

THE FRENCH NAVY OF TO-DAY

This article, written before the Armistice was signed, tells of the strength of the French Navy of this war. At the time of going to press, the fate of the French Fleet was still unknown

FRANCE'S battle fleet in 1914 was hardly comparable with the British Grand Fleet, and it numbered few modern battleships. Her large cruisers were numerous, but included many ancient vessels; of fast light cruisers she possessed none worthy of the classification. It was in torpedo craft, surface and submarine, that she excelled.

Excepting for the gallant part that her old battleships played at the Dardanelles, the public never heard of the activities of the large French ships.

It was not recognised that, particularly in the Mediterranean, the bulk of the French patrols were employed in the monotonous and arduous escort and patrol duties rarely enlivened by any incident.

Then, in April, 1917, the Corfu Conference definitely assigned to France the task of containing and bringing to action the hostile squadrons in the Adriatic and at Constantinople, leaving the whole of the anti-submarine campaign to the British admiral at Malta.

France suffered cruel losses in large and old ships with their gallant companies, until it began to be regarded as a matter of course that ill-luck would dog any French battleship or cruiser which had to leave port.

Since the Great War the French Navy has been completely rebuilt. At the outbreak of the present conflict in September, France could muster seven battleships built and the four 35,000-ton ships of the Richelieu class building. Those in service consisted of the two new Dunkerques, of 26,500 tons, armed with eight 13-inch guns; the two 22,000-ton Breagnes, built in 1913 and recently reconstructed, together with the Lorraine, which was rebuilt in 1934, armed with ten 13.4-inch weapons. Lastly came the two ships of the Paris class, also of 22,000 tons, but mounting 12-inch guns.

Ten Large Cruisers

In addition, there is the aircraft-carrier Bearn, an ex-battleship of 1914, converted for her present duties in 1923, which in the near future will be reinforced by the two Joffres, of 18,000 tons.

In large cruisers France has a total of ten. The 10,000-ton Algerie mounts 8-inch guns, which also form the armament of the four Suffrens, of 9,900 tons, and the two Tourvilles, of slightly larger displacement. In addition, there are six 7,600-ton cruisers of the La Galissonniere class and another three cruisers of the De Grasse class, of 8,000 tons, building, all of which carry 6-inch weapons as their primary armament. The three Duguay Trouins, of 7,250 tons, are armed with 6.1-inch pieces. Two mine-laying

cruisers, the Emile Bertin, of 5,600 tons, and La Tour D'Auvergne, of 4,770 tons, completed the total.

A Magnificent Force

To supplement the cruising force, France has built up a formidable strength of super-destroyers, which are virtually light cruisers, ranging from 2,300 tons to nearly 3,000 tons; 32 of these craft have been built, and four more are building, the latest being armed with 5.5-inch guns and carrying 10 torpedo tubes.

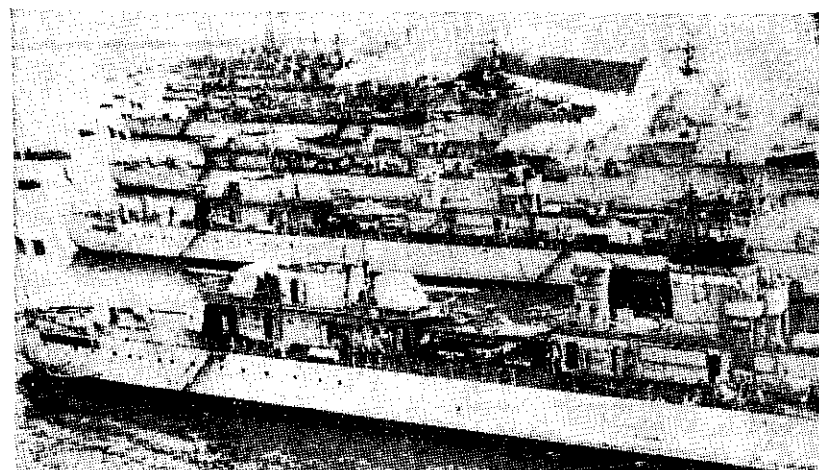
Besides these, she has 26 destroyers built and as many more building of from 1,000 to 1,800 tons, 12 smaller torpedo boats, and 32 escort and patrol vessels, to which are being added another 23 units. These last proved particularly valuable in the anti-submarine campaign.

Finally, there are 77 submarines, all of which have been built since 1924, together with another 25 in course of construction. A host of auxiliaries completes the tale of a magnificent naval force.

The traditional naval policy of France has been in the main two-fold—to ensure Allied naval interests in the Mediterranean and to guard the transport of her colonial army from North Africa, leaving to the British the task of dealing with the foe in northern waters and ensuring the freedom of Allied oceanic traffic.

This was the keystone of the Anglo-French naval strategy in 1914, and in a modified form it has remained. But in the intervening years since 1918 new factors have arisen.

It was to be assumed that in another war with Germany the Rome-Berlin axis would demand a drastic revision of plans. To France would fall the task



MANY of France's destroyers are virtually light cruisers. This photograph shows a flotilla of these speedy craft at anchor in Brest Harbour

of coping with the Italian Navy in the Mediterranean. Possible reinforcements of British battleships and cruisers could be assured, but in view of Italy's formidable submarine flotilla, approximating 100 craft, and her numerous destroyers and torpedo boats, over 130 in all, her task seemed likely to be strenuous.

Laconic Telegrams

No aid could be expected to augment the British patrols in the Atlantic and in the Channel. The less insistent but nevertheless possible intervention of Tokio on the side of the totalitarian powers had also to be taken into account.

So long as there was no move on Italy's part the bulk of the French naval forces were free to assist Britain. And how well had that aid been given? From the laconic telegrams which emanated from Paris from time to time, there was gleaned a picture which was all the more pleasant in view of France's ill-fortune in the last war. On September 18: "An enemy submarine was successfully attacked by our naval forces."

Ten days later it was authoritatively claimed that French warships had destroyed two U-boats. On October 16 the French Ministry of Marine declared that the submarine which sank the liners Bretagne and Louisiane and the tanker Emile Miguet had paid the penalty. Twelve days afterwards Paris announced that the bodies of six German sailors from a German submarine sunk in the Atlantic on October 26 or 27 had been washed ashore.

Dose of Depth Charges

On November 13 it was revealed that one of the aircraft attached to the Bearn had sunk another U-boat by depth charges. Nine days later came the news that two more submarines had been sunk by the destroyer Sirocco. A third enemy craft was sunk a few days later by the surveying vessel Amiral Mouchez in the English Channel; a torpedo fired by the U-boat had been sighted, and the patrol, swiftly turning about, ran up the track of the torpedo and settled the fate of the enemy by a dose of depth charges.

Finally, on November 30, it was announced that a U-boat had been seen to fire three torpedoes at a convoy in the Bay of Biscay and had then dived, but too late. Before she could seek safety in deep water, a shower of depth charges shattered her hull.

Her Price of Admiralty

On the other side of the picture, France has already paid her price of Admiralty. During September the cruiser-minelayer La Tour D'Auvergne, whilst lying in Casablanca harbour, caught fire and blew up with the loss of over 200 of her crew. Whilst the unremitting hunt of the U-boats was pressed home, over one hundred French warships were actively engaged in protecting the passage of the British Expeditionary Force across the Channel. No fewer than 158,000 troops were safely ferried across the narrow waters, and each night three convoys left England's shores guarded by British escorts until they were taken under the care of French warships.

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