But just how did this D-Day collection come to be lying there? Martin Davies reveals how a group of divers from the Southsea Sub-Aqua Club finally solved the mystery!



Though the presence of these tanks and armoured vehicles had been known about for some time, the question of how they came to be there had always remained unanswered with any degree of certainty. For many years it had been believed that, because of the lack of a shipwreck nearby, they had slipped or fallen from a Mulberry Harbour 'Whale' section during its journey across the Channel on D-Day.

The term 'Whale' was applied to the sections of floating roadway which, in effect, formed a floating bridge and joined the pier heads of the Mulberry Harbours themselves to the land. Indeed, a section of 'Whale' Bridge is the closest Second World War wreckage to this collection of armoured vehicles. Now, a team from the Southsea Sub-Aqua Club has finally gathered the evidence needed to piece together the full story.

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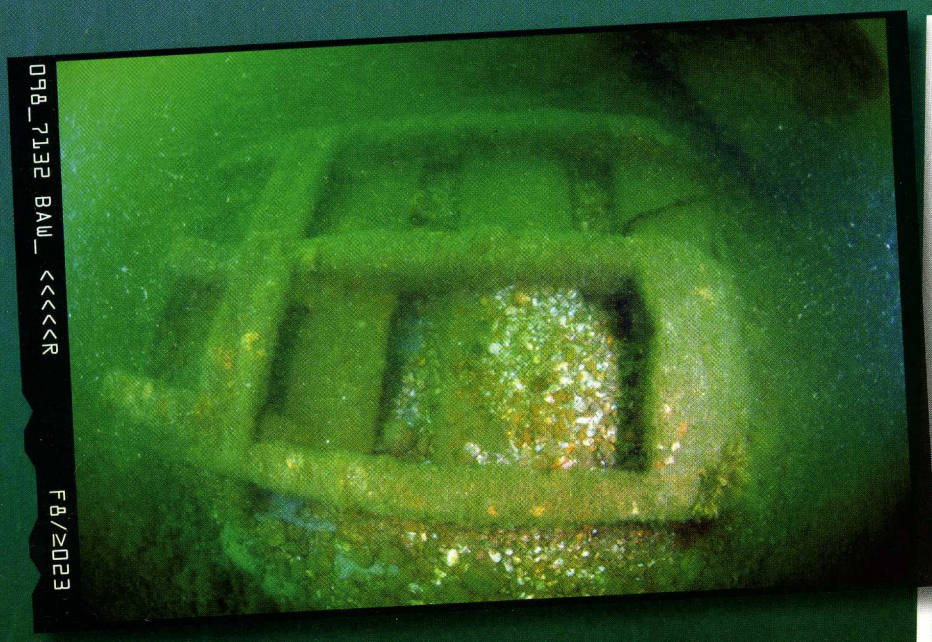
The initial breakthrough came after a preliminary survey (see Briefing Room, Issue 16) during which the dive team realised that the tanks were not the more commonly used Shermans that they had expected to find. They were British tanks, but had a shorter barrelled, larger calibre gun. Staff at The Tank Museum at Bovington, Dorset, subsequently identified the wrecks as being Centaur CS IV tanks. This was a vital clue.

The Centaur CS IV tank (CS standing for Close Support) was a design that could be traced back to the Crusader and later Cruiser Mk.VII, or Cavalier as it became known. In 1941, Leyland Motors, in partnership with Rolls-Royce, had begun work on designing a new tank engine and



ABOVE:
Some of the smaller artefacts that litter the seabed in the dive area; clips of .303 ammunition in what appears to be quite reasonable condition.

MAIN PICTURE:
One of the two Centaur CS IVs discovered by divers from the Southsea Sub-Aqua Club on the seabed some eight miles off the West Sussex coast near Selsey Bill. (All images with the kind permission of Martin Davies)





hit upon a design called the Meteor – in effect a de-rated Merlin engine. To accompany this new power plant, Leyland designed a new tank. This was called the Centaur. But a lack of Meteor engines meant that the Centaur was eventually fitted with poorly built, and poorly performing, Nuffield Liberty engines. As a result, the Centaur was only slightly more successful than its predecessor.

Fitted with a 95mm Howitzer (capable of firing both HE ammunition and hollow charge anti-tank ammunition) and one BESA machine-gun, and with their engines upgraded, some eighty Centaur CS IVs were provided for a specially created unit of the Royal Marines - the 'Armoured Support Group'. With their 95mm Howitzer, these tanks were intended to be used in the early waves ashore on D-Day. During the approach to the beaches, it was intended that some of the Centaurs would be mounted on ramps on the landing craft to allow their guns to fire over the bow at enemy positions using naval gunnery techniques.

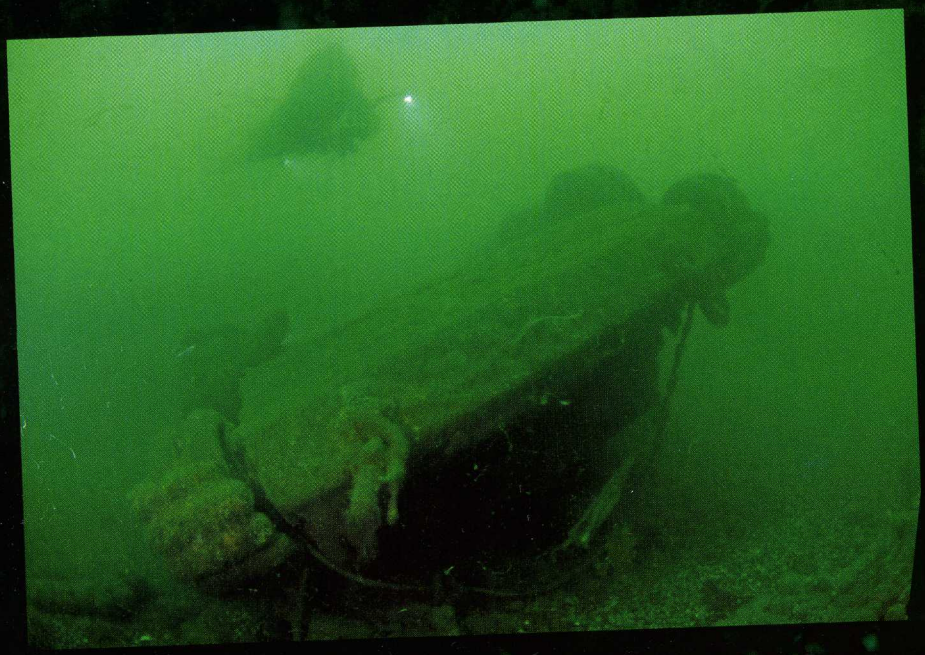
ABOVE:
One of the Porpoise sledges that was discovered, and identified, by the dive team. The Centaurs were intended to be some of the first tanks to land at 'H-Hour' on 'D-Day' and so could not be re-supplied immediately. Special waterproof sledges were designed to be towed behind the tanks and which would carry the extra ammunition they needed as they made their way inland.

But only twenty-eight of these tanks, each of which weighed twenty-eight tons, had a maximum speed of 27mph, and a crew of five, made it on to the beaches and inland. At least two, we now know, lie in the waters off West Sussex.

Armed with this information, the Southsea Sub-Aqua Club began to plan an in-depth underwater survey of the wreck site. Hopefully, further clues as to how the wreckage came to be here would be uncovered. After receiving approval from the Ministry of Defence, a grant from the British Sub-Aqua Jubilee Trust and

ABOVE:
A 95mm HE Shell lying on the seabed in the dive site. The dive team stress that the dive site is littered with ammunition, much of which is likely to be unstable. Anyone intending to dive this location is advised to exercise extreme caution.

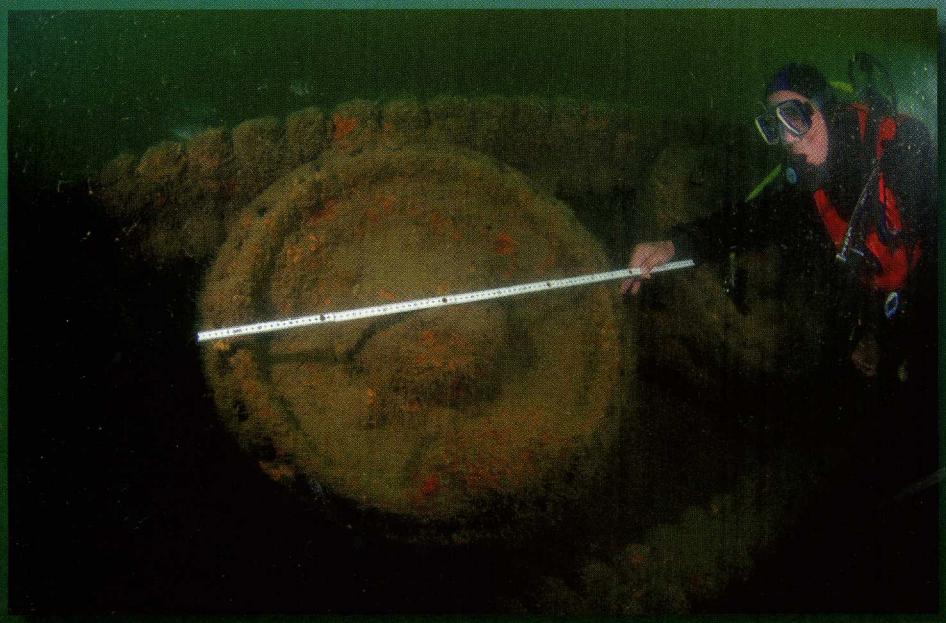
BELOW:
One of the Armoured D7 Bulldozers – this being the one with its blade still attached. The survey also uncovered a length of wreckage, similar to a gun barrel, near one of the bulldozers. With no evidence of a gun carriage, its identity was initially the subject of much discussion – though it is now believed that this is the barrel of the 20mm anti-aircraft gun from a landing craft.





ABOVE:
A view of the rear of one of the Centaur CS IVs. This is the one that was found to be missing part of one track. So unique were the objects being dived on, that a film crew from the BBC's 'Coast' TV programme accompanied the dive team on the first day of the survey.

DIVING INTO D-DAY HISTORY



LEFT:
A member of the dive team surveying one of the Centaurs. Speaking of the project's success, team leader Alison Mayor said: "This project has been a fantastic success. There is something about diving on military equipment like this, we dive on shipwrecks all the time but this is very different - the tanks and bulldozers are out of context without a shipwreck around. They are awesome machines, resting peacefully on the seabed and surrounded by shoals of fish". This year, the dive team intend to look for the wreck of LCT(A) 2428 itself!

BELOW:
A close-up view of the 95mm Howitzer on the same tank. Each Centaur carried a store of fifty-one rounds of ammunition.

with the kind help of Silent Planet Ltd., who provided the dive boat, a team of twenty-five divers, led by Alison Mayor, was able to commence the task.

Over a period of five days, the site was mapped in detail. Numerous measurements and photographs, along with hours of video, were taken. Some surprising discoveries came to light, many of which would be used to help solve the puzzle of how the wreckage got there. The dive site itself was tricky to find as the tanks and bulldozers lay close together in a scour and only stood proud of the seabed by a couple of metres – the whole area involved is some thirty metres by twenty metres wide. Little information appeared above the general seabed level on an echo sounder.

Having located the wrecks, the dive team soon established that one of the two Centaurs lay upside down. The other is on its right-hand side at an angle of approximately forty-five degrees. Because of their armoured construction, both were found to be in excellent condition despite more than sixty-four years on the sea bed. Some track was found to be missing on one tank. The distinctive twelve-inch round plates fitted on the front of the tanks, a unique identification feature for Centaurs, is clearly visible on both tanks. At their rear, the divers were able to see the tow bars which pulled the Porpoise sledges.

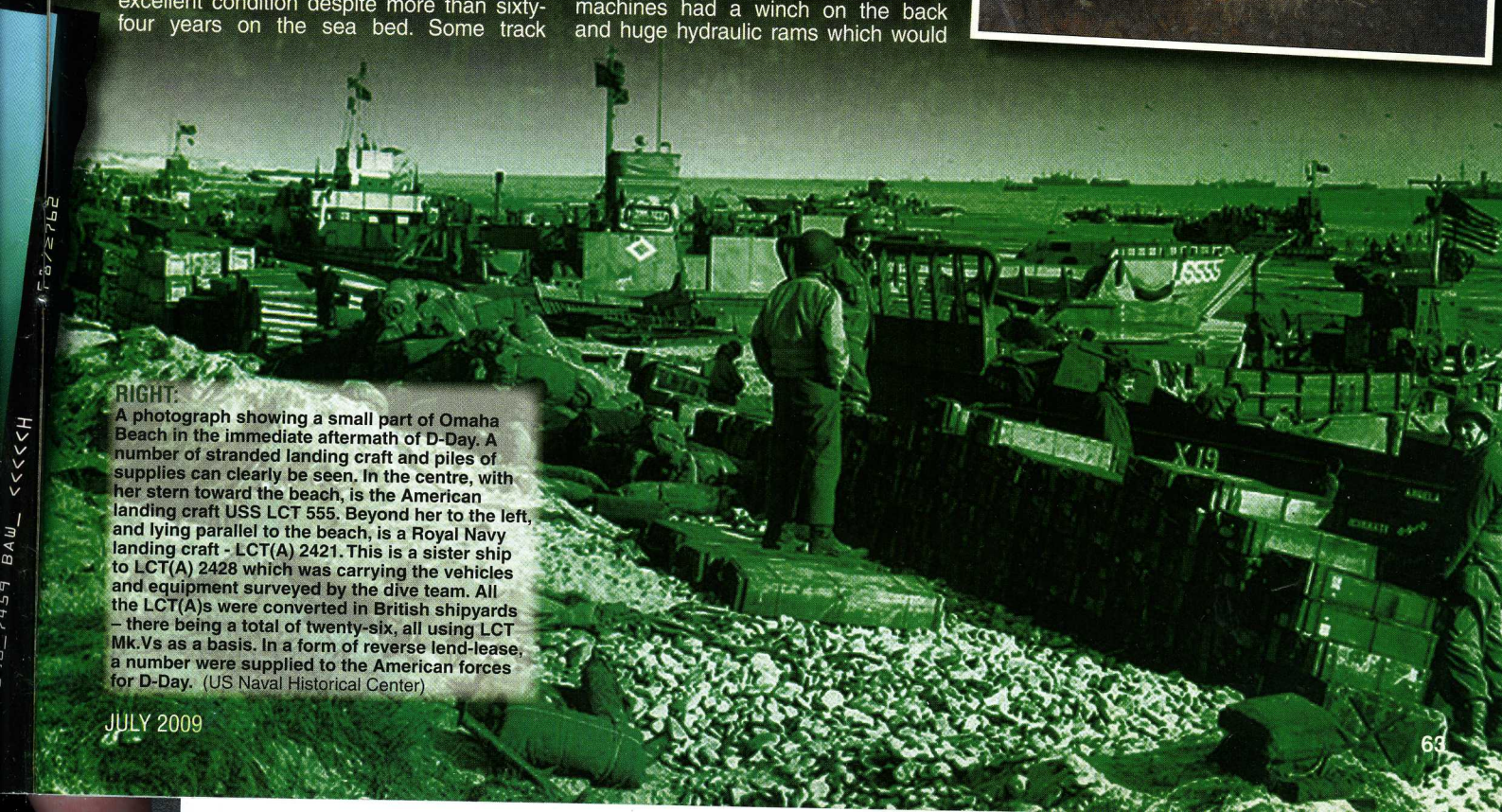
Incredibly, the two Centaurs were not the only armoured vehicles found in the dive site; there was also a pair of armoured bulldozers.

Now common in most modern armed forces, the armoured bulldozer was first developed by the British Army during the Second World War. Some of the so-called 'Hobart's Funnies', the armoured bulldozers were, most commonly, armoured versions of the D7 medium bulldozer which had been manufactured by Caterpillar Inc. since 1938. This specialist equipment was designed to clear the beaches of obstacles to allow vehicles, troops and equipment to cross the beaches. These powerful machines had a winch on the back and huge hydraulic rams which would have easily shifted any obstacle in its path. The driver's cab and the whole of the body of the bulldozer were covered in extra armour to protect against enemy fire.

The two bulldozers are laying on their sides just three or four metres behind the tanks. One is complete with its three-ton blade standing almost three metres high. Sadly, as the divers discovered, the blade of the other example has broken off, though it does lie close by.

Additional items located include the remains of a vehicle, well broken up and laying to the front and side of one of the tanks. The engine block, axles, wheels and tyres, along with other parts, are scattered across the site. There was also the discovery of a large





RIGHT:
A photograph showing a small part of Omaha Beach in the immediate aftermath of D-Day. A number of stranded landing craft and piles of supplies can clearly be seen. In the centre, with her stern toward the beach, is the American landing craft USS LCT 555. Beyond her to the left, and lying parallel to the beach, is a Royal Navy landing craft - LCT(A) 2421. This is a sister ship to LCT(A) 2428 which was carrying the vehicles and equipment surveyed by the dive team. All the LCT(A)s were converted in British shipyards – there being a total of twenty-six, all using LCT Mk.Vs as a basis. In a form of reverse lend-lease, a number were supplied to the American forces for D-Day. (US Naval Historical Center)

'Kedge' anchor tucked just underneath one of the tanks, along with two four-bladed propellers.

These would be significant clues to solving the mystery. Kedge anchors were used by landing craft to pull themselves back off the beaches after dropping their cargo. It is believed that the anchor and props were spares from a Landing Craft Tank (LCT).

Armed with the results of the underwater survey, the team commenced an extensive period of research using archive documents and references. It was quickly established that the Whale Bridge section could not have supported over 100 tons of equipment - when installed in its final position, each section was only designed to support a maximum weight of fifty-six tons. The original 'Whale' theory as to how the wreckage came to be in this part of the Channel was therefore discounted at an early stage.

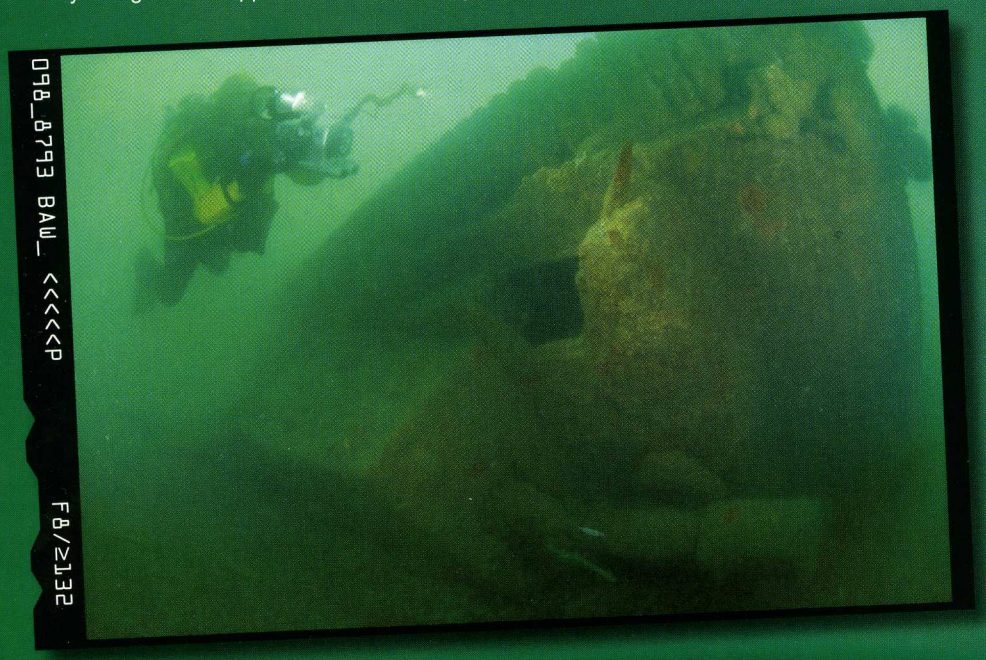
One entry in the War Diaries of the 2nd Royal Marine Armoured Support Group described how the unit had loaded onto their Landing Craft Tanks at Gosport on 2 June 1944. It was an event, the writer proudly added, that was "partly witnessed by the Prime Minister and other visitors". These Royal Marines and their flotilla of landing craft were to be part of 'J Force' - the predominantly Canadian assault force. It was to be landed on Juno Beach at 'H Hour'.

Working back through these fascinating documents, the researchers were eventually led to an entry which noted how, on the night of 5 June 1944, one Royal Navy LCT(A) - LCT(A) 2428 - had failed to make it across the Channel due to engine trouble. It subsequently capsized whilst under tow. All of the twelve man crew of the landing craft and thirty-nine Royal Marine and Canadian Army personnel were reported to have been rescued. The ship continued to float for some time and was later sunk by Royal Navy gunfire to stop it becoming a hazard to shipping.

The LCT(A)s were in themselves unusual. As already mentioned, the intention was that some of the landing craft would approach the beaches at 'H Hour', providing firepower from two tanks firing from the bows. A wooden ramp of heavy timbers was built so the two tanks, side by side up forward, could fire over the bow ramp during the run in. To protect the LCT's crew, additional armour consisting of two-inch armour plate, was fitted around the crew quarters aft of the tank deck. It was this armour that led to the designation LCT(A) - the 'A' standing for armoured. Unfortunately, the additional armour and raising of the tanks on the ramps severely affected the stability of the craft and heavy seas resulted in a number of overloaded landing craft being swamped.

As the research continued, the final, conclusive, piece of the jigsaw was finally found. The discovery of the original loading tables for LCT(A) 2428 revealed that it had indeed been carrying two Centaurs, a pair of Armoured D7 Bulldozers, a "5cwt Car (4x4)", and a quantity of ammunition. Finally, a report from a crew survivor, Able Seaman C.R. Hunt, aged 22 at the time, confirmed the events of the sinking.

After more than sixty years, one group of dedicated divers had finally answered a long-standing D-Day puzzle! ■



TOP:
One of the two Centaurs resting on its side. The 95mm Howitzer is clearly visible.

ABOVE:
Another view of one of the Armoured D7 Bulldozers.