SYNTHETIC HARBOURS

The Best-kept Secret of the War

A KORERO Report

NO SECRET of this war has been better preserved than was the intention of the Allied High Command to construct our own harbours to speed our heavy equipment ashore after " D " day. There can be no doubt that the Nazis had perfected their anti-invasion strategy, and placed confidence in its success. It is not difficult to guess what that strategy may have been.

In any amphibious landing—and particularly so when that landing takes place on a coast with few port facilities—there comes a time when the lightly equipped infantry of the invaders are precariously ashore, but are unsupported. The heavy equipment—tanks, tank destroyers, guns, ammunition and the trucks to carry it, are still striving to wallow through the surf to lend assistance.

This is the time when the defenders throw in their counter-attacks, with every chance of driving the attacking infantry into the sea. But when the Germans did launch their counter-attacks, they were first warded off and then soundly thumped by heavy equipment which the German High Command had every right to suppose could not be ashore at all.

The Allies had no major port at that time; tiny French fishing harbours could not handle the traffic, and the tides and storms of the Channel precluded the landing of sufficient heavy equipment through the surf. How then was it done? The answer represents, in the words of the late President Roosevelt, " The most critical single project which the United Kingdom had undertaken in this war."

This project was the construction, in England and Scotland, of virtually the entire artificial harbour equipment used on the beaches of France. This made possible the landing of enough supplies to ensure the Normandy breakthrough and the sweep through France and the Lowlands to the German border. All this with the possession only of Cherbourg, never a great cargo port, and not open for heavy traffic until August—two months after " D " day.

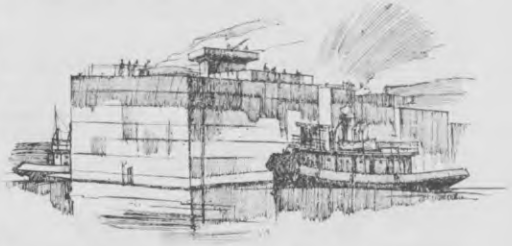
Conception

At the Quebec Conference in 1943 the Combined Chiefs of Staff decided that the creation of artificial harbours would be absolutely essential. Only by such improvization would it be possible to unload over the beaches enough supplies to ensure a sucessful cross-channel invasion of Europe. Nothing like it had ever been attempted before, but since 1941 British engineers had been engrossed in experimental work, in which United States Naval Civil Engineers had joined. The final plans and specifications were completed in November, 1943, only seven months before " D " day.

Construction

Two complete port installations were required, one for use by the British Forces and the other for the Americans. The British port was to be at Arromanches, and the American at Laurent-sur-mer. Britain undertook the entire construction programme for both forces, although American Seabees joined with the Royal Engineers and civilian labour in building and assembling the equipment. Some 50,000 men were kept hard at work on this giant task.

Each of the two ports was to have a capacity equal to that of Dover, and was



Manoeuvring a caisson into position.