



FROGMEN AT WORK



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On 20 June 1944, in order to counter the Allies' advance towards Cherbourg, the German Major-General Sattler ordered the demolition of the town's port infrastructure: the concrete slab and supporting piles of the Quai de France were destroyed; the giant Norwegian whaler *Solglimt* and the coaster *Grandlieu* were sunk and overturned across the Transatlantic Basin; cranes, tugs, barges and goods wagons were also sunk in the basin and mines were laid to prevent any boats from entering the port.

Cherbourg was liberated on 26 June but the Kriegsmarine (as the German navy was known during the Third Reich, from 1935 to 1945) had gone to great lengths to carry out wholesale sabotage. Cherbourg's port and harbour were riddled with a range of sophisticated mines: magnetic, acoustic, pressure or pulse-counter-triggered.

The port of Cherbourg was a strategic point for supplying the combat troops on the front line. It had to be made operational again as quickly as possible.

On 27 June the 1056th Port Construction and pair Engineer Group, who were tasked with planning and scheduling all the work required to restore the port to an operational condition, arrived in Cherbourg to carry out preliminary reconnaissance activities, directed by the Fourth Major Port of Embarkation.

On 2 July minesweepers, let by Commander John Temple of the Royal Navy, began clearing the outer harbour.

In spite of the sophisticated equipment used by the American and British navies (ultrasonic depth finders, magnetic and acoustic detectors), frogmen had to be brought in. Some of the pressure mines could be triggered by a ship simply passing close to them.

On 3 July Commander Francis Landon of the Royal Navy began an underwater investigation of the harbour basins, jetties and anchorages. The Royal Navy general staff of mine experts, with their special diving suits, had more experience than the Americans.

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80 volunteer frogmen, American and French as well as British, who were nicknamed “human minesweepers” by the British sailors, knuckled down to the difficult task of locating the main underwater obstacles including mines.

The frogmen began their search in the Bassin du Commerce, in the town centre. According to the numerous fishermen who witnessed the operations, the Germans had carried out less extensive sabotage here, making it easier to access and less dangerous. A crowd of onlookers observed the scene. Three underwater mines were discovered, as well as a great deal of bulky debris (notably barges and dinghies).

The frogmen’s diving suits, which could be used to a depth of 15 metres, enabled them to work for one hour before returning to the surface. For heavy work, acetylene and oxygen cylinders were taken down when required to provide the

power supply for cutting torches. The frogmen were also equipped with the latest underwater welding equipment.

The water was very murky because of all the massive mine explosions, so grids were installed over the basins using a system of weighted ropes, which made marking out simpler.

By 13 July 1944 103 mines of all types had been cleared by the frogmen to open a navigation channel between the Western Fort and the Napoleon Beach, where amphibious trucks were then able to disembark.



American diver at work in the port

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