

IN THE WAKE OF RAPHAEL SEMMES

by Hubert B. Leroy

By mid-June, as always since a decade, the archeological diving campaign on the wreck of the *CSS Alabama* off the coast of Cherbourg was well underway. Under the guidance and management of Dr. Gordon Watts, the divers of the *CSS Alabama Association* were this year celebrating their 200th diving mission in the dark waters of the English Channel.

Being a long-standing member of this association, I have closely monitored its activities since a long time and was thus once again in Cherbourg to witness the main events of the current campaign. June 30, 2001 will remain a most memorable day not only for myself, but also for Serge Noirsain, Jean-Claude Janssens and Gerald Hawkins, my friends of the CHAB who had accompanied me on this trip.

Through the years, I had constantly requested to my friend Ulane Bonnel, president of the *CSS Alabama Association*, her consent to accompany the divers to the site where occurred, on June 19, 1864, the famous duel between the *CSS Alabama* and the *USS Kearsage*. The reasons for my demand were twofold, on one hand of sentimental nature and on the other, I had wanted to gather some specific information that required personal observations and assessments from the site of the Confederate wreck. Besides, being myself a diver, my interest in sharing some of the experiences of the professionals was obvious.

My dream finally came true on June 29, when during the morning breakfast with my friends at the Naval Circle, Ulane Bonnel came up with a fabulous piece of news : arrangements had been made for us to accompany the French divers on the following morning for a full day at sea. One can just imagine our astonishment !

Thus, on Friday June 30, the four CHAB musketeers boarded the craft of the *Club de Plongée de Cherbourg* (Cherbourg diving club) named *Little Pocket* where they were warmly welcomed by the skipper Serge (not Noirsain !) and his group of friendly divers. We lifted anchor at 10 AM and gained the high sea through the West Pass, in the wake of the Confederate blockade runner some 137 years ago. Cheerfully standing on the aft of the deck, our thoughts were riveted on the events that had taken place right here on that fateful day of Sunday, June 19, 1864.

Just like in June 64, the weather was superb, portraying a beautiful sunshine and a light breeze. Our small boat was progressing at some 20 knots, roughly the speed of the *Alabama*. It took us almost an hour to reach the floating buoy marking the position of the wreck, just off Querqueville Bay. Waiting for us was the *Enrica*, the craft of Gordon Watts and the American divers on board which we recognized our friend and correspondent Captain USN (RET) Oliver Semmes III, descendant of the *Alabama* commander. The use of two boats during this campaign is explained by the fact that since the *Enrica* flies the US colors, she is exempt from several certification procedures required by the French naval authorities, and this allows her divers to spend more time on the wreck.

Once equipped with their cumbersome and sophisticated gear, our frogmen disappeared into the deep green sea in groups of two. Their mission was perilous as usual, requiring professional underwater skills and an absolute knowledge of sub-surface techniques. The *Enrica* has on board an air compressor that feeds a sucking pump. The divers use it to remove silt and debris from the wreck lying at the bottom of the ocean. The carefully

planned agenda of the day was carried out efficiently and with clockwork precision. Although the French and American divers work hand in hand, their procedures and protocols differ somewhat except on matters related to safety. It is worthwhile mentioning that the time allotted to a dive on the wreck with compressed air bottles at a depth of 200 feet and in a hostile environment (strong currents, poor visibility, cold temperature etc.) is limited to 15 minutes. To this must be added the time necessary for numerous decompression stages. Moreover, the level of the tides also dramatically affects these conditions. Therefore, 45 minutes of effective work per day under calm sea conditions require three teams of divers to operate at a quarter of an hour interval.

On board the *Little Pocket* the excitement was gaining momentum within the CHAB party. Around noon, a cold lunch was served together with an excellent bottle of Bordeaux wine. The members of the safety team left behind on standby answered our endless queries concerning their perilous work and motivations for joining the *CSS Alabama Association*.

The dive of the day was most rewarding. A variety of artifacts were retrieved from the wreck, ranging from porcelain plates to eggcups, miscellaneous debris and a splendid ebony smoking pipe that we had the privilege to hold and scrutinize. It was a fabulous moment for the CHAB team with whom the divers shared their emotions, impressions and comments on the mission's accomplishments.

The diving equipment secured, our boat left the site of the wreck and headed back towards the coast. During the return journey, we joined the French divers in their ritual of drinking hot red wine prepared by one of them according to an old Cherbourg recipe. Back in the harbour, we were further invited to view the amazing underwater video film that one of the Americans had shot during his dive. Gordon Watts and others professionally commented the various footage scenes and answered the questions of the audience.

The afternoon ended with a brief visit to the facility where were stored the *Alabama* artifacts collected during the 2001 archeological campaign. After thanking our good friends for such a memorable day, we headed back to Belgium with the feeling of having accomplished "our mission" in the wake of Raphaël Semmes.

We express our deep gratitude to Ulane Bonnel and Joë Guesnon for making an old dream come true. Our appreciation is also extended to the *CSS Alabama Association*.



View from Querqueville of the West Pass of Cherbourg harbor trough which the CSS Alabama gained the international waters to meet the USS Kearsage
(Photo G. Hawkins)