

A Sailor's View of Early Service in the *Marine nationale* on the Eve of the First World War

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Conventional naval histories seldom consider the individual experiences of common sailors. Subaltern and other approaches to history from below use new sources to take a different viewpoint. In May 1913, recruit Georges Brucelle arrived in Toulon to start voluntary service in France's Marine nationale. After completing common training, he specialized in torpedoes and undertook instruction to gain qualification. Assigned to a destroyer minelayer, Brucelle died along with many other of the ship's crew during operations in 1915. Personal letters sent to his family reveal insights into the working and social lives of a French sailor just before the Great War.

Les histoires navales conventionnelles tiennent rarement compte des expériences individuelles des marins ordinaires. Les approches subalternes et autres de l'histoire par le bas utilisent de nouvelles sources pour adopter un point de vue différent. En mai 1913, la recrue Georges Brucelle arrive à Toulon pour commencer le service volontaire dans la Marine nationale. Après avoir terminé une formation commune, il se spécialise dans les torpilles et entreprend une instruction pour obtenir une qualification. Affecté à un contre-torpilleur mouilleur de mines, Brucelle mourut avec de nombreux autres membres de l'équipage du navire lors d'opérations en 1915. Des lettres personnelles envoyées à sa famille donnent un aperçu de la vie professionnelle et sociale d'un marin français juste avant la Grande Guerre.

In the mechanical, nuclear, and digital eras that characterised major navies in the twentieth century, numbers of trained personnel functioned and operated across the naval hierarchy from the lowest sailors right up to the highest admiral. Each possessed specific tasks and responsibilities. The divide between officers and the lower deck derived from historical traditions as well as socio-economic factors of class and background. Those were reinforced in naval establishments, within separate training systems, and aboard ships of squadrons and fleets. Common sailors constituted by far the majority, though they typically receive less scholarly attention than higher ranks, who commonly left memoirs, autobiographies, and other records from which broader historical studies draw. Writings on the Royal Navy and the United States Navy remain among the few focused specifically on sailors and enlisted personnel during the early twentieth century.¹ The recruitment, training, discipline, and social relations of sailors as a group and individually reflected portraits of lived experiences in a time of immense technological change. No comparable treatment covers France's *Marine nationale*, with existing studies stressing resistance to higher leadership and episodes of disobedience and mutiny.² Scholarship dealing with the Royal Navy's sit-down strike at Invergordon and similar naval "mutinies" purport to present a social history of the lower deck, if only because the concerns of sailors are given voice through grievances and testimony before boards of inquiry and disciplinary proceedings.³ Availability

¹ Brian Lavery, *Able Seamen: The Lower Deck of the Royal Navy, 1850-1939* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012); Christopher McKee, *Sober Men and True: Sailor Lives in the Royal Navy, 1900-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Simon Mark Smith, "'We Sail the Ocean Blue': British sailors, imperialism, identity, pride and patriotism c. 1890-1939" (Ph.D dissertation, University of Portsmouth, 2017); Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Enlisted Force, 1899-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978).

² David M. Hopkin, "Storytelling, fairytales and autobiography: some observations on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French soldiers' and sailor's memoirs," *Social History* 29, no. 2 (May 2004): 197, doi: 10.1080/0307102042000207840; Andrew Orr, "The Myth of the Black Sea Mutiny: Communist Propaganda, Soviet Influence and the Re-Remembering of the Mutiny," *French History* 32, no. 1 (2018): 89-90, doi: 10.1093/fh/cry003; Philippe Masson, "The French Naval Mutinies, 1919," *Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century: An International Perspective*, eds. Christopher Bell and Bruce Elleman (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2003), 116-120; Matt Perry, "The 1919 Mutinies in the French Armed Forces," *The Global Challenge of Peace: 1919 as a Contested Threshold to a New World Order*, ed. Matt Perry (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 8, doi: 10.3828/Liverpool/9781800857193.003.0004; Matt Perry, *Memory of War in France, 1914-45: César Fauxbras, the Voice of the Lowly* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 21.

³ Anthony Carew, *The lower deck of the Royal Navy 1900-39: The Invergordon mutiny in perspective* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), xviii-xix; Christopher M. Bell,

of sources derived directly from common sailors therefore offers a major impediment to deeper historical research that considers their lives as a whole.

Writing history from below relies on new perspectives and fuller exploitation of ignored primary sources. In France, sluggish reception toward Professor Ranajit Guha's subaltern studies that emphasised under-classes and human relationships over history written by elites competed with different varieties of social history and study of *mentalités*.⁴ Application of the subaltern approach to the naval context however holds much potential. Predominantly working class in origin and separated from officers by rank and training, sailors serving in the *Marine nationale* represented a large distinct group that interacted with each other internally and externally through connections to friends and surrounding locales. Identifiable by the fashionable blue/white naval rating uniform with red pom-pom topped hat, they resided within the navy's organization during working lives on duty and became renowned for exuberance, romance, and sexual prowess when away on leave ashore.⁵ Beyond basic stereotypes, remarkably little is known about their actual habits, concerns, and activities. Most sailors wrote occasionally when time allowed, often no more than commercial picture postcards sent to family, acquaintances, and sweethearts. If the surviving written record is limiting, diaries and personal correspondence from sailors held in formal repositories and archives remain rare.⁶ Such sources are commonly treated as ephemera with little or no historical merit. The subaltern approach explicitly reclaims the common lives of sailors as significant through the fragments left behind.

The experience of *Matelot torpilleur* Georges Jules Brucelle (service number 34305-1) provides an interesting frame into the early service career of a French sailor before the First World War. The primary sources for this interrogation are original handwritten letters sent by Brucelle to his mother and sister between May 1913 and September 1914, thirty-eight in total, which the author bought in a private sale from a seller in France.⁷ The conversation is necessarily one-sided because other correspondence mentioned by Brucelle in

"The Royal Navy and the Lessons of the Invergordon Mutiny," *War in History* 12, no. 1 (2005): 84-85, doi: 10.1191/0968344505wh312oa.

⁴ Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, "On the 'Belatedness' of the Reception of Subaltern Studies in France," *Actuel Marx* 51, no. 1 (2012): 150-164, doi: 10.3917/amx.051.0150.

⁵ Andrew Stephenson, "'Our jolly marin wear': The queer fashionability of the sailor uniform in interwar France and Britain," *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture* 3, no. 2 (March 2016): 157-159, doi: 10.1386/fspc.3.2.157_1.

⁶ Matthew S. Seligmann, "'Mass Anywhere on Sea or Land': Catholicism and the Royal Navy, 1901-1906," *War in History* (2022): 2, doi: 10.1177/09683445211068077.

⁷ All translations from individual letters and other sources into English from the original French are by the author.

Toulon le 24-5-18

Chère Mère.

J'ai reçu ta lettre à l'instant, cela m'a fait un grand plaisir, et je te remercie de ce que tu m'envoie, mais j'ai été chagriné de savoir ma pauvre Louison encore malade. elle n'a vraiment pas de chance, mais j'espère qu'au reçu de la présente, elle sera remise complètement. Dis lui qu'elle a un troc de jeu, et que ce n'est vraiment pas au moment où l'on va s'appeler Madame Matz que l'on s'amuse à ça, sans cela je la gronderais, et ce pauvre bébé ce qu'il a dû se faire de la bile encore.

Quand à moi je suis toujours content de ma nouvelle vie, je suis allé à Cannes en canot automobile porter des bagages au Capitaine et je t'assure que c'était vraiment agréable.

Et toi Chéri mère, cette santé, tu ne
m'en parles pas, te voilà donc installé
dans ton nouveau local, et je suis
heureuse de connaître la nouvelle
installation de mes deux grands chéris.
Justement quand j'ai reçu ta lettre
je venais d'écrire à mon Oncle Emile
en m'excusant d'avoir oublié sa fête,
tu penses si j'ai été vexé quand je m'en
suis rappelé.

Je termine en vous embrassant tous
Bien, bien fort.

Ton fils qui t'aime.

Georges.

11^e compagnie de formation

5^e Dépôt de la Flotte

Toulon (Var).

Je viens d'aller avec la compagnie rendre
les honneurs à un sous-marin qui
part au Maroc.

the private letters no longer exists.

For Brucelle, family provided emotional attachment, a source of funds, and interested intimate pen pals exchanging news regularly. He described intake into the 5th fleet personnel depot in Toulon and passing through the navy's training system for recruits, the travails of attaining qualification as a rated sailor in the torpedo speciality, and appointment to the destroyer minelayer *Casabianca*. His general observations at different Mediterranean locations, health ailments requiring hospitalization, and extracurricular activities while off duty, including courting a fiancée at distance, are also recounted. Sadly, Brucelle died when the *Casabianca* sank on the night of 3 June 1915 in the Aegean Sea due to a mine explosion. The letters are what remain of a young life cut-short during the war, and an otherwise forgotten sailor only remembered and cherished by his immediate family. Sharing Brucelle's writing and reflections brings a unique lower deck perspective to the working and social lives of a sailor indoctrinated into the pre-war French Navy.

Recruitment and Basic Training in Toulon

The *Marine nationale* that Brucelle joined in 1913 was in a state of transition as France tried to catch up and keep pace with the growing naval power of Great Britain and Imperial Germany in the European context. Until the late nineteenth century, France possessed the second largest navy in the world and extensive colonial possessions near to and distant from the metropole.⁸ Due to political and financial restraints, France fell behind in construction of newer type warships and relative ranking. An assortment of dated battleships and armoured cruisers comprised the majority of the fleet, and the first dreadnoughts were only laid down in French shipyards during 1910.⁹ A naval law introduced in 1912 signified a commitment to build out the fleet in greater numbers over a projected eight-year timeframe matched with increased authorized personnel strength. Senator Pierre Baudin, minister of marine (January-December 1913) known for his anti-German views and radical politics, paid particular attention to stepping up recruitment for manning the expanding navy's ships, over and above 47,000 personnel in 1912.¹⁰ The *Marine nationale* generally relied on a

⁸ Brian C. Chao, "'A brilliant second': France as a naval great power," *Navies in Multipolar Worlds: From the Age of Sail to the Present*, eds. Paul Kennedy and Evan Wilson (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2021), 32; Brooke J. Schwanke, "La Marine Nationale: The French Navy's Rise to Naval Superiority in the 18th Century" (MA thesis, University of Nebraska, 2019).

⁹ Hugues Canuel, "From a Prestige Fleet to the Jeune École: French Naval Policy and Strategy under the Second Empire and the Early Third Republic (1852-1914)," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 110.

¹⁰ *Journal officiel de la République française* 21 (22 January 1913), 642; Ray Walser, *France's*

combination of three-year conscripts from the navy's allotment of the national draft and volunteers enlisted from seafaring and industrial communities to fill the ranks. Baudin expressly wanted to increase the proportion of volunteers from untapped sources of recruitment in urban and rural areas, to draw in young men of suitable aptitude. Such recruits finished higher levels of formal schooling and considered the navy another vocational choice alongside civilian employment.

Brucelle's induction into the navy manifested this subtle policy change and desire to broaden the appeal of naval service. A 1913 recruiting pamphlet extolled the benefits of the navy:

The salaries of sailors are much higher than those of the soldiers of the metropolitan troops and colonials. The sailor's ration provides a varied diet and includes wine at all meals. Sailors acquire professional knowledge which is useful to them after release and which makes them sought after by industrial establishments. Ships of the fleet are called upon to visit the most diverse countries. Any re-engagement gives rise to the provision of a pro-rated bonus depending on the grade and speciality of the interested party. After 25 years of service, sailors are entitled to a retirement pension.¹¹

Volunteers had to be unmarried, possess no criminal or morality convictions, display good character, have good robust health, meet minimum height requirements, and be over the age of seventeen. Application for a contract required a birth certificate, endorsement of good conduct and morals from the mayor in the place of domicile, and parental consent if under the age of twenty. The *Marine nationale* enticed young men like Brucelle at the start of adult lives into voluntary service that offered attractions in terms of competitive pay, stable employment with training, and promise of adventure.

While no doubt important in the calculation, Brucelle also held other reasons for leaving Paris and entering the navy. In the midst of a wider economic recession, France's gross domestic product per capita in 1913 was in the mid-range of European countries. Unemployment in the capital city remained at significant levels. Most available jobs were low-paying in service industries and factories, where hours were long and the work hard. Brucelle's mother raised three children alone on a working-class wage in unhealthy employment conditions. She was frequently sick and forced to miss work. His older sister,

Search for a Battle Fleet: Naval Policy and Naval Power, 1898-1914 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1992), 219-220; Michel Moisan, "Pierre BAUDIN (1863-1917): un radical-socialiste à la Belle Époque," (Ph.D dissertation, Université d'Orléans, 2009), 453-454.

¹¹ *Marine nationale, Engagements volontaires dans le corps des équipages de la flotte* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1913), 1.

Louise, took up additional outside work to support the family, and was also sickly. A close uncle and aunt, to whom Brucelle felt affectionate, also helped since he was one of their favourites.¹² The thought of becoming a burden on his family weighed heavily on Brucelle and he constantly inquired about their health and wellbeing. As well, he was disheartened by past romantic relationships, “and ridiculed by certain young girls, something that moreover motivated my departure in the fleet.”¹³ Besides the push of general economic conditions, personal circumstances convinced Brucelle that a scenery change was probably worthwhile to get far away from the associations of Paris. A notice in the mail that the nineteen-year-old was to report for sailor training in southern France at the main fleet base in Toulon facing the Mediterranean satisfied the desire for a fresh start.

Brucelle travelled by train, stopping over in Marseilles which he visited for the first time with newly met friends to see the sights, and then departed in another train along the sea to Toulon. The sunny warm climate, palm and olive trees lining city streets, and mountain views left a strong first impression: “I am delighted. For me it’s really ideal. Although a bit hot.”¹⁴ Toulon and its naval establishments was the heart of the French fleet. The country was divided into five administrative and operational maritime prefectures, one through four along the Atlantic and the Channel with a main base at Brest, and the last fifth centred at Toulon on the Mediterranean coast.¹⁵ Under a 1904 diplomatic accord and naval arrangements with Great Britain, the *Marine nationale* concentrated its main units and warships there in the 1st naval army (*Armée navale*) commanded since August 1911 by Vice Admiral Augustin Boué de Lapeyrère, a former minister of marine (July 1909-March 1911).¹⁶ An extensive shore establishment steeped in tradition and practical functionality supported the fleet.

The 5th fleet personnel depot (*dépot des équipages de la flotte*) was the starting-point for training, where Brucelle was assigned to the 11th company 3rd section as an apprentice sailor. He recounted inauguration into the navy’s ways during those initial days:

¹² Letter, 6 December 1913.

¹³ Letter, 10 December 1913.

¹⁴ Letter, 20 May 1913.

¹⁵ Jean Moulin, “France La Marine Nationale,” *To Crown the Waves: The Great Navies of the First World War*, eds. Vincent P. O’Hara, W. David Dickson, and Richard Worth (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 57-63.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Miller, *The Millstone: British Naval Policy in the Mediterranean, 1900-14, the Commitment to France and British Intervention in the War* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1999), 309-319; Paul Chack and Jean-Jacques Antier, *Histoire maritime de la première guerre mondiale* (Paris: France-Empire, 1992), 31-32.



Depot living quarters, hammocks slung and put away. (*Toulon 5me Dépôt des Équipages de la Flotte* postcard set in author's possession)

we returned to the depot, which is three-quarters an hour from the city, and yesterday evening I slept for the first time in a hammock. I slept as well as in a bed in our room. I see the coastal mountains on one side, and on the other the roadstead. I'll give you a description and then tell you what my employment consisted of today. The depot is magnificent. These are new buildings, all the modern conveniences. Huge gardens where we walk, one would not really suspect being in a barracks. Here finally, early this morning the wake-up which is done at 5:30 am, we were called to be vaccinated and pass the check-up, then after the clothing issue we were given all our effects. It was not long! Once all dressed we went down to the courtyard for a sad ceremony. I attended the degradation of a sailor in the presence of all the troops of the garrison. Then naturally after the meal (we eat better than at home Mother Brucelle). Don't be upset my dear Mother. Be happy, don't worry, because I'll be happy. The leaders are very kind. By being serious, one can be the happiest of soldiers.¹⁷

Apprentice sailors were housed together in separate rooms occupied by members of the same company and roughly the same age. Hammocks were hung at night and stowed with other kit during the day (see image above). Washing facilities and bathrooms were shared.

¹⁷ Letter, 20 May 1913.

Apprentice sailors followed a daily routine during training. Brucelle's next letter described the schedule and activities:

In the morning wake-up call at 5:30 am. We have half an hour to get dressed, make hammocks, and then go down to have coffee in the refectory at 7 am, exercise until 8:30 am. From 8:45 am to 10 am physical culture. At 10:15 am breakfast. Between breakfast and resumption of work we have to pack our bags, all of us, our bathing suits, and you talk if I'm the type to do the laundry, that's not bad for me. I hired myself out as a washer on my way back. I've already used up a 14 cent bar of soap bought at my own expense. This afternoon boating school and football, then after I became a seamstress to sew all the canvas labels onto our clothing. I pricked my hands a bit. So all of a sudden you have a model son, and this evening before supper, we went swimming. I passed my swimming instructor certificate. I serve as quartermaster at the school for the soldiers. I am a monitor. I tell you another 6 months and I am an admiral. But with the sun beating down on us, I have become dark skinned. So, you see that we are not too unhappy. The most annoying thing is that we won't be able to go out to town for the first time for 10 days, but we don't even have enough time for that to bother us. In any case, we are 6 Parisians, we are the highest rated in the squad. You wouldn't recognize me anymore.¹⁸

Some apprentice sailors without means took on washing and domestic duties from others to earn extra money. New friendships formed. Brucelle, intelligent and motivated, was still very much an enthusiastic recruit and enjoying the experience: "I'm still happy with my new life. I went to Cannes in a motorboat to take some luggage to the Captain and I assure you everything was pleasant."¹⁹ Special duty interrupted the normal routine's monotony.

The visit of Raymond Poincaré, France's president elected the previous January, to the area prompted much ceremony and celebration for the *Marine nationale*. Apprentice sailors received fresh fish as an extra supplement at parties in the president's honour, though Brucelle fell sick to the stomach and spent a full week in the infirmary: "I resumed my service this morning, but decidedly the fish does not suit me. We have them here once a week. Glad I never eat it." Brucelle went on to describe his participation in the festivities:

For me here, these days have been fun. In the morning we went to form Poincaré's escort to take him from the station to where he embarked on a speed launch which took him to the cruiser *Jules Michelet* anchored in the roadstead. Saturday afternoon we had rest and midnight leave,

¹⁸ Letter, 23 May 1913.

¹⁹ Letter, 29 May 1913.

and as the whole town was celebrating, we took advantage of it. Woke up on Sunday at 3 am for the grand parade of all the garrison troops. It was a splendid sight. In the evening for the return of the President to Toulon, the whole squadron was illuminated – viewed from my window, it was magical. I have never seen anything so pretty, and at 11 pm, we returned to the platform to take Poincaré back to the train which returned him to Paris. You see that our 2 days were well spent and if I had not been ill, everything would have been perfect.²⁰

Sailors were both participants and backdrops for these ceremonial events that involved public and naval figures.

Brucelle surprisingly wrote little about his day-to-day training at the depot, which according to a 1913 edition of the standard recruit manual included dress and deportment, discipline, drill with and without rifles, basic seamanship skills including rope knots, hygiene and physical conditioning, first aid, compass fundamentals, and signalling.²¹ Sailors went on long group marches and walks in the countryside covering many kilometers. Brucelle commented:

This morning we paraded to the sound of music to prepare for 14 July. We are already there since it will be the same as for Poincaré. All that makes me laugh, I thought I was following the torchlight procession of Nogent with my company, with the music and Little Father Matz in front. I'm telling you there's no such thing in the fleet. That's the good view.... Can you send me my certificate of studies because it must be presented to the Captain for the torpedo specialty. Send it to me within the week if possible.²²

Tiring of barracks life in the depot, Brucelle was already planning for the next tranche of more advanced training and selected one of the most technical specialities to pursue. Brucelle scribbled on 9 July 1913: "I resumed my service this morning and to start we had an inspection from the Admiral, then we left for town all the companies together to do a mock parade and review for 14 July".²³

Bastille Day, the July national public holiday in France, was particularly symbolic for the state, the navy, and individual sailors. Brucelle enjoyed himself:

I just spent 3 days celebrating very nicely and I especially had fun

²⁰ Letter, 18 June 1913.

²¹ Marine nationale, *Manuel des recrues des équipages de la flotte*, 1st ed. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1913), 4 parts.

²² Letter, 25 June 1913.

²³ Letter, 9 July 1913.

Sailors dance with local girls in town. (Postcard in author's possession)



yesterday. And I assure you for the meals, the government did not scrimp on us. You be the judge. The morning before leaving for the review, in addition to coffee, we were each given a tin of sardines, and 1/2 bottle of white wine because we got up at 3 am but in the end it was shit. At 11 am for lunch here is the menu:

3 Sardines, with butter and ham

1 Chicken, watercress for 6

Peas

Fried potatoes

Jams and pears

Wine 1 kraft, 1 litre of champagne, coffee, and cigar and half a cent on top of the market. You see we sometimes have a good time in the regiment because for us it was a real banquet. Then midnight leave on the 12th, 13th and 14th, but you know on the 13th we were all in bed at 7 pm.

Finally, I danced in town and I paid for it, at all the crossroads I danced. As to parade and decorations of the city and the ships it was the same provided for the president. There was lots of entertainment that reminded me a little of Paris that day: that's how I spent the holidays. You see I wasn't bored, and I hope you too had a little fun during those celebration days.²⁴

Sailors sought entertainment where possible, including female company. If visits and holidays provided high-points for rich description, Brucelle's days in the depot however were nearing an end.

As a sign of the personnel pressures put on the expanding *Marine nationale*, Brucelle was moved out of the depot to make way for new intakes of recruits. A couple months of service made him senior amongst apprentice sailors:

²⁴ Letter, 15 July 1913.

I am going to have a change as there are too many of us here at the depot. On Friday, they are embarking aboard the 1st squadron battleships all those who have 2 months service.... We only embark for 3 months, not even in a squadron, until 1 October because after that we will go to the course for 6 months. This is going to be interesting because if the rumour is true, we will have the advantage of seeing a few countries ... my time at the depot I am starting to know it and you know that I like the change. To tell the truth, I am therefore enchanted by the circumstance of embarking as a regular sailor, which would be interesting service for sure. Just this little time will give us a taste of life aboard.²⁵

For the next three weeks, Brucelle stayed with the fleet, and then “the commander has just called me and granted me 10 days leave, so I’ll be leaving for you on Sunday.”²⁶ The basic torpedo course for sailors started sooner than expected in late August.

Torpedo Specialist Coursework

The next phase of sailor training covered in the letters denoted a busy and demanding time for Brucelle as he studied diligently to attain rank and become qualified on torpedoes. The French Navy, which had a long relationship with the Whitehead enterprise and its improved designs, gave the underwater weapon high prominence with dedicated personnel.²⁷ A torpedo was a complicated mechanical device requiring specialized knowledge to handle and maintain properly. Brucelle transferred to *Marceau*, an obsolete four-barbette battleship repurposed as a torpedo school for sailors, commanded by *Capitaine de frégate* Marcel Chamonard.²⁸ Attached to the Mediterranean schools division, *Marceau* was situated at Les Salins d’Hyères – salt marshes home to bird species – east of Toulon along the coast toward La Londe les Maures. Besides the location’s remoteness, Brucelle suffered from aching gastronomic discomfort and tiredness likely caused by overwork and stress: “I’m fine now and still working hard. You learned from Louise the result of my examination. It was a good result, and you know if I don’t write more often don’t mind because the time is eaten up. You see tonight I’m writing during study, at the risk of getting caught, but I didn’t want to go through this day

²⁵ Letter, 29 July 1913.

²⁶ Letter, 19 August 1913.

²⁷ Chris Madsen, “French Torpedo Development before 1914,” *British Journal for Military History* 7, no. 3 (2021): 134-137, doi: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v7i3.1573.

²⁸ Stephen S. Roberts, *French Warships in the Age of Steam 1859-1914: Design, Construction, Careers and Fates* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Seaforth, 2021), 59-60.

without writing to you.”²⁹

Determined to do well, Brucelle devoted most of his time to learning thoroughly the course materials. The pace of intellectual work was gruelling, with a few distractions:

Sunday, my friends forced me to go out with them despite the fact that I wanted to stay here. On Saturday, I was depressed. They told me that it would do me good and I do not regret having done it, especially since we only get out every 15 days. We went to Hyères which is splendid country, 6 kilometers along a road lined with palm trees and by the sea. It is beautiful. So, we had some very nice fun and that changed my mood. Since Monday we have been on the first-class cruiser *Jules Michelet* for submerged tube training which is a magnificent mechanical device, and I see the more we learn the more interesting it becomes. We stay for 8 days on this new warship. There is very little rocking - I assure you that one would not believe they were on the sea but high and well in a large house. It takes 4 minutes to go from the rear to the front. So you see, there are decks and we are 1,100. It's a real village. If you write me in the next 8 days always address the letters to the *Marceau* because there is a special service for us.³⁰

The reward for successful completion was advancement. Brucelle was made a *matelot* from 11 September 1913, the first step in moving up the French Navy's hierarchy of enlisted ranks (see Table 1): “Today I am fresh and in good spirits and they have just now distributed the certificates in respect to the last course, so from today we are permanent and await the solemn opening of the next course on 1 October, in which I will only have to work harder. Tomorrow we transfer the coal. It's a dirty chore, and one of the little inconveniences of the job.”³¹ Though, the next day “without any reason I was exempted from coaling. You think I was not upset at all, especially since I benefited from the double ration like my colleagues ... our ship is moored and doesn't move much.”³² Sailors continued performing regular duties in the interval awaiting start of the course. The appointment of Rear Admiral Gabriel Darrieus to lead the Mediterranean schools division gave Brucelle and his friends a break: “We have been in Toulon for 2 days for the taking of command of a new Admiral and the arrival of *Jean Bart* and *Courbet*. We had a good time this morning. It

²⁹ Letter, 31 August 1913.

³⁰ Letter, 5 September 1913. *Jules Michelet* was a fast armoured cruiser commissioned in December 1908 reflecting continued *Jeune École* influences. John Jordan and Philippe Caresse, *French Armoured Cruisers 1887-1932* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Seaforth, 2019), 164-176.

³¹ Letter, 11 September 1913.

³² Letter, 13 September 1913.

is a rather imposing ceremony, especially since the weather here is splendid.... Excuse me if I don't give you a lot of time, but I don't have much because I'm going ashore and the boat will go."³³

Table 1. French Navy's lower rank and seniority structure (*marins des équipages de la flotte*)

Apprentis marins (apprentice sailors) – entry-level

Matelots non-brevetés (ordinary sailors non-rated) – 1st class, 2nd class, 3rd class

Matelots brevetés (ordinary sailors rated) – 1st class, 2nd class, 3rd class

Quartiers-mâîtres (quartermasters) – 0-5, 5-10, 10-15, 15-20, over 20 years

Seconds-mâîtres (second masters) – 0-5, 5-10, 10-15, 15-20, over 20 years

Mâîtres (petty officers) – 0-5, 5-10, 10-15, 15-20, over 20 years

Premiers-mâîtres (chief petty officers) – 0-5, 5-10, 10-15, 15-20, over 20 years

Source: Marine nationale, *Manuel du marin torpilleur*, 5th ed. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1909), xxiv.

Admission to the *Marine nationale's* advanced torpedo course was competitive. The course was technically challenging and difficult to complete. Previously qualified personnel in the *torpilleur* classification had to keep up with the latest technology and engineering developments or faced removal and loss of supplemental pay.³⁴ The number qualified in the speciality was strictly controlled and naval authorities were selective. Brucelle described the culling process even before the formal course began:

For me, it's more of the same. Working more than ever to write an exam tomorrow. This one is not for the final qualification but if I have the knowledge to follow the course. It is insane that they are trying to eliminate you. And 48 were removed last month. There will be almost as many this month. Well, I am doing my best to get qualified without making big mistakes, but please believe me that it is a hard effort that we all make because seeing the things that they ask us, we will soon have to be an engineer to take this specialty.³⁵

Technical knowledge involved theoretical and practical dimensions, taught by instructors on *Marceau*. That included familiarity with the internal working

³³ Letter, 16 September 1913; *Journal officiel de la République française* 270 (5 October 1913), 8836.

³⁴ *Journal officiel de la République française* 296 (30 October 1912), 9268.

³⁵ Letter, 23 September 1913.

components of standard French torpedoes.³⁶ Brucelle was confident that he would be successful and already planned to have his mother come south for a visit:

you must already know from Louise that I passed the exam and therefore am committed to taking the supplemental course. All I have to do now is wait for the ranking competition and the final exam which will take place around 15 February. As for health, I have nothing to complain about for the moment. I only have small migraines that come from time to time to annoy me, but it's nothing and passes quickly.... For New Year's Day, we have 48 hours leave and my friends and I have decided to go to Nice. It only costs 3 francs round trip, and it seems like a pretty city to see. But you know Mother, it's the funds that are eaten up always on these occasions, and I don't hide from you that at this moment if you could lend me some money, it would do me a good service, and I will be sure to thank you afterwards.³⁷

Family financial support additional to basic naval pay ensured sailors maintained a manageable existence during training. Brucelle, in this respect, was still dependent on his mother, who genuinely wanted him to do well in his studies to pursue a rewarding career in the *Marine nationale*.

Though learning was taxing, Brucelle elected to push ahead with more advanced torpedo training that would benefit his final rating. The incentive for working harder on the course was higher standing with accelerated promotion and better pay later:

I am on the course for the higher qualification. The only advantage I would have if I succeed is to be able to become quartermaster in a 1 year and half service instead of waiting 3 or 4 years. In the morning, we practice, that is to say that we work to reassemble, disassemble a torpedo, adjust the parts to align and finally do the work of a mechanic. We also have to take care of underwater and electrical appliances. Afternoon, theory until 4:30 pm, and in the evening after dinner from 7 to 8:30 pm review the day's work and study. The most interesting thing is that every day, we're doing something new. So, the day after tomorrow I'm going on a torpedo boat trip to learn the torpedo tube and the launch. At the moment, it's all confusion for me, although I am well reminded that there is so much to learn it takes at least 6 months to be knowledgeable.³⁸

³⁶ *Marine nationale, Instruction sur les torpilles automobiles*, 1st ed. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1914).

³⁷ Letter, 30 September 1913.

³⁸ Letter (1), 3 October 1913.

Privately, doubts about his ability to continue in a credible fashion arose. Writing in another letter the same day, Brucelle said that *Lieutenant de vaisseau* Jean Louis Auguste de Portal, *Marceau's* second-in-command, was encouraging: "When I started the course, it was really excessively hard work, especially since yesterday after an exam that the second officer received. I told him I didn't feel capable of it, but despite that he forced me to redo it, telling me that if I wanted to I could do so under certain conditions. All that remains is to push a bunch of mechanics and calculations into my head because this supplemental course is taken by young people coming out of higher education."³⁹ Without a prior foundation, Brucelle had to learn fundamentals first to excel on the course.

Brucelle's perseverance soon began to pay-off in a few weeks, in spite of some setbacks. His confidence and therefore performance on the course improved:

Regarding my work, I am happy because I am beginning to understand well, and consequently, I am more and more interested. At the end of the month there is an exam to eliminate those who will not be able to follow the course because there are twice as many as needed, but I have the assurance of not being one of those, as I am at the top of the class.... My wallet was stolen with 7 francs in it, 5 from Uncle Emile and 2 of my own. We were changing linens. I put my pants next to me. When I picked them up, the money was gone. It took a first-rate rascal to do that in so little time. So, we did a search, but it was lost. I made my mourning. I would have been left with just 20 cents were it not for the money that you sent dear Mother, and I sincerely thank you for your kind intention.⁴⁰

Sailors valued money and stamps above all else. Tough breaks could not deter Brucelle from proceeding, nor could bad health. In mid-October, he went to the infirmary with severe stomach pains that went on day and night. With some ice, a little rest, and eating food again, Brucelle recovered:

I only got off with a few days late on the course since I'm afraid of missing what would have taken another 6 months to make-up. Finally, everything is fine. I hope it won't hurt me too much, and that by working I'll catch up with the others. You know dear Mother, the thought of seeing myself sick so far from everyone gave me a hard blow. Fortunately, these 5 days passed quickly and now I only have to take precautions.⁴¹

³⁹ Letter (2), 3 October 1913.

⁴⁰ Letter, 12 October 1913.

⁴¹ Letter, 18 October 1913; Patrick Louvier, "Les maladies et les accidents dans la marine de

Perhaps the health scare gave him a newfound resolve. A gap in letters sent to his mother during November resulted from a secretive courting relationship with a young woman within the family, whom he visited on leave in Digne along the Bléone River in southeast France, soon to be his fiancée.

Brucelle resumed his regular correspondence back to Paris upon returning to *Marceau* in December. Worries about his mother's ill-health, lack of paid work, and unsatisfactory rental situation, preparation for the culminating final examination "in front of 19 senior officers who question you on everything,"

Sailors from torpedo school ship *Marceau* pose for professional portrait sitting in Toulon, December 1913. (Photograph in author's possession)



and a bout of bronchitis that "the doctor put me on exempt from service, except I'm studying" occupied his thoughts.⁴² He was also pondering the future. His intentions were to leave the navy in five years, find work as a technical engineer, and get married. In another letter, Brucelle confided his feelings for his aunt Madame Férand's sister-in-law, Marie Louise, with whom he corresponded for several months and visited in Digne: "I would certainly do everything to please her and behave toward her in such a way as to carry out my project, but in 5 years, ideas can change."⁴³ First, he had to complete the

guerre française en Méditerranée au XIXe siècle (1815-1914)," *Corps* 15, no. 1 (2017): 311, doi: 10.3917/corp1.015.0305.

⁴² Letter, 6 December 1913.

⁴³ Letter, 10 December 1913.

course and pass examinations to become rated. Brucelle only found time for letter writing on Sundays, a day of rest.

Subsequent letters recapped Brucelle's activities during the week and progress on the course toward the examinations. Twelve days before Christmas, sailors received the opportunity to get off the ship: "Yesterday we had a military march with the crews of the other school ships. We did field service which is very interesting. It changes life aboard a little. We went to Fréjus at 16 kilometers around Les Salins on the road to Nice with music in the lead and across a splendid country. So, I am delighted with our outing, although a little tired!"⁴⁴ *Marceau* sailors picked wild flowers along the way, which they wore in their lapels (see above). Meanwhile, course studies continued. Brucelle saw an end in sight: "I am starting to be tired of this intellectual overwork, but these 6 months will not be for nothing because once rated, I will be calmer in all respects. Frequent leaves and higher pay, these are appreciable things in the service. For example, I do not know where I will be but I will do my best to be closer to Paris."⁴⁵ Reconnecting with his family was a priority. Although he went to Digne at the end of December to see Marie Louise, Brucelle sent best wishes for the New Year to his mother and Louise.⁴⁶ A varied routine on *Marceau* and in the squadron awaited him upon return.

The month of January 1914 was busy for Brucelle in the last stretch to the torpedo speciality qualification examinations. He rejoined the same armoured cruiser from his earlier apprentice sailor days:

Last Saturday that is to say the 4th we went on the *Jules Michelet* to spend 8 days to launch torpedoes by submerged tubes and the squadron just appeared. Total we were at sea for 10 days. First we passed in front of Cannes, Nice, Monaco, and Menton where we stayed for 2 days. From there we went to Corsica to the bay of Porto-Vecchio with a 22-hour crossing, then to Ajaccio, return to Golfe-Juan with inspection by Admiral Boué de Lapeyrère.... As my health is fine, I'm starting to put on a little weight. It's not too soon because I was very skinny.⁴⁷

Brucelle complained about shortness of money after expenditures during the trip, and an unfortunate turn in the weather that uncharacteristically brought a snowstorm to usually sunny, warm Toulon. He counted down days to the ranking competition first week of February to determine placement and the individual oral examination in March, and then returning to Paris for some rest. Brucelle consulted his mother about the next stage:

⁴⁴ Letter, 14 December 1913.

⁴⁵ Letter, 21 December 1913.

⁴⁶ Letter, 30 December 1913.

⁴⁷ Letter, 14 January 1914.

Say I want to have your opinion on my posting, because we are asked where we want to go after finishing the course. There is not much hope for Cherbourg unless by a little stroke of luck. There remains therefore the Toulon squadron, torpedo boats, or a campaign and the Bizerte submarines. The squadron means nothing to me at all because it's the real life of the barracks and then we only leave Toulon very infrequently. The only place where these warships go is Villefranche from time to time. It is not very interesting to stay there for 3 consecutive years. Couldn't you send something to my cousin Naulot whether through his relations a posting at Brest or Cherbourg might be arranged. Otherwise, I'm asking for a campaign because I'm bored staying in Toulon - it's a dirty hole if not for the nice surroundings, but for leave it's too far. Staying out of the country for a long time might not be the safest, but at least when we come back one can have a long leave and life is much more pleasant. So you will give me your opinion on this subject because I really do not know where to ask.⁴⁸

Reality was that Brucelle would go where the navy decided. The likelihood was Toulon and the naval army, despite Brucelle's growing disillusionment with the place. Submarines, another option, were still relatively new and novel, with some concerns about safety:

I did a dive for the first time on the submarine *Argonaute*, which has been attached to *Marceau* for the past month to teach us how to launch torpedoes aboard these boats. I assure you that I am delighted because it's something that you don't do every day. At first I was just a little impressed, as were my friends, because we had just learned of the English submarine 87 disaster, but once diving we were completely cold-blooded. We stayed 3 hours sailing at 15 meters depth. I can comfortably say it was not too bad and certainly not inconvenient, to be denied the open air. We only appreciated the dive right at the start because the boat tilts lower; otherwise when everything is closed up we did not know if we were on the surface or underwater. Anyway, I'm not unhappy about it and assure you, we don't go there anymore during class. I didn't tell you before because you would have been pissed off, wouldn't you little Mother.⁴⁹

The *Argonaute*, an experimental submarine commissioned under pennant designation Q-40 in January 1911, possessed two tubes able to fire 450 mm torpedoes, a total of six carried aboard.⁵⁰ Brucelle found this experience in

⁴⁸ Letter, 18 January 1914.

⁴⁹ Letter, 25 January 1914.

⁵⁰ Henri Le Masson, *Les sous-marins français: des origines (1863) à nos jours* (Brest and

a submarine to be cramped and damp. And his mother disapproved so his choices narrowed.

Brucelle successfully completed examinations to become a rated sailor in the torpedo speciality. He learned that his cousin André was now in the navy and serving in cruisers at Toulon, although which one was not specifically mentioned. The course's last week in early February covered taught materials from previous months: "We have started the review of all our studies. I am starting to have a little rest. In a month the exam will be finished and then the awaited crowning of 6 months of work, and leave which in any case cannot be taken away."⁵¹ The first examination, written by the group as a whole, took a full morning. Congratulating his mother on moving into a more spacious "luxury" apartment, Brucelle asked for the new address:

Hey Mama about 38 days and you can kiss your son now that it's over. You can't imagine how long that seems to me. Yesterday's ranking competition is already done, a good step towards the end. The final examination, as I have already told you is from 8 to 12 and after, departure and fine Paris. I might stop at Digne. It will delay me for a day, but I see myself having one more day, as everything will be for the best since my 2 affections will be satisfied.⁵²



Casabianca, early in its career, c. 1896. (Wikimedia Commons)

Paris: Éditions de la Cité, 1980), 282.

⁵¹ Letter, 1 February 1914.

⁵² Letter, 7 February 1914.

Brucelle was equally successful in March as he fielded questions from the examining officers. Understandably, he was eager to leave Toulon immediately and did not send any letters, instead preferring to tell Marie Louise and his family about the achievement in person.

In the *Armée navale*

After finishing leave in Paris, Brucelle returned to Toulon in April 1914. As a qualified torpedo specialist, he was assigned to the minelaying destroyer *Casabianca*. The older warship had been commissioned in 1895 and belonged to a class of three small cruisers reclassified as *contre-torpilleur d'escadre*.⁵³ Out of active service after 1904, the *Casabianca* was converted into a minelayer in 1911. *Capitaine de frégate* Marie Charles Joseph de Lafournière commanded the *Casabianca* and the 1st naval army's group of minelayers, which included the sister ship *Cassina*.⁵⁴ The *Casabianca* was configured to carry 97 *Harlé* defensive mines, 120 *Harlé* blockade mines, or 140 Model 1906 mines on half meter gauge deck rails.⁵⁵ The minelaying destroyer also had three launch tubes capable of firing the Model 1904 Whitehead and Model 1909R (1000 meters and 2000 meters) torpedoes (Table 2). Though some sources claim removal of those tubes, the presence of specialists like Brucelle indicates that torpedoes were still an important secondary armament to the *Casabianca*'s main role of laying mines. In a letter congratulating Louise on her 23rd birthday and progress in the sport of cycling, Brucelle commented on the new surroundings and agreeable duty:

My health is good for the moment and I am pleased to be on a destroyer, for food, for some work on the torpedoes, in fact the Swedish school of the soldier, and every afternoon, problems dictated just like in class. It is not disagreeable if you want but it's only this ship which only sails every 3 months. Finally, for the question of us staying in Toulon, I am delighted, but as a warship it is nothing. Extraordinarily, we sailors have 100 underwater mines to take care of and we don't mine 6 so we wouldn't dare do any other duty than in a squadron, each at his determined work. Finally, I assume my part in the meantime and take hoses on the right side.⁵⁶

Life on a destroyer was less regimented than larger cruisers and battleships, and

⁵³ *Contre-amiral* Lepotier, *Les Derniers Torpilleurs* (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 1969), 55.

⁵⁴ *Bulletin de la marine* (1914), 799. Jean Labayle Couhat, *French Warships of World War I* (London: Ian Allan, 1974), 192-193.

⁵⁵ Roberts, *French Warships in the Age of Steam*, 274-275.

⁵⁶ Letter, 9 May 1914.

relations closer due to more confined spaces. Brucelle performed many duties as a sailor outside his rated specialty. The *Casabianca's* age and specialized function meant longer periods of time spent in port, which was alright with many sailors because opportunities for shore visits and mail increased. Brucelle's longing for new sights and locations was soon fulfilled by trips to other parts of the western Mediterranean under French control.

Table 2. Principal models of 450 mm torpedo deployed in the Marine nationale 1914.

Cold (compressed air propulsion)

1904 – 150 kg. air charge; speed 35 knots 5-600 m., 24 knots 5-2000 m.; 72 kg. combat head

1906 – incremental changes to 1904 model; 108 kg. combat head

1906M (modified) – increased air discharge over basic 1906 model; speed 38 knots 5-600 m.

Heated (hot air from petrol combustion propulsion)

1909R (heated) – without water injection; speed 42 knots 5-1,000 m., 34 knots, 2000-3000 m.

1911V (speed) – for submarines, with water injection into heater; speed 42 knots over 1000 m.

1911D (distance) – for battleships, water injection into heater; speed 24 knots over 6000 m.

1912D (distance) – for battleships, water injection into heater and engine; speed 28 knots over 8,000 m., 19 knots over 15,000 m.

Source: Marine nationale, *Manuel du gradé torpilleur*, 1st edn. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1922), 6-7.

Brucelle's letters became less frequent as the *Casabianca* went to sea for durations of time in connection with visits, naval maneuvers, and fleet exercises. They were written and posted on his return, usually describing his travels and experiences and inquiring about his mother's health and new apartment. Brucelle travelled to Tunisia for the first time:

we set sail on Thursday morning and we arrived yesterday evening at 6 pm in sight of Bizerte after 30 hours at sea. We made an excellent crossing on Friday. Around 9 am in the morning we reached Sardinia, we went along it for 2 hours having a nice show in front of the oak trees because in the water a few porpoises followed us for awhile, which slowed us down a bit. Finally, we entered the Bizerte canal, crossed the city, and came to anchor at the end of Lake Sidi Abdalah. From what I could see of the city the air is very open and useful, the houses are dark and white, which is a pretty good effect. When we passed through Bizerte, there were Senegalese skirmishers on the quay, they cheered us on. It's a new thing for me and I'm happy to have come

to this side of Tunisia even though Bizerte is not very pretty and we do not get to go ashore. It is very hot but on the water it is bearable. I believe that we will be going to Algiers and that we will go ashore. I think I have 20 days leave after the maneuvers and I can tell you my impressions. We have just been told there will be local leave presently, so I have to go.⁵⁷

The *Casabianca* in fact stayed longer in Tunisia, which gave sailors more time ashore. Senator Armand Gauthier, minister of marine (March-August 1914), came to visit Bizerte on a personal tour and made a point of going aboard French warships in harbour, including the polished up *Casabianca*. Brucelle was part of the honour guard which greeted Gauthier's arrival and wrote upon return to Toulon:

In Bizerte we had aboard the minister of marine, then Friday evening cast off for France which gave us 14 days total in Tunisia. We aimed to arrive Saturday morning so that the crew could spend the holidays in Toulon. Unfortunately, we were attacked offshore by a powerful storm. The whole crew and even the officers were sick. I assure you that I can't get enough of it, no way to stay up and sick as a real beast. It's my first time sick at sea, but I'll remember it. So, it is one of the little inconveniences of being a sailor, and I have a good memory of the maneuvers. In short, around 2 am on Sunday morning we were able to reach a small port in Sardinia. We left at 10 am so we just arrived this Monday morning at 4 am.⁵⁸

The *Casabianca's* crew missed the holiday weekend, but remained in Toulon for the next two weeks. Sailors however were busily employed in duties and received few opportunities to get into town for leisure and other pursuits. Brucelle himself looked forward to going back to sea and visiting more new places.

The naval army's evolutions and practice for war were merely a backdrop for Brucelle's personal odyssey in naval service. Still relatively new to service, he enjoyed the experiential side of the life otherwise unavailable to him if he had stayed in Paris. But, Brucelle yearned to see his family again in person, creating a pull between the two desires. For an emotional young man maturing into adulthood, the evolving independence was key:

We are repairing all the mines that we anchored in Bizerte, which leaves me no leisure.... Wednesday we leave for Porto-Vecchio (Corsica) for 12 days to prepare the Vacca rock for the squadron's shootings, which will still be a little distraction and one more country

⁵⁷ Letter, 16 May 1914.

⁵⁸ Letter, 1 June 1914.

to know because there it's not like being on the *Michelet* and I can go ashore. I assure you that the navy is interesting because we have a lot of change. We don't stay rotting in the same city for years, which is a good thing for me because as you know I very much like new things.⁵⁹

Upon returning from Corsica, Brucelle received twenty days of approved leave the following month. The naval army's summer season of maneuvers was ending, and crews duly released to expend accumulated leave entitlements. Brucelle broke the news about coming to stay in Paris:

know Mother that I am no less happy despite my estrangement from all of you, no matter how much a separation was inevitable, and knowing that barracks life did nothing for my health, and then the change of country from time to time took away the monotony of a prolonged stay. And in this way time passes more quickly, and once in awhile a little leave Mother is an opportunity to see your Georges. And the three of us, Louise, will go take a good little walk in the woods or along the Marne. Tomorrow we are going to Golfe-Juan for general inspection of the naval army. I am again going to see pretty sites because for 8 cents I can go to Monaco, and 3 cents to Cannes, and I shall if it is possible to visit these spots so renowned for their beauty.⁶⁰

It was during this leave period in Paris that the countries of Europe stumbled into open warfare, and the *Marine nationale* went onto a war footing in accordance with pre-war plans. Brucelle treasured the one last chance to see his family before returning to Toulon and *Casabianca*.

Active naval operations in the Mediterranean started soon enough. Vice Admiral Boué de Lapeyrère and the naval army missed the opportunity to intercept the German cruisers *Goeben* and *Breslau*, instead prioritizing the safe transport of troops in convoy from North Africa.⁶¹ France declared war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire on 12 August 1914, though the much anticipated naval battle between opposing fleets never materialized because the naval forces of Imperial Germany's ally stayed in port to pursue a fleet-in-being strategy.⁶² Brucelle rejoined the *Casabianca* the last week of August. A number of his relatives had enlisted in the army or been near the fighting on land with the Germans. He inquired about their wellbeing. Letters sent to his

⁵⁹ Letter, 15 June 1914.

⁶⁰ Letter, 4 July 1914.

⁶¹ Lawrence Sondhaus, *The Great War at Sea: A Naval History of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 97-98; *Capitaine de vaisseau de reserve A. Thomazi, La guerre navale dans la méditerranée* (Paris: Payot, 1929), 18-20.

⁶² Paul Halpern, *The Naval War in the Mediterranean, 1914-1918* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 17; Milan N. Vejo, *Austro-Hungarian Naval Policy 1904-14* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996), 116-128.



Postcard memorializing the minelaying destroyer *Casabianca*, sunk by its own mines in the Aegean Sea on 3 June 1915. (Postcard in author's possession)

mother and sister were now subject to censorship and not always received. Brucelle wrote in a last letter on 10 September 1914: "It has been 15 days since I returned to port ... it is an ordinary life here. This evening we are setting sail for an unknown destination but say without fear there will be no danger for me because the role of our warship is not to fight, and we know its purpose, something we have already done successfully in detriment of our enemies."⁶³ Letters are absent from the next ten months up to his death on 3 June 1915.

On that night, *Casabianca* was lost deploying mines off the Turkish coast near Smyrna (Izmir) in the Aegean Sea. A mine prematurely exploded causing other mines on the deck rails to detonate in a chain reaction that blew off the ship's stern. Eighty-eight sailors and six officers were killed in the explosion or by drowning. A British destroyer rescued sixty-four crew members and two officers, including the captain.⁶⁴ It was initially hoped that some unaccounted sailors reached the shores of Turkey. Loss of life on the *Casabianca* was just as tragic as the 681 sailors and officers lost on the torpedoed armoured cruiser *Léon Gambetta* just two months earlier.⁶⁵ Similarly, the sea took many of the

⁶³ Letter, 10 September 1914.

⁶⁴ "French Mine Layer Sunk in the Aegean," *Western Times*, 8 June 1915.

⁶⁵ Matt Perry, "Vive La France! Death at Sea, the French Navy and the Great War," *French History* 26, no. 3 (2012): 345, doi: 10.1093/fh/crs033.

Casabianca's crew not picked-up or reaching the safety of rafts. In August 1915, naval members of a court martial in Toulon acquitted *Capitaine de frégate* Lafournière of any responsibility in relation to the sinking, concluding that reasonable measures were taken.⁶⁶ Brucelle's mother, whose close relationship and affection toward her son are evident throughout the private letters, was likely devastated. His sister Louise and fiancée Marie Louise missed him dearly. Brucelle was formally acknowledged a war casualty and posthumously awarded a military medal in November 1921.⁶⁷ Officially, he became just another statistic from the First World War instead of a sailor who lived an interesting short life, loved and was loved, and held dreams for the future.

Conclusion

Subaltern approaches open up possibilities for writing naval history from below and utilisation of overlooked primary sources from the lower deck. Scholarly work on the *Marine nationale* in English generally leaves out the experiences of common sailors, in part due to language and limited availability of contemporary private correspondence. Georges Brucelle's letters to his family portray an articulate and intelligent young man, new to naval service just prior to the First World War. From his time arriving as a working-class recruit from Paris at the fleet personnel depot in Toulon, coursework on the torpedo school ship *Marceau*, up to specialist assignment to the destroyer minelayer *Casabianca*, Brucelle worked diligently to get ahead and make the most of his experience in the navy. His descriptions of leadership by superiors, provision of food, quarters, and realistic opportunities for advancement remained largely positive. Brucelle benefited from free healthcare in the navy, costly for working French civilians. Pay at lower rank levels was frequently supplemented by money sent from home, even for those with very little. Entertainment during leave and time ashore depleted funds quickly with sailors. Brucelle looked favourably upon travel and visits to new places associated with the navy, which remained a major draw for him compared to his previous land-based urban life in Paris. Meanwhile, Brucelle conscientiously applied himself to gaining the rated torpedo specialist qualification and ranking that would give material benefits for future service and better his post-navy employment and marital prospects. Like many French sailors, he pursued a steady romantic relationship, with a sweetheart or fiancée at a distance. Brucelle intended to stay in the navy for five years and then get settled. Unfortunately, the war and

⁶⁶ "Loss of T.E. Casabianca," *Western Times*, 14 August 1915.

⁶⁷ By minister of marine order dated 18 November 1921. *Journal officiel de la République française* 319 (26 November 1921), 13005.

his death cut short those plans and hurt his family. Emotional attachments remained very dear, particularly the relationship with his mother.

Was Brucelle's odyssey of early career service in the *Marine nationale* before the First World War typical or exceptional? It is always hard to extrapolate the experiences of a single individual to a larger group. Certainly, not every sailor was so successful or conscientious. The reflections do show however the premium that the French Navy put on quality training and ensuring excellence in studies. The advanced torpedo course that Brucelle went through leading to culminating final examinations was demanding and thorough. Sailors under instruction received exposure to torpedo arrangements in larger cruisers and battleships, submarines, destroyers, and torpedo boats. The detailed descriptions provided by Brucelle remain among the few available for this type of instruction at this rank level. Brucelle's letters are a snapshot into the working and social lives of an ordinary sailor in the pre-war *Marine nationale*, which can add to any wider general study of French sailors using sources from more individuals.

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