

# THE HARBOUR CALLED MULBERRY

## An Extraordinary Story Is Told In An Extraordinary Way

ON D-Day, July 6, 1944, British engineering completed one of its most remarkable feats—two prefabricated harbours, each capable of handling supplies as easily as a good natural port, were towed across the Channel and put together under fire on the beaches of France. The story behind that amazing plan goes back to 1940, and involves thousands of men. It was such an extraordinary story that it really needed to be told in an extraordinary way. The BBC undertook this, and in March of this year broadcast a documentary programme lasting nearly an hour and a-half, which dramatised the story of "The Harbour Called Mulberry," from the moment (at the time of Dunkirk) when it was no more than a feeling of determination to return, up to the day—D plus 16—when the worst summer storm for 40 years was subsiding, and one half of the construction, Mulberry B, had withstood it.

**R**ECORDS of "The Harbour Called Mulberry," have been sent by the BBC to the NBS, and will be heard from 2YA on Monday, September 3, starting at 7.30 p.m. The programme is in three parts (1) "The Harbour is Planned"; (2) "The Harbour is Built"; (3) "The Harbour in Being." It was written and produced by Cecil McGivern, and incidental music was written specially for it by Walter Goehr. The Admiralty, the War Office, the Ministries of Supply, Labour, and War Transport, and the Films Division of the Ministry of Information all co-operated with the BBC in the production. The narrator is Valentine Dyall, who at times explains, at other times is almost a part of the cast, throwing out questions to the workers, inventors, and soldiers, and at other times again is simply a declamatory voice placing words in a rhythmical pattern with the incidental music.

### Its Hero Is Not a Man

As the narrator will tell listeners (in the words of Cecil McGivern), "The Harbour Called Mulberry" is the story of the growth of an idea, of the clothing of that idea in steel, and of its fulfilment. The real men who played their parts in the original drama are unnamed, "because the hero of this story is not a man." Yet in the drama which the BBC has made, men emerge as living characters—War Office experts, Second Front "agitators" whose voices float in through the War Office windows, foremen on concreting jobs, commandos returning from raids, workers who have been dragged far from their homes to do the unskilled work—all these are brought to life by a highly skilled acting cast, and worked closely into a fast-moving script.

### "A Magnificent Job"

Martin Armstrong, one of the independent critics writing for the BBC Listener on broadcast programmes, de-

scribed how he listened to "The Harbour Called Mulberry" with misgivings, remembering his "inability to stomach those large dramatisations of great events with which the BBC occasionally indulges us." But, he says, he expected the worst and got the best.

"Cecil McGivern, who wrote and directed it, has certainly done a magnificent job," Armstrong said. "The story covered the whole scheme from the first tentative discussions down to the carrying out of the great venture on D-Day and the subsequent gale that put it to its supreme test, and the incidents and scenes were so skilfully chosen, written, and linked together by the narrative that the story forged ahead not only without a hitch, but with perfect coherence and a steadily-growing interest. Even my pet aversion, the incidental music, seemed to me to be in place here, and, besides, good in itself . . . it is a first-rate historical document, besides

being a thrilling drama—quite the best thing of its kind I have heard."

### In the Beginning

This story of the growth of an idea starts where you might expect it to start—with a British Tommy remarking at Dunkirk: "We're out—right out—but one day, we'll go back, as sure as God made little apples." Then you hear about the commando raid on Guernsey, when a dinghy overturned on the way back to the launch and one commando and precious Bren guns were lost in the surf: "The surf creaming on the yellow sand, looking lovely, and gentle, but behind it—the terrible strength of the sea." It was there that someone realised how much would have to be learnt about beach landings.

And while the Germans are deciding that without first taking a port the English cannot threaten invasion of the Continent, some English engineer is on his way to Whitehall to deal with "port reconstruction and repair"—to think out ways of restoring the wreckage the Germans will leave when eventually it is possible to capture a port.

As 1941 goes by, some lessons are learnt. A raid on the Lofoten Islands in March leads to ideas for the design of LCA's—Assault Landing Craft. Study of the weather indicates that the odds are two to one against, for any given attempt. Commando reports suggest that with adequate naval and air support a

small port could be taken and held. But could the Continent be invaded on a large scale? The problem grows with the New Year, and in 1942 the experts wonder whether and how a major assault could take place. Meanwhile the Germans decide to concentrate forces in the ports. Then comes another experiment. At 1.34 a.m. on March 28 H.M.S. Campbelltown is exploded at St. Nazaire, 400 Germans are killed, and a dry-dock is closed by the wreck.

The scene changes to a Conference Room in Whitehall. The experts are piling up the butts of nervously smoked cigarettes in the ashtrays. Could Antwerp be taken? Army: with air cover, yes. Air Force: no fighter cover could be given. Antwerp is too far away. Could a landing be made in the Pas de Calais area? Air Force: yes, air cover possible. Navy: yes, quite practicable. Army: impossible—the perimeter would require 50 divisions.

### The P.M.'s Memo

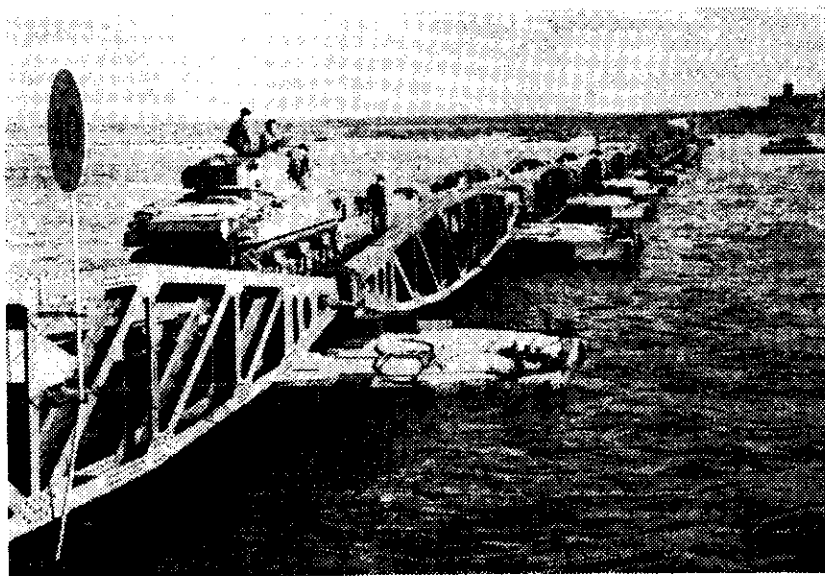
Then comes Mr. Churchill's now famous memorandum, suggesting an investigation of the possibilities of using piers on beaches—piers that might float up and down on the tide, that could be anchored, that could roll, expand, and contract. And 1942 ends with only one decision made, and that a negative one—no invasion this year. But an idea has been born.

In 1943, there is the experiment with bubble breakwaters, and a trial with the "lilo scheme"—inflated rubber bags to break the waves. In April comes the try-out of "Winnie," a floating pier 480ft. long, with "spuds," spikes that are pushed down to rest on the bottom. "Winnie" withstands a violent storm in a remote Scottish bay, twisting and bending, rolling, but surviving. So the decision is made, and the planning of a gigantic undertaking begins.

### The Work Begins

A 50-mile stretch of beach for D-Day is chosen in secret, and it is proposed to make two "Mulberries"—one for the Americans, and one for the British troops—two harbours the size of Dover (which took seven years to build), 50,000 tons of steel, when every ton is precious, 15 miles of piers, causeways, and breakwaters, needing thousands of tons of cement, and all to be built in six months. Code names are chosen for the different parts of Mulberry so that it can all be talked about and written about and even those who are doing the work won't know the secret.

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An armoured vehicle driving towards the coast of Normandy on one of the prefabricated steel roadways of Mulberry Harbour. At top of page: A composite photograph of the port in position.