

S.S. LEOPOLDVILLE

Text and images by Vic Verlinden

When the Belgian troop transport ship *S.S. Leopoldville* was torpedoed, 763 young American soldiers died. It was the largest American loss in a single action during the Second World War. This tragedy was kept secret in order to keep up the morale of the combat troops. It was long after the end of the war that the truth finally surfaced.



A Floating Palace

When the 11,500-ton passenger ship *Leopoldville* was launched in 1927 at the John Cockerill S.A. shipyard in Hoboken near Antwerp, Belgium, it was used immediately on the Antwerp - Matadi line. The Compagnie Maritime Belge used it to transport passengers and goods to Belgian Congo. It was the first of the CMB ships to leave the port of Antwerp for Congo, and so was quickly named "Congo boat," but it was also used as a luxury cruise liner to other destinations. On these trips, the rich passengers were treated to untold luxury in the beautiful art deco interior of this floating palace. Everything possible was done to make the trip unforgettable for the passengers as they traveled to Norway and far-flung destinations such as the North African countries of Morocco and Algeria.

When the Second World War broke out, the ship was immediately claimed to transport troops. After a series of adaptations and installation of the necessary armament, the *Leopoldville* took on its new task. Starting in May of 1940, more than 120,000 troops were transported; and until December 1944, the ship logged 219,949 miles without an incident.

Christmas Night 1944

On the 24th of December 1944, at 09:00, the *Leopoldville* left Southampton, England, to transport 2,235 American soldiers of the 66th Infantry Division to Cherbourg, France. These soldiers were mobilized to stop Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt's campaign in the Belgian Ardennes.



When they approached the French coast, Captain Charles Limbor gave the order to sail in a zigzag pattern. The reason for the maneuver was a warning from one of the three accompanying destroyers about a potential U-boat attack. About five miles in front of the port of Cherbourg, U-boat *U-486* waited for prey. The submarine of Oberleutnant Gerard Meyer was equipped with a new snorkeling device that enabled it to stay under water while charging the batteries. When evening fell, Oblt. Meyer spotted the *Leopoldville*, and fired a torpedo that hit on the starboard side. The damage was enormous.

The Rescue Operation

Immediately, an SOS was sent out and several ships came to the rescue, including a tugboat. However, the tug was unable to move the ship to safety because Captain Limbor had dropped anchor in order to avoid floating into a minefield that lay just outside the harbor.

Even though Commander Pringle of the English destroyer H.M.S. *Brilliant* brought his ship alongside, many lives were lost during the evacuation. Many jumped too early or too late, thus falling between the two ships into the ice-cold water. Many of the wounded who were tied on to stretchers also fell between the two ships and were lost. The sea was extremely choppy, making the transfers that much harder; and, of course, the bitterly cold water made for little chance of survival for those who went in. Nevertheless, the *Brilliant* was able to save more than 500 soldiers.

Still, seven hundred and sixty three soldiers died in this catastrophe. Amongst them were the twins from New York, Clarence and Carl Carlson. Their bodies were never found. Private Angelo Catalano died on his 21st birthday; his body was never found. His brother Jerry later testified how difficult it was for the family to celebrate Christmas in the years following the tragedy.

The Supreme Command of the Allied Forces tried to keep everything silent in order to keep up the morale of the troops. Only in 1996 did the English Admiralty release documents that detailed what really happened. Since then, a monument for the victims has been raised in Fort Benning, Georgia, U.S.A.

Under the guidance of Allan Andrade, the survivors meet every year to commemorate their fallen comrades. Allan is a retired police officer from New York who made the tragedy public. He also published a book with the testimonies of survivors and their families. At the gathering of 2006, my diving buddy Danny Huyghe filmed some very moving testimonies for the documentary that he is making about the torpedoing of the *Leopoldville*.



Diving on the Leopoldville

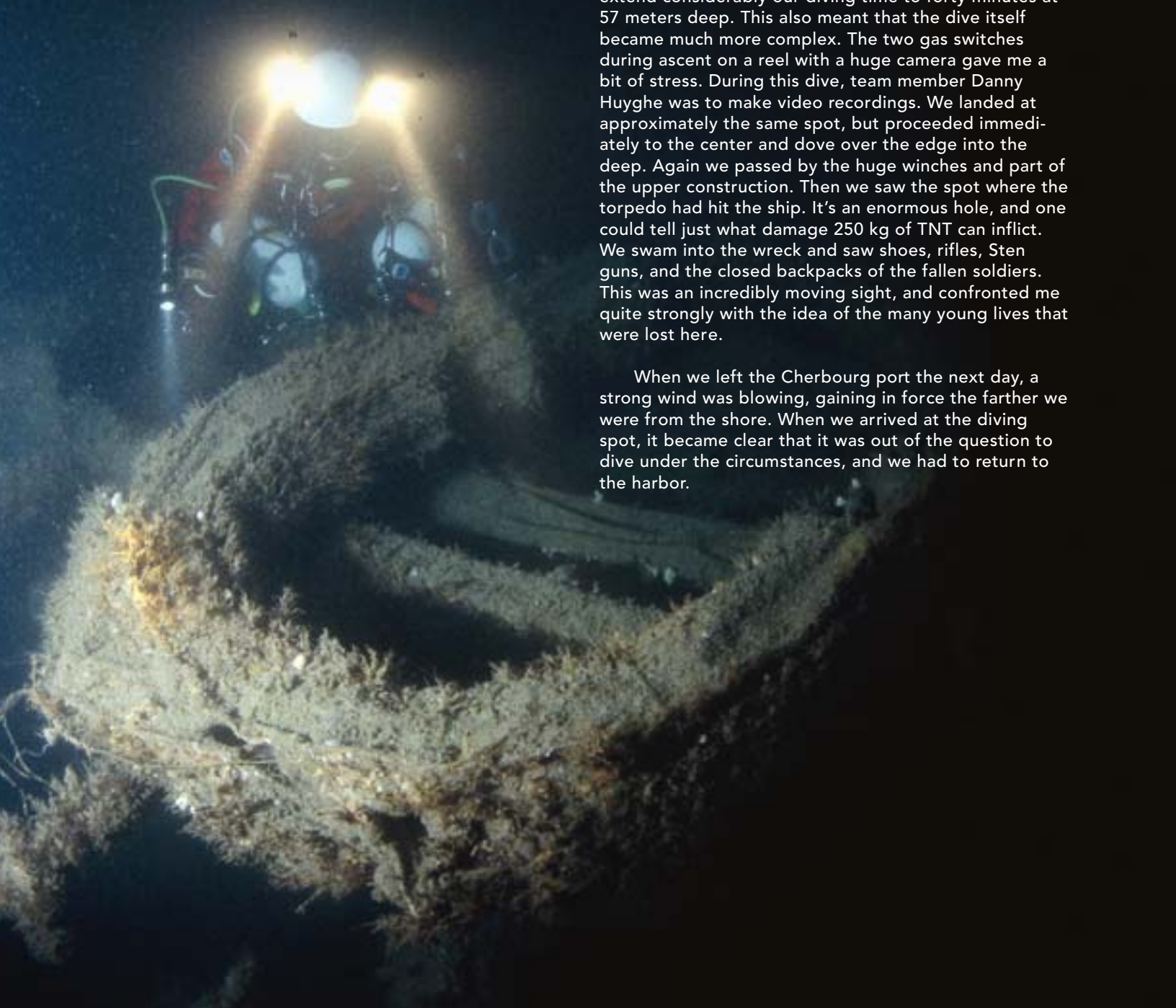
The wreck of the *Leopoldville* is situated only five miles from the port of Cherbourg, but it lies at a depth of 60 meters. Dennis Leonard and Jean Olive of the French Navy Diving Team accompanied us. They had all the necessary permits to dive on this official war cemetery. Not to waste any precious diving time, each phase of the dive was carefully planned and the blueprints of the ship studied in detail. After a speedy descent, we landed on the starboard side of the wreck. We swam immediately over the edge to the deck in the direction of the bow cannon. I took several pictures, and we continued swimming to the middle of the wreck. It was amazing to me that the deck planks were still there after so many years. The big winches to load the ship were also still there. The visibility was at least eight meters.

When we returned to the upper part of the wreck, I saw in one of the aisles a stack of helmets and a pile of ammunition. These helmets were left behind when the soldiers jumped overboard to save their lives. After a few more shots, our twenty-two minutes of diving time had passed, and we had to start the decompression procedure. The intense dive and the sound condition of the ship were overwhelming. Back on board the diving vessel, we had a lively conversation about it. But the wind had gained strength, and the dive for the next day was cancelled. We had to start our return trip of 650 kilometers to Belgium, but we vowed to come back in 2006.

Further exploration of the wreck

In September 2006, we planned two consecutive trips to the wreck. We would dive with trimix in order to extend considerably our diving time to forty minutes at 57 meters deep. This also meant that the dive itself became much more complex. The two gas switches during ascent on a reel with a huge camera gave me a bit of stress. During this dive, team member Danny Huyghe was to make video recordings. We landed at approximately the same spot, but proceeded immediately to the center and dove over the edge into the deep. Again we passed by the huge winches and part of the upper construction. Then we saw the spot where the torpedo had hit the ship. It's an enormous hole, and one could tell just what damage 250 kg of TNT can inflict. We swam into the wreck and saw shoes, rifles, Sten guns, and the closed backpacks of the fallen soldiers. This was an incredibly moving sight, and confronted me quite strongly with the idea of the many young lives that were lost here.

When we left the Cherbourg port the next day, a strong wind was blowing, gaining in force the farther we were from the shore. When we arrived at the diving spot, it became clear that it was out of the question to dive under the circumstances, and we had to return to the harbor.





Entrance in the machine room

Two weeks later we dove again on the wreck, and I wanted to take a closer look at the torpedo hole.

Just before the spot where the ship was broken, I discovered several large objects on the starboard side. These items turned out to be three life rafts. These rafts must have been tied to the ship when disaster struck. They would have floated away otherwise. I took a few photos then swam to the backside. We were at a depth of 57 meters, and I decided to enter the wreck with my diving buddy, Eric Wouters. We did so where the machine room is situated. We came into a narrow aisle, and had to turn right. Eric attached his reel because it was too risky to lose our direction for the return. We could see clearly the cranes and tubes that one expects in a machine room. The passage was very narrow, and we experienced difficulty maneuvering. We continued swimming and came to another room where we saw several running frames. Then we signaled each other that it had become too dangerous to proceed, and we had to start our ascent urgently.

Back on board, we discussed the discovery of the life rafts with our French colleagues. It turned out that they never noticed them before, and were really surprised when we told them where they are located on the wreck. The next day, we made video recordings of the rafts because they are very important in the whole picture. They could have saved dozens of lives, if they had been used. The survivors told us later that they couldn't untie them because the knots were frozen.

A shipwreck that doesn't leave you untouched

The *Leopoldville* tragedy is something that will stay always in my mind, and I think this is also true for all the different team members with whom I have dived on the wreck. The stories of the young soldiers who left for a foreign country to save it from Nazism really touched me.

After the war, there were bitter discussions about the Belgian crew who were blamed for not having done enough to save the soldiers. I think that, in this type of disaster, the overall panic is bound to make victims. Silent witnesses of this are the military life rafts that are still there!

