



OPERATION QUICKSILVER III - BIGBOBS PART 1

Part of Col David Strangeways' Quicksilver plan required the limited display of dummy landing craft, which simulated the new Mark 4 Landing Craft Tank (LCT). Sites for these were chosen at the end of March 1944. 255 "Bigbobs", as they were known, were to be set out on rivers between Great Yarmouth and Folkestone between 20th May and 12th June. 70 were set out on the river Orwell. From 1st April 1944 there was a ten-mile exclusion zone along the South and East coast up to the Wash. Woolverstone and the Shotley Peninsula must have been literally sealed off. This zone was enforced until 15th August 1944.

The Dummy craft or "Bigbobs", as they were known, officially "Device 36" were designed by Chris Toon at Cox and Co (Watford) Ltd, an engineering company specialising in tubular furniture. The design had been trialled at Virginia Water and then Beaulieu and was successful. A decision was taken to make several hundred "kits". Parts were ordered in Dec 1943 for delivery in March 1944. A training base for construction was located at Waldringfield on the river Deben.

"First of all, we were to go on a course, a common enough event, as any ex-service chaps will know, only in this case whole companies at a time. My Company found itself at Waldringfield near Woodbridge, in a field with piles of metal tubes welded together to form a type of assembly kit, each sub-assembly had to be memorised and broken-down time and time again until we could do it all blindfolded. At this stage we practised in the dark until we could do it perfectly." Lance-Corporal Yardley

The Army was responsible for construction. "A" Company of 10th Worcestershire battalion, under Capt. J. G. Hayes, were assigned to Woolverstone. They were billeted on the Church Field, near St Michael's church.

Building at Woolverstone started on 22nd May. The weather was calm and dry. There was little moonlight. In early summer the hours of darkness were short, between 5 and 6 hours. It took a group of 30 trained men divided into three teams approximately six hours to assemble one Bigbob. Time was tight. An incomplete craft would have to be disassembled and hidden away. The first finished craft was run down the slipway into the river on its wheeled undercarriage at 03:00.

The Bigbobs arrived as kits. Each kit required 7, 3-ton lorries, 6 covered and 1 open, and was accompanied by a motorcycle despatch rider. After off-loading their cargo, the drivers spent the night asleep in their lorries before returning to Watford.

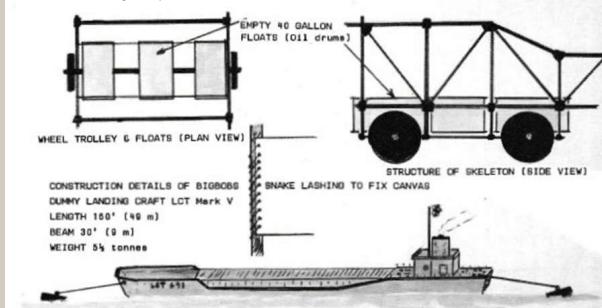
"Final stage of the route to (Woolverstone) was via country lanes and eventually ended in a wooded area. Here lorries were unloaded and the contents put out of sight under the hedgerows in the woods...In the morning, the completed LCT would be afloat and all that could be seen was a jeep towing a harrow over the field to erase all tell-tale activity." Driver. Mr R J Noyce

The construction area was "an expanse of open parkland bounded by a line of trees close to the river banks, where the ground sloped steeply down to the water."

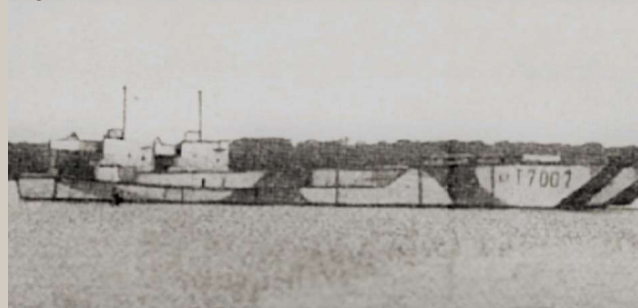
The kit consisted of 500 different pieces and had to be assembled in the dark and in near silence. For each Bigbob a construction area of roughly 100 m² was required.

Their skeleton was made of light weight 3 1/4" tubular steel held together by fish-plates and cotter pins. Light, steel pre-fabricated plates were bolted to the sides, bow and stern to achieve the exact shape. The frame was assembled in three sections - an articulated construction - which gave it some flexibility on entering the water. Canvas was then stretched over this and tied onto the frame by lacing. The final LCT was 49m (160 ft) long, beam 9 m (30 ft). She weighed around 5 1/2 tonnes. * A system of 30 wheels was attached to the base so the finished craft could be run down to the river's edge. They floated on an assemblage of around 30, 40-gallon oil drums.

Peter Tooley, Operation Quicksilver. 1988



Bigbobs on the river Orwell



Once the basic craft had been completed the superstructure had to be added, wheelhouse, funnel, bow doors of the correct angle and a bridge, fashioned out of duck boards, were added. Coils of rope were placed on the decks. An ensign and halyards for the mast were included. "The completed LCTs were indistinguishable from the real thing at 25 yards." R J Noyce

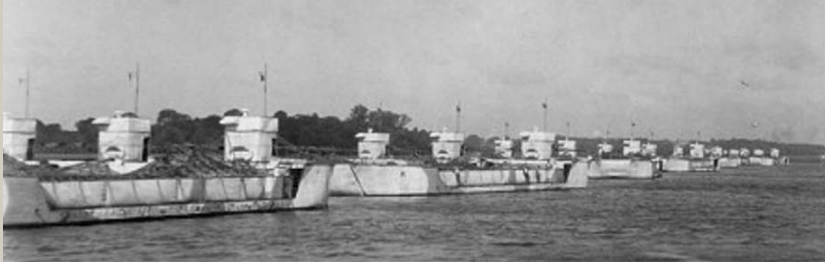
*There seems to be some discrepancies in accounts of the size of Bigbobs constructed and moored on the river Orwell. In essence, there were two types of LCT in production at this period of the war: Mk IV and Mk V. The Mk IV was 57m (187 ft) in length. Beam 11.5 m (38ft). Weight 13 1/2 tonnes. The Mk V was 35.8 m (117 ft) in length. Beam 9.8m (33ft) Weight 5 1/2 tonnes. Clearly, the Mk IV is much the larger craft. Neither fit the dimensions given by Lt. Peter Tooley. It appears that the dummy LCTs moored on the river Orwell were type Mk V. Genuine LCTs of both types can be seen on the Orwell in March 1944 but only type Mk V in July. Therefore, it is the Mk V dummy LCTs that were built at Woolverstone.





OPERATION QUICKSILVER III - BIGBOBS PART 2

Bigbobs on the river Orwell



Once the dummy LCT reached the water, the Army operation was handed over to the Navy. The Bigbob had to be guided out to its mooring. She had no engine, was light and had a shallow draught. This made her difficult to manoeuvre. Any wind or strong tide made the job even more challenging.

The articulated structure of the LCT made entry to the water slightly easier as the bow then mid-section could lift horizontally on the water as the remainder of the craft descended the angle on the sloping hard.

Each Bigbob had to be accompanied to its mooring by 4 small, agile craft, LCVP (Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel) manned by Royal Marines. Two LCVPs, with Royal Marine coxes to steer them, were tied either side of the bow by hand lines on entry to the river, one at each corner. A Naval officer stood precariously on the duckboard bridge between 20 and 30 feet above the water giving directions. With the Army team pushing from the stern and the Royal Marines tugging from the bow, the craft entered the river where two more LCVPs tied onto the stern. The LCVPs acted as the Bigbob engine and required skill to manoeuvre.

“There were no rudders, so if we wanted to turn to starboard then I had to get starboard craft to put their engines astern and the port craft to go full ahead.” Peter Tooley.

With deft instruction the newly completed Bigbob was steered to the trots of orange buoys moored along Potter’s Reach, and tied fore and aft about 64m (70yds) apart, in pairs or threes.

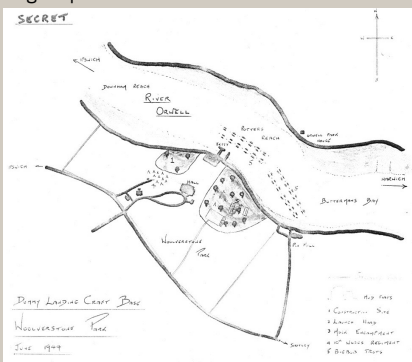
Great care had to be taken not to run the craft onto either river bank or mud bank. The articulated nature of the frame would have distorted the shape of the craft and shown it to be a dummy.

The vehicle hold was covered with camouflaged netting poked up with poles to simulate a cargo of tanks or lorries.

The Bigbobs themselves were serviced by a small number of personnel members of 446 Flotilla of Royal Marines who were camped in tents just outside the main gates leading to the rose garden in the Park grounds. The Bigbobs were moored with a White Ensign raised during the day and manned by skeleton crews who carried out a range of tasks, even fishing over the side. Laundry was hung out to dry. Specially designed oil burners were lit to produce puffs of smoke. Aldis lamps blinked signals ashore. Small boats delivered ammunition, mail bags and other essential stores. Liberty boats took men to and from the craft. Fuel Lighters moved up and down the line of craft, laying out oiling hoses to simulate re-fuelling. The mooring patterns were varied. And all the time, real LCTs chugged up and down the river, mingling with the dummies.

Four launches took place each night with 50 Bigbobs moored by June 6th. 13 further craft were added the following week.

While all this subterfuge was taking place, real landing craft and larger invasion ships were using Woolverstone for training. Some of the landing ships were so large that the only way they could turn about was to place their strengthened bows onto Cat House Hard and push the stern around under engine power.



To maintain the deception a fake Army camp was constructed between Woolverstone and Pin Mill. Among other things, this had a Guard house, a parade square, tents, dummy equipment, smoking field kitchens, phantom convoys of army lorries delivering supplies and even fake wireless chatter to moored Bigbobs.

Operation Quicksilver maintain the deception throughout June, only coming to an end in early July. On 10th June General Guingand, signalled to Colonel Wills, commanding the 10th Worcesters, as follows:

The Chief-of-Staff is anxious that the threat created to N. France by the dummy landing craft under your control be continued as long as possible. It is during the next fortnight that we may well obtain most benefit from these craft.



While it is realised that the launching and maintenance of the craft is an extremely arduous task it is requested that every possible effort be made to ensure that as much life and animation is given to them as possible.

You should explain to all ranks that they are playing an extremely important part of the plan, and that in view of this they are required to make as great an effort as battalions deployed in the battle areas.

The German High Command was convinced that the Normandy landings were a distraction from the main invasion force. They believed an invasion force, including 500 landing craft, was massed in southeast England. This kept Panzer Divisions near Pas de Calais in readiness, thus keeping them away from the battle for Normandy. The Quicksilver deception was successful in its aims.

“These deception measures continued as planned after D-day and events were to show that they achieved outstanding results and in fact played a vital part in our successes in Normandy.”
Normandy to the Baltic Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery

