

An Ambiguous Partnership: Great Britain and the Free French Navy, 1940-1942¹

Hugues Canuel

On se souvient aujourd'hui des forces de la France libre en raison de faits d'armes tels que leur courageuse résistance à Bir Hakeim en 1942 et la participation du général Leclerc à la libération de Paris en 1944. Par contre, la contribution antérieure de la marine de la France libre est moins bien connue : elle a donné à de Gaulle, dont l'espoir était alors bien mince, les moyens de mobiliser des appuis politiques au sein de l'empire colonial français et d'apporter une contribution militaire précoce à la cause des Alliés. Cette capacité s'est développée à la suite de l'appui modeste mais tout de même essentiel du Royaume-Uni, un allié qui se méfiait de fournir les ressources absolument nécessaires à une flotte qu'il ne contrôlait pas complètement mais dont les actions pourraient aider la Grande-Bretagne qui se trouvait alors presque seule contre les puissances de l'Axe.

Friday 27 November 1942 marked the nadir of French sea power in the twentieth century. Forewarned that German troops arrayed around the Mediterranean base of Toulon were intent on seizing the fleet at dawn, Admiral Jean de Laborde – Commander of the *Force de Haute Mer*, the High Seas Force – and the local Maritime Prefect, Vice Admiral André Marquis, ordered the immediate scuttling of all ships and submarines at their berths. Some 248,800 tons of capital ships, escorts, auxiliaries and submarines was scuttled as the *Wehrmacht* closed in on the dockyard.² The French “Vichy navy” virtually ceased to exist that day. Small flotillas remained isolated in those few colonies, such as Indochina and Martinique, that continued to pledge allegiance to the collaborationist regime of Marshall

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all quotes from French-language sources have been translated by the author. The author wishes to express his sincere appreciation to Dr. Chris Madsen, professor in the Department of Defence Studies at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto (Ontario), for his insightful comments on previous drafts of this article. All errors still found therein remain the author's own.

² The tonnage figure is taken from a report from the *Direction centrale des constructions et armes navales* to the Minister of the Navy, “Situation de la Flotte de Toulon,” 16 November 1944, *Service historique de la Défense*, Vincennes, France (SHD), 3 BB 2 SEC 114, folder labelled *Situation de la Flotte – Tonnage – De 1939 à 1950*. It amounted to one-third of the 1939 tonnage illustrated in Table 1 of this article. See also Daniel Grasset, “Une tragédie navale: le sabordage de la Flotte à Toulon le 27 novembre 1942,” paper presented at the Académie des sciences et lettres de Montpellier, 9 May 2011, accessed 30 March 2014, http://www.ac-sciences-lettres-montpellier.fr/academie_edition/fichiers_conf/GRASSET2011.pdf; Philippe Masson, *La Marine française et la guerre, 1939-1945*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 2000), 354-403; Charles W. Koburger, *The Cyrano Fleet, France and Its Navy, 1940-1942* (New York, 1989), 79-90.

Philippe Pétain despite the German invasion of France's Free Zone., The fourth largest fleet in the world at the outset of the war, first of the second-rank navies, the *Marine nationale* had joined the hostilities confident that it could make a potent contribution to the defence of France and the allied cause. Three years later, the fleet's remnants were technologically outdated, its sailors largely unfamiliar with the new tactics of carrier aviation and anti-submarine warfare, and the officer corps divided in its loyalties.

In contrast to this bleak assessment, a much smaller fleet had been at war on the allied side since the Franco-German Armistice. Established on 1 July 1940, the *Forces navales françaises libres* (FNFL, Free French Naval Forces) had been in existence for a mere three days when British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered Operation Catapult, which sought to seize, neutralize or destroy all elements of the French fleet that were within reach of the Royal Navy (RN), regardless of their crews' allegiance to Free France or to the Vichy regime. British troops boarded more than one hundred merchant navy vessels, warships and submarines which had found refuge in Great Britain and elsewhere in the empire, taking control by surprise and interning the sailors ashore.³ Other ships were disarmed with skeleton crews remaining on board (*Force X* in Alexandria, Egypt),⁴ or left damaged in colonial ports without adequate repair facilities (battleships *Richelieu* in Dakar, Senegal, and *Jean Bart* in Casablanca, Morocco).⁵ Nowhere was the blow more brutal though than in Mers el-Kebir on the outskirts of Oran in Algeria. Following unsuccessful negotiations between local commanders, the Royal Navy delivered a devastating gun and aerial assault that resulted in the destruction or severe damage to most ships in port, including the battleships *Bretagne* and *Dunkerque*, and the loss of nearly 2,000 French sailors and officers.⁶

A dejected Vice Admiral Émile Muselier, commander of the FNFL, met the next day with the leader of the Free French movement, acting Brigadier General Charles de Gaulle.⁷ As Churchill and the Royal Navy's senior leadership had purposefully refused to forewarn them of the operation, they contemplated a break with their British ally to relocate to a colony beyond Vichy's reach, such as Pondicherry in India. Thoughts of retirement in

³ The National Archives of the UK, Kew, (TNA), ADM 1/10321, French Warships at Oran and Alexandria on the Surrender of France, Admiralty – Diary of Events – Wednesday, 3rd July, 1940.

⁴ TNA, ADM 1/10321, Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean at Alexandria – Diary of Events – From Wednesday, 3rd July, 1940 and Thursday, 4th July, 1940.

⁵ TNA, ADM 1/10835, Attack on French Ship *Richelieu*, Signals from the Admiralty to HMS *Hermes 7* and 11 July 1940; Pierre-Jean Ronarc'h, *L'évasion du cuirassé Jean-Bart: 18 juin 1940*, 2nd ed. (Strasbourg, 2010).

⁶ TNA, ADM 1/10321, Signals Exchanged Between Admiralty, C-in-C Mediterranean and Vice Admiral Force H, 30 June to 2 July 1940, and Force H – Diary of Events – From Wednesday, 3rd July, 1940. For more recent interpretations of the overall operation, see Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Claude Huan, *Mers el-Kébir (1940), la rupture franco-britannique* (Paris, 1994); David W. Wragg, *Sink the French! At War with Our Ally – 1940* (London, 2007).

⁷ For their personal recollections of that fateful episode, see Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre – Volume 1 – L'Appel, 1940-1942* (Paris, 1954), 77-78, which was translated in *War Memoirs – Volume 1 – The Call to Honour, 1940-1942* (London, 1955), 96-97, and Émile Muselier, *Marine et Résistance* (Paris, 1945), 71-72.

Canada as private citizens also arose.⁸ The despondence did not last, however, as they concluded their discussion with a renewed commitment to *la France libre* and a lasting alliance with Great Britain. *Realpolitik* prevailed over emotions. Thus, Vice Admiral Muselier continued building up the nearly still-birthing *FNFL* that summer, even as most French sailors outside of France's metropolitan and colonial ports found themselves corralled into British detention camps and their vessels impounded by the Royal Navy.

Both Muselier and de Gaulle drove a hard bargain in the process, adopting an approach that carefully balanced implied dependency on allied support and proclaimed autonomy for the Free French Forces. Such *modus operandi* would come to define Franco-British military relations in respect to the support provided by Great Britain for expansion and buildup of de Gaulle's naval forces. The *Forces françaises libres* (*FFL* – Free French Forces) are remembered today through such feats of arms as their gallant resistance against Rommel's tanks at Bir Hakeim in 1942 and General Leclerc's race to Paris in 1944.⁹ Nonetheless, the earlier contribution made by the *FNFL* in providing de Gaulle with the initial means to rally political support within the French colonial empire and to make a small but early military contribution to the allied cause remains equally significant. This ability came as a result of the modest and yet pivotal support provided by an ally leery of supplying badly needed resources to a fleet it did not fully control as will be demonstrated in this paper. To do so, the text will first narrate the efforts of de Gaulle and Muselier through the summer of 1940 to secure recognition and support from British authorities in the wake of Operation Catapult. The build-up and achievements of the fledgling navy through the following two years will be recounted, concluding at the time of the allied landings in French North Africa and the scuttling of the Vichy navy in Toulon.

The Search for Legitimacy

De Gaulle quickly bounced back after Mers el-Kebir. As he recalled later: "In spite of the pain and anger into which I and my companions were plunged..., I considered that the saving of France ranked above everything, even above the fate of her ships, and that our duty was to go on with the fight."¹⁰ On Bastille Day, he led a contingent of 200 *FFL* troops parading through the streets of London and addressed a defiant message to French people everywhere through the British Broadcasting Corporation: "We must do our utmost to beat the enemy... Our English allies, already masters of the seas and who will soon dominate the skies, are getting stronger everyday... France, although divided and pillaged, has not lost."¹¹

⁸ Éric Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle* (Paris, 2002), 152-153; Renaud Muselier, *L'amiral Muselier, 1882-1965: Le créateur de la croix de Lorraine* (Paris, 2000), 114; Edward Spears, *Two Men Who Saved France: Petain and de Gaulle* (London, 1966), 164-165. Major General Spears had been appointed as Churchill's personal representative to the French Prime Minister in May 1940 and retained such duties to de Gaulle after the Armistice.

⁹ Philippe Masson, *Histoire de l'armée française de 1914 à nos jours* (Paris, 1999), 325-326 and 340-342; John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York, 1989), 331, 414.

¹⁰ De Gaulle, *The Call to Honour*, 97. Original statement in French in *L'Appel*, 78.

¹¹ Fondation Charles de Gaulle, "Discours du général de Gaulle, 13 juillet 1940," last accessed 21 April 2014, http://www.de-gaulle-du.net/sentrainer/term_commt/13juillet40.htm.

His legitimacy remained in doubt, however. Virtually no prominent figure from the political class, nor the ranks of the diplomatic and civil services, joined the French National Committee de Gaulle had proposed to assemble in London.¹² Although the British Cabinet had formally recognized him on 28 June as “leader of all Free Frenchmen, wherever they may be, who rally to him in support of the allied cause,” the movement did not have the status of other governments in exile, such as those of Belgium and the Netherlands.¹³ Great Britain continued to recognize the Vichy regime until Pétain broke off diplomatic relations as a result of Operation Catapult. Whitehall pursued a rather ambiguous approach thereafter, by keeping ties through a Canadian representative until 1942.¹⁴ Neutral powers – most critically the United States – also maintained diplomatic representation in Vichy, thus acknowledging Pétain and the seemingly lawful transfer of power that had occurred in France on 10 July.¹⁵

It was on that fateful day that a majority of French senators and deputies sat for an extraordinary parliamentary session to ratify the terms of the Armistice and agreed to make the unelected Marshall Philippe Pétain head of state, cumulating both executive and legislative powers, thus “voting the Third Republic out of existence.”¹⁶ But for de Gaulle that regime had accepted defeat before the war was lost and sacrificed the French people while they were still fighting, therefore relinquishing the authority to represent the citizenry and rule the country.¹⁷ In order to restore the nation and reestablish France as a great power after the hostilities, he considered it essential that the French people continue to fight and that organized French forces make a potent contribution to the liberation of the homeland. It was clear to de Gaulle that campaign could not be left to the allies alone, however benevolent they may be, if France wished to stand alongside the victors at the war’s end. The path ahead was clear, requiring, in the general’s words:

¹² De Gaulle, *L’Appel* 71-74 and 82-84; Spears, *Two Men Who Saved France*, 136-139; Christine Levisse-Touzé, “Le Général de Gaulle et les débuts de la France Libre,” *Revue historique des Armées* CCXIX, 2, (June 2000), 66.

¹³ “Leader of Free Frenchmen – Recognition by British Govt. of Gen. de Gaulle,” *The Barrier Miner*, 29 June 1940, 1; Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle*, 150; Yossi Shain, *The Frontier of Loyalty: Political Exiles in the Age of the Nation-State*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005), 116-117.

¹⁴ Vichy France formally broke off diplomatic relations with Great Britain on 8 July 1940, see François Charles-Roux, *Cinq mois tragiques aux Affaires étrangères* (Paris, 1949), 158. Although based in London after the Armistice, Canadian diplomat Pierre Dupuy remained accredited as *chargé d’affaires* to France and conducted three official visits to Vichy over the course of the following year. His reports to the British Foreign Office can be found at TNA FO 371/28234 and FO 371/28235, Mr. Dupuy. Olivier Courteaux provides an extensive analysis of Dupuy’s role in *Canada between Vichy and Free France, 1940-1945* (Toronto, 2013), 53-84.

¹⁵ The United States maintained diplomatic representation in Vichy until 8 November 1942 when the Pétain regime severed all relations as a result of the allied landings in North Africa. Department of State – Office of the Historian, *A Guide to the United States’ History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: France*, last accessed 16 February 2015, <http://history.state.gov/countries/france>.

¹⁶ Assemblée nationale, “La République dans la tourmente (1939-1945): La période de la guerre, le régime de Vichy et le Gouvernement provisoire de la République française,” last accessed 16 February 2015, <http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/decouvrir-l-assemblee/histoire/histoire-de-l-assemblee-nationale/la-republique-dans-la-tourmente-1939-1945>. The quote is from Richard Griffiths, *Pétain* (London, 1970), 248.

¹⁷ Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle*, 160; and Daniel J. Mahoney, *De Gaulle: Statesmanship, Grandeur, and Modern Democracy*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ, 2000), 87-90.

the re-appearance of our armies on the battlefields, the return of our territories to belligerence, participation by the country itself in the efforts of its fighting men, and recognition by the foreign Powers of the fact that France, as such, had gone on with the struggle, – in short, to bring our sovereignty from disaster and the policy of wait-and-see, over to the side of war and, one day, victory.¹⁸

De Gaulle did not only aspire for his movement to make a contribution to the eventual defeat of the German occupier. He sought the more immediate “transfer of sovereignty” from the vanquished regime in Vichy and this momentous ambition necessitated legitimacy, internally among his people and externally on the international scene. His idea of sovereignty very much reflected a Westphalian concept expressed in terms of a centralized government exercising supreme and independent authority over a given area, and holding the monopoly on the legitimate use of force.¹⁹ Within that framework, de Gaulle seized on the urgency of establishing these three pillars (authority, territory, armed forces) under the Free French movement. Once senior figures had rallied to him, he announced the formation of the *Conseil de défense de l’Empire* (Empire Defence Council) on 27 October 1940, an executive body of sort to manage governmental affairs.²⁰ Sovereign territory was sought through obtaining the allegiance of France’s colonies, a contest of such importance that fratricidal fighting often ensued such as in Senegal (September 1940), Gabon (November 1940) and Syria (June 1941). The most pressing effort in the summer of 1940, however, was that of assembling proper armed forces, including a navy capable of carrying out de Gaulle’s ambitions in the European theatre of operations as well as reaching out to the farthest corners of the Empire. This task would require political support and military assistance on the part of the British, neither of which was necessarily forthcoming at that time.

Whether Prime Minister Winston Churchill truly perceived de Gaulle as the saviour of France or merely as a choice of last resort following the Armistice is controversial amongst historians and cannot be resolved here.²¹ Of more significance was the prime minister’s conviction of the immediate need for a French ally to keep that country’s fleet and colonies out of Axis hands. This position was in contrast to that of several members of his government as well as diplomatic and military circles. The unprecedented situation resulting from the presence of a militant de Gaulle in Great Britain and an ostensibly legitimate regime in Vichy left British leaders facing a conundrum many were reluctant to resolve.²² Active and forceful interventions on the part of Churchill would often be required that

¹⁸ De Gaulle, *The Call to Honour*, 87-88. Original quote in French can be found in *L’Appel*, 69.

¹⁹ For an introduction to these principles, see James A. Caporaso, “Changes in the Westphalian Order: Territory, Public Authority, and Sovereignty,” *International Studies Review* II, 2, (Summer 2000), 1; Daniel Warner, *An Ethic of Responsibility in International Nations* (Boulder, 1991), 9.

²⁰ De Gaulle, *L’Appel*, 119 and *The Call to Honour*, 145; Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle*, 196.

²¹ For a range of views, see Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War – Volume 2 – Their Finest Hour* (Cambridge, 1949), 509; François Kersaudy, *De Gaulle et Churchill: La mésentente cordiale* (Paris, 2001), 83-85; Simon Berthon, *Allies at War: The Bitter Rivalry among Churchill, Roosevelt, and de Gaulle* (New York, 2001), 29-31.

²² Philippe Masson, *La Marine française*, 195; Claude Huan, “Les négociations franco-britanniques de l’automne 1940,” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* CLXXVI (1994), 140-141; Berthon, *Allies at War*, 31-32.

summer, whenever Free French leaders went knocking on doors around London, seeking support in standing up their fledgling forces.²³ These tensions would become particularly apparent in the formation of de Gaulle's navy in the aftermath of Operation Catapult and the bloody legacy of Mers el-Kebir, as Muselier quickly realized that summer.

Muselier's Early Efforts

Muselier was placed in command of the *FNFL*, as well as that of the *Forces aériennes françaises libres (FAFL – Free French Air Force)* while waiting for a flying officer of suitable seniority to rally the movement. He would often prove as much an asset as a liability over the following years.²⁴ The first officer of general rank from any of the three services to respond to de Gaulle's call and the only naval flag officer ever to join the Free French, Muselier was definitely a "catch" of sorts. Nevertheless, tensions in the command relationship between the senior sailor and the much more junior army officer, younger by eight years, arose immediately and were never really resolved. De Gaulle was but a colonel at the start of the war and had been made acting brigadier general in late May 1940, a fact that clearly grated on Muselier and led to his eventual firing in March 1942.²⁵ Though a highly competent sailor and effective organiser, Muselier's controversial reputation in the naval service did not help in attracting senior officers to the Free French. He graduated from the *École navale* in 1901. A classmate, Admiral François Darlan, became head of the *Marine nationale* in 1937.²⁶ Muselier had been promoted to rear admiral in 1931, a fairly good pace in those years, but he was not promoted again until October 1939. Even then, his promotion only occurred as a result of the wartime requirement to elevate the rank for the position he had held since the previous year – commander of the Marseilles Defence Sector, a rather low-profile appointment. But within weeks Navy Minister César Campinchi "retired" him under pressure from the local business community because Muselier had publicly accusing prominent citizens of war profiteering.²⁷

²³ The following note from Churchill to the chiefs of staff committee was telling: "It is the settled policy of His Majesty's Government to make good strong French contingents for land, sea and air Service [sic]... and to have them as representatives of a France which is continuing the war. It is the duty of the Chiefs of Staff to carry this policy out cordially and effectively... Mere questions of administrative inconvenience must not be allowed to stand in the way of this policy of the State... I hope I may receive assurances that this policy is being whole-heartedly pursued." TNA, CAB 121/541, Memorandum from Prime Minister Churchill to General Ismay, 12 July 1940. For additional statements on Churchill's role in these early months, see de Gaulle, *L'Appel*, 85 and *The Call to Honour*, 105; Émile Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme* (Paris, 1946), 38; Spears, *Two Men Who Saved France*, 157-159; Masson, *La Marine française*, 195-196.

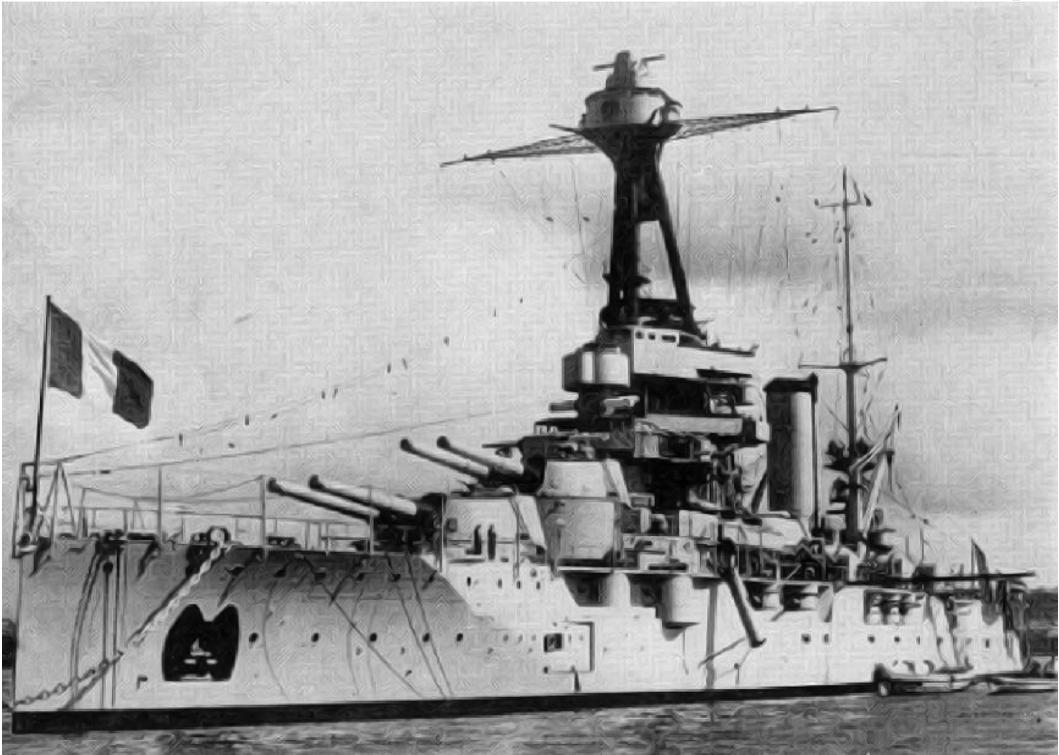
²⁴ De Gaulle, *L'Appel*, 76 and *The Call to Honour*, 95; Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 27-28 and *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 14; Thierry d'Argenlieu, "Les origines des FNFL," in *Revue de la France Libre* XXIX (June 1950), 17-20. D'Argenlieu was the *FNFL* chief of staff from July 1940 to March 1941, a key witness to the beginnings of de Gaulle's fledgling navy.

²⁵ For an objective study of this tense relationship, see Edmond Pognon, *De Gaulle et l'Armée* (Paris, 1976), Chapter XVIII ("De Gaulle et Muselier").

²⁶ Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Claude Huan, *Darlan* (Paris, 1989), 32.

²⁷ Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 15; Coutau-Bégarie and Huan, *Darlan*, 190.

Muselier never forgave Darlan and the navy's senior leadership for abandoning him in the face of political pressure and he proved a dedicated Free French supporter in the summer of 1940. Following a harrowing escape from Marseilles on board a decrepit British collier, he had arrived in Gibraltar in late June hoping to find forces from France willing to continue the fight. Even though on the retired list and still unaware of de Gaulle's call to arms, the 58-year old had taken charge of the few units there: armed trawler *Président Houduce* and freighter *Rhin* (the latter adapted to transport commandos), unarmed cargo ships *Anadyr* and *Lieutenant de la Tour*, and captured Italian merchantman *Capo Olmo*, as well as several aircraft. Though he inaugurated "French Naval Station Gibraltar" on 28 June 1940, Muselier's initial experience in rallying troops would be representative of the trials ahead.²⁸ A brawl erupted on board the vessel *Rhin* when a naval officer, Sub-Lieutenant Claude Péri, sought to convince the civilian crew of continuing the fight despite the Armistice. Péri was badly injured and only six men joined Muselier while fifty others asked to be repatriated home. The freighter *Lieutenant de la Tour* had to be relinquished to evacuate dozens of sailors, aviators and French civilians from Gibraltar as they elected for the Vichy camp.²⁹



Provence from United States. Navy Department. Division of Naval Intelligence, *ONI203 Booklet for Identification of Ships of the French Navy* (9 November 1942)

²⁸ Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 24-26 and *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 8-11.

²⁹ Muselier, *L'amiral Muselier*, 104-105; Anthony Heckstall-Smith, *The Fleet That Faced Both Ways* (London, 1963), 74.

As this episode showed, rallying sailors to the *croix de Lorraine* would prove a great challenge, even before Mers el-Kebir.³⁰ On the eve of Operation Catapult, FNFL headquarters personnel amounted to five officers and one civilian typist. Out of the 200 vessels of the *Marine nationale* (ranging from battleships to small motor launches and tugs) and 135 merchant ships which had found refuge in the British Isles and other Commonwealth possessions, the vice admiral could only claim to control two submarines (*Rubis*, operating out of Dundee, Scotland since the fall of 1939, and *Narval*, which had sailed from Tunisia to Malta after the Armistice), and three armed trawlers (*President Houduce* in Gibraltar as well as *Le Vaillant* and *Vikings* in Chatham, England) in addition to a few freighters.³¹ Such underwhelming numbers must have been distressing, especially when contrasted with the size of the French Navy at the outset of the war (see table 1). The navy ships had arrived in British ports with their 11,500 crew members as well as another 10,000 shore-based sailors and army personnel, and 2,500 civilians, embarked during the evacuation of the Channel ports. Some 2,500 merchant sailors and a few hundred fishermen had come with their boats while 200 aviators had flown their machines directly to England and Gibraltar. As well, 4,500 injured Dunkirk survivors were still in British hospitals and the bulk of the 6,000-strong alpine division that had participated in the Norway campaign had returned to Great Britain; thus, nearly 35,000 French military personnel and civilians could be found on British land in the aftermath of the Armistice. And yet, barely four hundred men and a dozen officers had pledged allegiance to the Free French Navy as of 3 July while 20,000 of their countrymen had chosen evacuation in a convoy of 12 ocean liners and cargo ships bound for Morocco. Another 10,000 would follow, until the departure of the last repatriation ship on 26 November 1940.³²

³⁰ De Gaulle, in his memoirs, attributed the idea of adopting the cross of Lorraine to Muselier's chief of staff, Lieutenant Commander Thierry d'Argenlieu, but the latter confirmed the founder of the FNFL as the instigator of this initiative. Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 30 and *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 15-16; De Gaulle, *L'Appel*, 79 and *The Call to Honour*, 98; D'Argenlieu, "Les origines des FNFL," 17.

³¹ Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 38; Levisse-Touzé, "Le Général de Gaulle et les débuts de la France Libre," 64; Émile Chaline, "Les Forces navales françaises libre," in *Espoir* no. 100 (January 1995), last accessed 21 July 2015, <http://www.charles-de-gaulle.org/pages/1-homme/dossiers-thematiques/1940-1944-la-seconde-guerre-mondiale/forces-navales-francaises-libres/analyses/les-forces-navales-francaise-libre-fnfl.php>.

³² Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 32 and 51 and *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 14; Émile Chaline, "Les Forces navales françaises libres." Admittedly, 900 men of the *13e demi-brigade de marche de la Légion étrangère* (13th Half Brigade of the Foreign Legion) rallied the FFL on 1 July 1940 but the bulk of the alpine troops elected to return to Vichy France that summer, following the example of its commander, Brigadier General Anthoine Béthouart, a Saint-Cyr classmate of de Gaulle. De Gaulle, *L'Appel*, 75 and *The Call to Honour*, 93; Pognon, *De Gaulle et l'Armée*, 123; and Robert O. Paxton, *Parades and Politics at Vichy: The French Officer Corps under Marshall Pétain* (Princeton, 1966), 33-34.

Table 1 – French Naval Strength 1 September 1939

Category	Vessel name or number of hulls per category	Combined tonnage	Remarks
Dreadnought battleships	<i>Courbet, Paris, Bretagne, Provence, Lorraine</i>	112750	Had entered service as follows : <i>Courbet</i> – 1913, <i>Paris</i> – 1914, <i>Bretagne</i> – 1915, <i>Provence</i> – 1915, <i>Lorraine</i> – 1916.
Fast battleships	<i>Richelieu, Jean Bart</i>	70,000	Although neither had yet entered active service, they were completing their fitting out in Brest (<i>Richelieu</i>) and Saint-Nazaire (<i>Jean Bart</i>).
Light battleships	<i>Dunkerque, Strasbourg</i>	60,000	Also referred to as battle cruisers or pocket battleships, they had entered service as follows: <i>Dunkerque</i> 1938, <i>Strasbourg</i> 1939.
Aircraft carrier	<i>Béarn</i>	22,500	Entered service 1928.
Seaplane carrier	<i>Commandant Teste</i>	10,160	Entered service 1932.
Heavy cruisers	19	157,000	Mostly “treaty cruisers” built under the Washington Treaty regime.
Light cruisers	8	21,500	Most classified as <i>contre-torpilleurs</i> (destroyers) but reclassified as light cruisers in later years.
Destroyers	24	57,600	Modern, mostly built during interwar period.
Torpedo Boats	39	45,000	Wide range of capabilities, some going as far back as WWI.
Submarines	80	73,000	Wide range of capabilities, some going as far back as WWI.
Corvettes / patrol boats	53	42,900	Wide range of capabilities, some going as far back as WWI.
Gunboats	7	1,800	All based in China and Indochina
Misc. Auxiliaries	47	70,920	
Totals	288	745,130	

Sources:

SHD, 3 BB 2 SEC 114, Folder *État numérique à la date du 1er septembre 1939 des bâtiments de la Marine classés par catégories*.

Philippe Masson, *La Marine française et la guerre, 1939-1945*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 2000).

Notes:

- a. Civilian ships armed for the hostilities but which continued to be manned by merchant seamen (from ocean liners to trawlers and large pleasure craft) are not included.
- b. Figures for submarines under combined tonnage indicate submerged displacement.
- c. Miscellaneous auxiliaries refer to minesweepers, repair ships, tenders, tankers, etc. Tugs and other small craft dedicated to harbour duties are not included.

De Gaulle was partly to blame. His haughty manners, perceived self-aggrandizement and cruel attacks on the personal character of Marshall Pétain – as much a revered figure in French military ranks as among the civilian populace – badly undermined the few visits he made to camps accommodating his fellow French in England.³³ The reputation of Vice Admiral Muselier within the *Marine nationale* did not help either but British authorities also played a part in this inauspicious beginning. As early as 17 May 1940, Prime Minister Churchill had commissioned a study on the potential ramifications of a defeated France. The report submitted ten days later included an emphatic concern that the French fleet might fall under Axis control and participants at an Admiralty meeting on 7 June considered the eventuality that the Royal Navy itself may have to seize or sink these ships if such an eventuality appeared likely.³⁴ By the time of the Armistice, disquieted by the presence in their rear of thousands of French military personnel and civilians of doubtful allegiance as Great Britain was preparing to repulse a German invasion, most British authorities came to favour their repatriation unless they formally rallied to the Union Jack. Many military leaders, including Chief of the Imperial General Staff John Dill, also grew concerned that visits to French camps by *F.F.L.* recruiters could result in large-scale unrest and require reallocation of significant police and military resources away from defence duties to restore order.³⁵ Memoirs by early adherents of *la France libre* abound with examples of British representatives covertly undermining their efforts through offers to join Great Britain's armed services, with higher rates of pay and promises of British citizenship after the hostilities, and relocating Free French recruits to camps where the conditions of living were clearly worse.³⁶

³³ Spears, *Two Men Who Saved France*, 158-159; Heckstall-Smith, *The Fleet That Faced Both Ways*, 72. Both Roussel (*Charles de Gaulle*, 156-157) and Masson (*La Marine française*, 194, note 160) cite extracts from the testimony of French citizens and military personnel having met de Gaulle at the time, leaving them with a sour taste of the Free French movement as a result.

³⁴ Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 87; TNA, FO 371/24383, Action by His Majesty's Government in the Event of a French Military Collapse, 25 May 1940; TNA, ADM 205/4, Minutes of a Meeting Held in the First Sea Lord's Room at the Admiralty, 7 June 1940.

³⁵ TNA, FO 371/24383, Extract from the War Cabinet Conclusions on French Armed Forces in the United Kingdom, 28 June 1940; Spears, *Two Men Who Saved France*, 156; Émile Chaline, "Les Forces navales françaises libres."

³⁶ De Gaulle, *L'Appel*, 74-76 and *The Call to Honour*, 93-94; Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 32 and 51 and *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 14; Spears, *Two Men Who Saved France*, 157-158; Étienne and Alain Schlumberger, *Les combats et l'honneur des Forces navales françaises libres, 1940-1944* (Paris, 2007), 34-38.

In addition to the difficulties attracting sailors to the movement, there was the problem of getting control over French vessels detained in British ports. The Royal Navy wished to make up for its losses from the previous months by sailing many of these ships under the White Ensign, be it with its own crews or those of other navies which had found refuge in Great Britain.³⁷ Though a supporter of de Gaulle, Churchill made quite clear in a note to the Admiralty the importance of retaining French warships and merchantmen under British control for use in the on-going Battle of the Atlantic.³⁸ This instruction followed a meeting which had taken place on 5 July between Vice Admiral Muselier and the British first sea lord, Admiral Dudley Pound, whereby the former proposed a “navy-to-navy” agreement to delineate relations between the RN and the *FNFL*.³⁹ The meeting did not start well. When Muselier expressed his intent to take command of all French warships and merchantmen residing in the British Isles, Pound replied that Cabinet had already endorsed a decision for British crews to take over an initial allotment of twelve vessels. The requirement to arm as many French escorts as possible and sail them under British flag would continue for the foreseeable future. This arrangement was necessary to ensure that the crews not be treated as “rebels” in opposition to the Vichy regime. Muselier retorted that the Pétain government was not legitimate but the second sea lord, Admiral Sir Charles Little, stated rather dismissively that world opinion would likely disagree with the leader of the *FNFL*. Pound actually reiterated the promise that any trained French sailors wishing to join the Royal Navy would be taken in because the British sea service was itself experiencing serious manning problems. Testy exchanges ensued on matters of logistical support, French uniforms for French sailors, the provision of accommodations ashore, Muselier’s intention to raise a battalion of *fusiliers-marins* (naval infantry), and the modalities for ships manned by French crews to fire their air defence batteries when under attack alongside in British ports.

Notwithstanding the differences, an initial – and fundamental – *quid pro quo* was reached. *FNFL* crews would be allowed to resume control of those ships they could man as long as they agreed to operate under the orders of British fleet commanders. To Muselier’s chagrin, British authorities never ratified this agreement in writing and de Gaulle accepted in a later meeting that French units could be “lent” to other navies.⁴⁰ But the basis for a credible Free French Navy at least appeared set. On the very day of the de Gaulle meeting, 12 July, *FNFL* sailors boarded the battleship *Courbet* in Portsmouth and Muselier formed the first contingent of *fusiliers-marins* the next day. In the following weeks, Free French crews resumed control of the submarines *Rubis* and *Narval*, armed trawlers *President Houduce*, *Le Vaillant* and *Vikings*, as well as smaller utility vessels and some cargo ships. A majority of the crew of *aviso colonial* (colonial sloop) *Savorgnan de Brazza* elected to join the Free French and they were allowed to return to their ship as a group that same

³⁷ TNA, CAB 120/285, Armament Supplies for French Ships, 20 July 1940; Coutau-Bégarie, *Mers el-Kébir*, 110; Masson, *La Marine française*, 195.

³⁸ TNA, PREM 3/179/4, Note from the Prime Minister to the First Lord and the First Sea Lord, 7 July 1940.

³⁹ A French translation of the British minutes can be found in full in Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 27-32.

⁴⁰ The text of the proposed agreement and the French translation of the British minutes for the 12 July meeting are reproduced in full in Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 32-36 and 42-43 respectively.

month.⁴¹ Muselier was conscious that the hostilities would endure and concerned that half of the *FNFL* recruits had no naval experience. Therefore he established an *École navale* in *Courbet*.⁴² Arrangements were soon made for other candidates to attend the wartime three-month midshipman course at the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth while *FNFL* detachments were assigned to Royal Navy trade schools for French ratings to train in the rapidly evolving techniques of anti-submarine and anti-air warfare, communications, engineering, and other matters.⁴³

This seeming goodwill could not mask the Admiralty's continued ambition to leverage French ships for its own purpose. *Courbet*'s sister-ship, the battleship *Paris*, remained alongside in Plymouth to be used as a floating depot under the White Ensign, providing quarters to Polish sailors for the duration of the war.⁴⁴ Though scuttled by her crew in Plymouth's shallow anchorage during Operation Catapult, the *torpilleur* (light destroyer) *Mistral* was raised in August 1940; she served, with a British crew, first as a coastal escort and then a gunnery training tender until 1944.⁴⁵ Her sister-ship *Ouragan* sailed under the colours of Poland before being turned over to the *FNFL* in April 1941.⁴⁶ Another light destroyer, *Bouclier*, also embarked Poles but was quickly transferred to the Dutch Navy in late August 1940 and then reassigned to the *FNFL* that December.⁴⁷ The light destroyer *La Flore* was assigned to support training at HMS *Osprey*, the RN's anti-submarine warfare school before joining sister ships *La Cordelière* and *L'Incomprise* in reserve under British colours for the remainder of the war.⁴⁸ The Royal Navy operated three motor torpedo boats (*V.T.B. 8, 11, 12*) as HMS *B. 063, B. 064* and *B. 065* before returning them to the *FNFL* in 1941-42.⁴⁹ Polish crews manned four small submarine chasers –

⁴¹ Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 74-76; Jacques Cornic, "Sous la Croix de Lorraine (under the Cross of Lorraine): The *FNFL* (*Forces Naval Françaises Libres*) 1940-1943 (Free French Naval Forces)," *Warship International* XXIV, 1, (1987), 36, 39. This last article provides a complete listing of all ships and submarines, of French origin and those lent by the Allies, that saw service with the *FNFL*.

⁴² Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 76; Cornic, "Sous la Croix de Lorraine," 39.

⁴³ Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 77-78 and *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 60-62; Émile Chaline, "Les Forces navales françaises libres."

⁴⁴ *Paris* was towed back to Brest in August 1945 where the *Marine nationale* continued to use her as a depot ship until sold for scrap to a French contractor in December 1955 and broken up in the following year.

Masson, *La Marine française*, 487; Robert Dumas, "The French Dreadnoughts: The 23,500 ton *Courbet* Class (Part 2)," *Warship* IX, 36, (1985), 231.

⁴⁵ HMS *Mistral* would be returned to the French Navy in August 1944 but remained in reserve in the northeast England port of Hartlepool for the remainder of the war. Towed back to Cherbourg in 1945, she saw no further service until condemned in 1950. Masson, *La Marine française*, 495; M.J. Whitley, *Destroyers of World War Two – An International Encyclopedia* (Annapolis, 1988), 47-48.

⁴⁶ *Ouragan* spent the rest of the war as a French depot ship in Portsmouth. Towed back to France after the hostilities, she saw no further service until her dismantlement in 1949. Masson, *La Marine française*, 494; Cornic, "Sous la Croix de Lorraine," 36; Whitley, *Destroyers of World War Two*, 47-48.

⁴⁷ Returned to the French Navy in 1944, *Bouclier* saw no further service until stricken in 1950. Masson, *La Marine française*, 498; Whitley, *Destroyers of World War Two*, 52-54.

⁴⁸ All four ships would be returned to the French Navy in 1945 but see no further service until condemned in 1950. Masson, *La Marine française*, 497-498; Whitley, *Destroyers of World War Two*, 52-54.

⁴⁹ *VTB 8* was reassigned to the *FNFL* in 1941 and paid off in 1944. *VTB11* bore two names while in RN service, HMS *B 064* and then *MGB 98* before being turned over to the French in June 1942; she was lost in Gosport the following March during a bombing by the *Luftwaffe*. *VTB 12* also bore two names under the White Ensign, HMS *M. 065* and *MGB 99*. The *FNFL* regained her service in June 1942. Cornic, "Sous la

Chasseurs 6, 7, 11 and 15, two of which were lost in combat and two others transferred to the Free French in February 1941 – while six more were taken into British service, only to be kept in reserve or reassigned to the *FNFL* later in the war.⁵⁰ Most tragically, the light destroyer *Branlebas*, operated by a British crew, foundered in a Channel storm on 13 December 1940 with only three survivors out of a complement of ninety sailors.⁵¹

This overview demonstrates that, despite its initial ambitions, the Admiralty in fact could do little with the French ships present in the British Isles. Royal Navy authorities quickly realized that the issues caused by different technical specifications, equipment standards and ammunition calibers resulted in debilitating delays in those yards assigned to maintain or upgrade these foreign vessels.⁵² It also became clear that the best units of the *Marine nationale* had actually been evacuated to North Africa, leaving but second-class material in English ports.⁵³ The battleships *Courbet* and *Paris* had first seen service before the First World War while escorts such as *Mistral* and *Ouragan* had been authorized under the 1922 naval budget. The light destroyers and sloops did not have the autonomy nor the seakeeping capabilities necessary for long transatlantic escort missions, as demonstrated by the loss of the *Branlebas*, even though a modern vessel built in 1938. All French submarines were deemed unsuitable for service under the White Ensign. By the end of 1940, the Royal Navy had largely given up on the concept of manning French ships itself and accepted that *FNFL* sailors were the best source of manpower to return to service those few units that could make an effective contribution to the war on the allied side. This turnaround provided one more argument to de Gaulle as he set about formalizing the Anglo-Free French relationship in a framework that would have lasting impact for the remainder of the war and beyond.

De Gaulle Concludes a Deal

Though Muselier had failed to secure a formal navy-to-navy agreement on 5 July 1940, de Gaulle was already trying to obtain a higher-level accord with Prime Minister Churchill. French law professor Pierre Cassin first reported to de Gaulle's headquarters on 29 June and was immediately tasked to draft a proposal that would give concrete shape to the declaration of the previous day when the British cabinet had acknowledged "the leader of all Free Frenchmen."⁵⁴ De Gaulle endorsed a first version on 1 July, which was communicated to Whitehall the next day. Negotiations then unfolded over the course of the next month, often acrimoniously. Operation Catapult played a role in this situation but repeated demands by the French negotiator for Great Britain to commit to controversial issues, such as full

Croix de Lorraine," 39; Angus Konstam, *British Motor Gun Boat 1939-45* (Oxford, 2010), 38.

⁵⁰ *Chasseurs 98 and 106* spent the war in reserve and the *FNFL* acquired *Chasseur 8* in July 1942. Masson, *La Marine française*, 515-517; Richard Worth, *Fleets of World War II* (Cambridge, 2001), 38.

⁵¹ Whitley, *Destroyers of World War Two*, 54; Paul Auphan and Jacques Mordal, *La Marine française dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1967), 351.

⁵² TNA, CAB 120/285, Armament Supplies for French Ships, 9 August 1940.

⁵³ Stephen Roskill, *The Navy at War, 1939-1945*, 2nd ed. (London, 1998), 80.

⁵⁴ See the recollections of René Cassin, "Comment furent signés les accords Churchill-de Gaulle du 7 août 1940," in *Revue de la France Libre* no. 154 (January-February 1965), <http://www.france-libre.net/accords-churchill-de-gaulle/>.

restoration of France's colonies after the war or exercise by de Gaulle of some form of control over those French citizens recruited into the British forces, also delayed the negotiations.⁵⁵ The bitterness would reach such a level that Major General Edward Spears, by then heading the British liaison mission to Free France, would later comment on negotiations conducted "with exasperating acerbity until even the best disposed of Foreign Office officials grew weary of trying to meet what appeared to be this manifestation of the overwrought nerves of our guests."⁵⁶ Nevertheless, compromises on both sides eventually led to an accord through an exchange of letters between de Gaulle and Churchill on 7 August 1940.

Though a momentous step, the very form of the agreement revealed continued uneasiness in the Anglo-Free French relationship. The main text carefully avoided any terms couching it as a formal treaty or diplomatic recognition between the two parties, the covering letters merely referring to the attachment as "a memorandum which... will constitute an accord between us concerning the organisation, employment and conditions of service of the [Free French] forces."⁵⁷ Churchill did write that "His Majesty's Government is resolved, once allied armies have won victory, to ensure the integral restoration of the independence and greatness of France,"⁵⁸ but carefully avoided specific reference to future status of France's colonies. In his 1949 memoirs, Churchill still only referred to the episode in one curt and noncommittal sentence: "On August 7, I signed a military agreement with [de Gaulle] which dealt with practical needs."⁵⁹ This description is in sharp contrast to negotiator Cassin describing the text as the "fundamental charter of the Free French movement."⁶⁰ For his part, de Gaulle commemorated the event in rousing terms in his memoirs:

The August 7th agreement had a considerable importance for Free France, not only because it got us out of immediate material difficulties, but also because the British authorities, having now an official basis for their relations with us, no longer hesitated to make things easier for us. Above all, the whole world knew that a new beginning of Franco-British solidarity had been made in spite of everything. The consequences soon made themselves felt in certain territories of the Empire and among French residents abroad. But in addition, other States, when they saw Great Britain proceeding to a beginning of recognition, took some steps in the same direction.⁶¹

⁵⁵ TNA, CAB 120/539, Minute from the Prime Minister to General Ismay, 26 July 1940; Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle*, 161; Barré, *Devenir de Gaulle*, 87-88.

⁵⁶ Spears, *Two Men Who Saved France*, 145.

⁵⁷ The text of the accord, as well as that of the covering letters by Churchill and de Gaulle, are available in full at Digithèque MJP, *Accord du 7 août 1940 entre la France libre et le Royaume-Uni*, last accessed 6 March 2015, <http://mjp.univ-perp.fr/france/co1940fi2.htm>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 508.

⁶⁰ Cassin, "Comment furent signés les accords Churchill-de Gaulle."

⁶¹ De Gaulle, *The Call to Honour*, 100-101. Original quote in French can be found in *L'Appel*, 81.

Regardless of either perspective concerning the political ramifications of the accord, its practical impact laid out fundamental principles of military support and coordination between Great Britain and the Free French movement. The parties agreed that the *FFL* would preserve their French character in terms of flags, discipline, and the administration of personnel, thus avoiding amalgamation in the armed forces of another country. The British accepted that de Gaulle's forces would have priority of assignment for all French equipment found in Great Britain and other territories as long as these forces could effectively use such equipment. Churchill also committed to furnishing additional items when necessary to bring French units up to par with their UK equivalent. As a quid pro quo, de Gaulle accepted that Great Britain and other allied powers could avail themselves of unused French equipment – including ships, submarines and aircraft – on a temporary basis as such items would remain French property and be returned to France after the war. De Gaulle further agreed that, while he exercised command over all Free French forces, these would be placed under British control when taking part in a given campaign – which would be the case for most operations involving the *Forces françaises libres* for the foreseeable future. Lastly, Great Britain consented to fund all *FFL* expenses subject to having those sums reimbursed after the war.



Members of the ship's crew of FFS *Le Triomphant* in working rig, seated on staging over the ship's side, painting the ship's bow. Imperial War Museums (collection no. 4700-01, photograph A1855). Lt. H. W. Tomlin, photographer

A Fledgling Fleet in Action

De Gaulle succeeded in avoiding the prospect of his movement becoming nothing but a foreign legion fighting under the British flag. In turn, Muselier set about exploiting the agreement of 7 August 1940 to build up his small flotilla. By then, barely a thousand men had joined its ranks while another 700 hundred had enlisted in the Royal Navy.⁶² Only one colonial sloop (*Savorgnan-de-Brazza*), two minesweepers (*Commandant Duboc* and *Commandant Dominé*), three armed trawlers (*President Houduce*, *Le Vaillant* and *Vikings*), and four submarines (*Rubis*, *Minerve*, *Junon* and *Narval*) had been made available for immediate service at sea. The *FNFL* fleet grew slowly through the fall months as more qualified personnel became available to man French vessels, including two modern destroyers (*Le Triomphant* and *Léopard*), the world's largest submarine (*Surcouf*), and additional torpedo boats.⁶³ By the end of the year, 3,300 sailors sported the *croix de Lorraine*, though barely half of those were veterans of the *Marine nationale*. A thousand or so had transferred from the merchant navy while the rest were civilians or former army personnel who had joined without any experience of life at sea.⁶⁴

Table 2 – Free French Units of French Origin 12 July 1940 – 30 December 1942

Category	Vessel Name	Tonnage	Remarks
Dreadnought	<i>Courbet</i>	22,550	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to <i>FNFL</i> 12 July 1940 - Floating barrack/AA battery (five kills) in Portsmouth, disarmed 31 March 1941
Light destroyers	<i>Le Triomphant</i>	2,570	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to <i>FNFL</i> 28 August 1940
	<i>Léopard</i>	2,160	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to <i>FNFL</i> 31 August 1940
Torpedo boats	<i>La Melpomène</i>	610	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to <i>FNFL</i> 31 August 1940 - Transferred back to the RN 15 October 1942 and placed into reserve

⁶² Muselier, *Marine et Résistance*, 44; Levisse-Touzé, “Le Général de Gaulle et les débuts de la France Libre,” 64.

⁶³ Cornic, “Sous la Croix de Lorraine,” 36.

⁶⁴ Chaline, “Les Forces navales françaises libres”; Masson, *La Marine française*, 193.

Submarines	<i>Surcouf</i>	4,000	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 15 September 1940 - Lost in collision with US cargo ship in the Caribbean 18-19 April 1942
	<i>Narval</i>	1,440	- Rallied Malta 26 June 1940 - Sunk by Italian mine off Tunisia 19 December 1940
	<i>Minerve</i>	800	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 15 August 1940
	<i>Junon</i>	800	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 21 July 1940
	<i>Rubis</i>	925	- Seized Op Catapult but returned to her French crew on the same day as they already rallied to de Gaulle
Corvettes / Sloops	<i>Savorgnan de Brazza</i>	1,960	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL July 1940
	<i>Chevreuil</i>	630	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 3 September 1940
	<i>Commandant Duboc</i>	630	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL August 1940
	<i>La Moqueuse</i>	630	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 10 August 1940
	<i>Commandant Dominé</i>	630	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 26 July 1940
Misc. Auxiliaries	<i>Président Houduce</i> (Armed Trawler)	1,179	- Rallied Gibraltar 17 June 1940, never seized
	<i>Reine des Flots</i> (Armed Trawler)	608	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL June 1941
	<i>Vikings</i> (Armed trawler)	1,159	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 31 July 1940 - Torpedoed by German submarine off Lebanon 16 April 1942
	<i>Cap des Palmes</i> (Armed merchant cruiser)	3,082	- Seized by the FNFL in Gabon 9 November 1940
	<i>Chasseur 8</i> (Submarine chaser)	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 21 April 1941 - Sunk off Plymouth by German aircraft 13 July 1942
	<i>Chasseur 10</i>	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 22 October 1940
	<i>Chasseur 11</i>	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 5 February 1941
<i>Chasseur 12</i>	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 1 May 1941	

	<i>Chasseur 13</i>	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 16 December 1942
	<i>Chasseur 14</i>	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 19 December 1942
	<i>Chasseur 15</i>	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL February 1941
	<i>Chasseur 41</i>	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 9 September 1940
	<i>Chasseur 42</i>	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 16 September 1940
	<i>Chasseur 43</i>	114	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL 9 September 1940
	<i>VTB 11</i>	28	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL June 1942
	<i>VTB 12</i>	28	- Seized Op Catapult, transferred to FNFL June 1942
Total in service on 30 December 1942	24 ships and submarines	17,686	- 2.4% of the total tonnage of the 1939 French fleet

Sources:

Émile Chaline and P. Santarelli, "L'activité des FNFL du 18 juin 1940 au 3 août 1943," *Revue historique de la Défence*, 176, 3 (September 1989), 67-80.

Jacques Cornic, "Sous la Croix de Lorraine (under the Cross of Lorraine): The FNFL (Forces Naval Françaises Libres) 1940-1943 (Free French Naval Forces)," *Warship International*, XXIV, 1, (1987), 34-43.

Philippe Masson, *La Marine française et la guerre, 1939-1945*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 2000).

Notes:

- a. Categories do not include naval units used purely as barrack ships or dedicated to alongside training.
- b. Figures stricken through indicate vessels no longer part of the fleet on 30 December 1942 due to losses, disarmament, etc.
- c. Tonnage figures for submarines indicate submerged displacement.
- d. The miscellaneous auxiliaries category does not include tugs and other small craft dedicated to harbour duties.

As inherent difficulties of maintenance and training with different equipment and standards also remained outstanding, Muselier and Pound agreed in April 1941 that *FNFL* crews could take over new warships under construction in British shipyards, starting with seven Fairmile wooden motor launches and seven Flower class corvettes through the course of that year.⁶⁵ Such newfound largesse on the part of the Royal Navy was facilitated by the enactment in the United States of the Lend-Lease Act on 11 March 1941, authorizing the

⁶⁵ Émile Chaline and P. Santarelli, "L'activité des F.N.F.L. du 18 juin 1940 au 3 août 1943," *Revue historique de la Défence* CLXXVI, 3, (September 1989), 72; Jacques Cornic, "Ships for Crews," *Warship International* XXII, 3, (1985), 252-253, 257.

Roosevelt administration to “sell, transfer title to, exchange, lease, lend, or otherwise dispose of... any defense article... (to) any country whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States.”⁶⁶ Although Lend-Lease would not be extended to the Free French until the following year, the British re-directed some resources to de Gaulle’s forces while efforts to bring former *Marine nationale* units into service were virtually abandoned. The Royal Navy now had access to a bounty of new construction in North America that required manning. Two more corvettes were added in 1942, as well as five Fairmile motor launches (all Fairmiles would eventually be replaced with six Vosper motor torpedo boats).⁶⁷ This effort culminated with the handover of the large Hunt class destroyer HMS *Haldon* on 15 December 1942, re-christened *La Combattante*.⁶⁸ The sum total of these transfers, combined with those French units already refurbished, made for a credible force despite ongoing losses as illustrated in table 2 above and table 3 below.

Table 3 – Free French Units of British Origin 12 July 1940 – 30 December 1942

Category	Vessel Name	Tonnage	Remarks
Destroyer	<i>La Combattante</i>	1,500	- RN Hunt class destroyer, transferred to FNFL 15 December 1942
Corvettes (Flower class)	<i>Mimosa</i>	950	- Transferred to FNFL 5 May 1941, torpedoed 9 June 1942
	<i>Alysse</i>	950	- Transferred to FNFL 10 June 1941, torpedoed 10 February 1942
	<i>Lobélia</i>	950	- Transferred to FNFL 16 July 1941
	<i>Aconit</i>	950	- Transferred to FNFL 23 July 1941
	<i>Renoncule</i>	950	- Transferred to FNFL 28 July 1941
	<i>Commandant Detroyat</i>	950	- Transferred to FNFL 16 September 1941
	<i>Commandant Drogou</i>	950	- Transferred to FNFL 26 January 1942
	<i>Commandant d’Estienne d’Orves</i>	950	- Transferred to FNFL 23 May 1942
Fairmile B Motor Launches	<i>Saint Roman (ML 123)</i>	85	- Transferred to FNFL 31 April 1942, returned to RN 30 July 1942
	<i>Saint Guenole (ML 245)</i>	85	- Transferred to FNFL 12 July 1941, returned to RN 31 July 1942
	<i>Saint Yves (ML 246)</i>	85	- Transferred to FNFL 12 July 1941, returned to RN 29 July 1942

⁶⁶ The bill, formally titled “An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States,” is available in full at Our Documents Initiative, *Transcript of Lend-Lease Act (1941)*, last accessed 5 July 2015, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=71&page=transcript>.

⁶⁷ Cornic, “Ships for Crews,” 252-253, 257.

⁶⁸ Eddy Florentin, *Les Rebelles de La Combattante, 1939-1945* (Paris, 1998).

	<i>Saint Alain</i> (ML 247)	85	-Transferred to FNFL 20 July 1941, returned to RN 18 August 1942
	<i>Ouessant</i> (ML 205)	85	- Transferred to FNFL 11 May 1942, returned to RN 12 August 1942
	<i>Ile de Seine</i> (ML 182)	85	- Transferred to FNFL 30 May 1942, returned to RN 12 August 1942
	<i>Beniguet</i> (ML 269)	85	- Transferred to FNFL 30 May 1942, returned to RN 12 August 1942
	<i>Molene</i> (ML 303)	85	- Transferred to FNFL 20 July 1942, returned to RN 12 August 1942
	ML 262	85	- Transferred to FNFL 1941, lost at St. Nazaire 28 March 1942
	ML 267	85	- Transferred to FNFL 25 July 1941, lost at St. Nazaire 28 March 1942
	ML 268	85	- Transferred to FNFL 1941, lost at St. Nazaire 28 March 1942
	ML 192	85	- Transferred to FNFL 1942, lost at St. Nazaire 28 March 1942
Vosper 70- foot Motor Torpedo Boats (Provided in replacement of the Fairmile MLs)	MTB 94	47	- Transferred to FNFL 24 October 1942
	MTB 98	47	-Transferred to FNFL 24 October 1942
	MTB 90	47	- Transferred to FNFL 11 November 1942
	MTB 91	47	- Transferred to FNFL 17 Novemebr 1942
	MTB 96	47	- Transferred to FNFL 24 November 1942
	MTB 227	47	- Transferred to FNFL 2 December 1942
	MTB 239	47	- Transferred to FNFL 7 December 1942
	MTB 92	47	- Transferred to FNFL 24 December 1942
Total in Service on 30 December 1942	16 ships	8,526	-32% of the total FNFL tonnage

Sources:

Émile Chaline and P. Santarelli, "L'activité des FNFL du 18 juin 1940 au 3 août 1943," *Revue historique de la Défence*, 176, 3 (September 1989), 67-80.

Jacques Cornic, "Ships for Crews," *Warship International*, XXII, 3, (1985), 251-266.

Philippe Masson, *La Marine française et la guerre, 1939-1945*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 2000).

Notes:

a. Categories do not include naval units used purely as barrack ships or dedicated to alongside training.

b. Figures stricken through indicate vessels no longer part of the fleet on 30 December 1942 due to losses, disarmament, etc.

c. Tonnage figures for submarines indicate submerged displacement.

Elements of this naval force had been operating at sea since September 1940. French warships worked in cooperation with the British under the clauses of the 7 August agreement. The three largest torpedo boats were present during the Battle of Dakar in September – which failed to rally Senegal to Free France but demonstrated the early mettle of the *FNFL* – and then moved on two months later against Libreville in Gabon, the first colony to be rallied by force of arms. Two Free French warships sailed to the Indian Ocean in 1941 and contributed to the blockade of Djibouti, still loyal to Vichy, while others participated in the campaign for Syria in the Mediterranean. Smaller vessels remained based in Great Britain to escort coastal convoys and participate in cross-Channel incursions, including the famous attack against the Saint-Nazaire dry dock in March 1942 and the ill-fated Dieppe raid in August of that same year. The destroyer *Léopard* participated in the North Atlantic run, where it would be joined by the British-built corvettes acquired through 1941.⁶⁹ Free French submarines *Rubis* and *Minerve* operated off the coast of Norway, laying minefields and landing commandos, and the Malta-based *Narval* patrolled in the Mediterranean.⁷⁰ Destroyer *Le Triomphant*, torpedo boat *Chevreuil* and the armed merchant cruiser *Cap des Palmes* arrived separately in the Pacific in the fall of 1941 to patrol France's possessions in Micronesia and escort convoys out of Australia and New Zealand.⁷¹ Meanwhile that December, Admiral Muselier personally led a naval force to rally Saint-Pierre-and-Miquelon, two small islands off the Canadian coast.⁷² October 1941 witnessed the birth of Free French naval aviation with the stand-up of a combined navy/air force fighter group, shore-based in Great Britain and equipped with Spitfires. The *FNFL* was even able to muster enough personnel to field a full regiment of naval infantry, with battalions serving in Eritrea, Syria and Libya while another was converted into a commando unit after arduous training in the hills of Scotland.⁷³

These operations experienced significant losses and attrition. The Malta-based submarine *Narval* struck a mine off the coast of Tunisia in December 1940. The year 1942 proved particularly grim with the loss in April of the submarine *Surcouf* and her complement of 130 crew members as a result of a collision, while surfaced at night in the Caribbean, with an American freighter.⁷⁴ Corvettes *Alysse* and *Mimosa* were lost, in February and June respectively, to German torpedoes during escort duties in the North Atlantic, and a U-boat sank the armed trawler *Vikings* off Lebanon in April. Four Fairmile motor launches did not come back from the raid on Saint-Nazaire and the Luftwaffe sank the small *Chasseur 8* in the Channel in July. To this must be added losses among the flying personnel operating out

⁶⁹ Chaline and Santarelli, "L'activité des FNFL," 70-71; Masson, *La Marine française*, 204-216 and 320-326.

⁷⁰ Antier, *L'Aventure héroïque*, 110-115; Chaline and Santarelli, "L'activité des FNFL," 71.

⁷¹ D. Ignatieff, "Présence dans le Pacifique des navires de la France libre," *Bulletin de la Société d'Études historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie* LXXVII (2001), 33-43.

⁷² Berthon, *Allies at War*, 149-159; Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 299-316.

⁷³ Chaline and Santarelli, "L'activité des FNFL," 71, 76.

⁷⁴ *Surcouf* was a unique vessel, built not as a submarine but rather as a light cruiser that could submerge, fitted with two 8-inch guns and capable of embarking her own seaplane for reconnaissance and target spotting. Her complete story is narrated by Claude Huan in *Le croiseur sous-marin Surcouf (1926-1942)* (Nantes, 1996).

of English fields and the *fusiliers-marins* fighting on the front lines of the Middle East.⁷⁵ They were the manifestation of a navy engaged in active operations in contact with the enemy.

The losses also suggest that despite its small size – 5,700 sailors manning 40 ships and submarines by the end of December 1942 for a total of 26,212 tons, or 3.5 percent of the September 1939 tonnage – the *FNFL* fleet had met the goals assigned by de Gaulle in the summer of 1940. Free French ships and submarines were making a direct contribution to the overall allied war effort, particularly in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, not pursuing narrow French objectives but paying an important cost in blood and vessels while demonstrating a growing effectiveness under British operational control. Thus, the provision of British-built units, especially the Flower-class corvettes and the Fairmile motor launches constituted a valuable return on the investment for the Royal Navy while the *FNFL* leaders quickly came to appreciate the serviceability and range of such new vessels, which were much better than those of older French construction of doubtful operational readiness.

On occasion, de Gaulle used his flotilla for narrower ends that did not always conform to British wishes, such as seizing smaller and remoter French colonies that would contribute to the expansion of the Free French movement but not prove as relevant to the allied cause. An example was that of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon. De Gaulle ordered Muselier in late December 1941 to rally the islands but without the endorsement of the American government, even though the United States had just entered hostilities against Germany.⁷⁶ This initiative provoked a crisis between the new allies as the Roosevelt administration perceived the *FNFL* operation as an unjustified intervention in the Western Hemisphere. The timing proved awkward for Churchill who was then in Washington for the first of the wartime Anglo-American conferences.⁷⁷ Dissensions also appeared between Vice Admiral Muselier and his Royal Navy colleagues when the former promoted the rearmament of what the latter would refer to as “prestige units”, such as the battleships *Courbet* and the submarine *Surcouf*, both requiring large crews and material resources that the small fleet could ill-afford. Despite such disagreements, Muselier did succeed in maintaining an effective – if tense – working relationship with the Admiralty. He proved especially astute in assigning British transfers to allied taskings in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, such as coastal defence and convoy escort, while dispatching French units of lesser interest to the Royal Navy for those missions more narrowly focussed on national objectives demanded by de Gaulle.⁷⁸

Operational successes, however, could not alleviate the growing personal tensions that permeated relations between de Gaulle and Muselier through these years. Militarily, Muselier refused to abide by a February 1942 directive from de Gaulle seeking to shape the future development of the fleet around the basing of naval divisions in the Channel, the

⁷⁵ Antier, *L'Aventure héroïque*, 110-115; Chaline and Santarelli, “L’activité des FNFL,” 71-76.

⁷⁶ De Gaulle, *L’Appel*, 184-187; Berthon, *Allies at War*, 149-159.

⁷⁷ Especially as the British government had indicated to the United States, as far back as October 1940, that they would favour initiatives facilitating the rallying of the islands to the Free French cause. TNA, FO 371/24332, Cypher from F.O. to Mr. Butler (Washington), 18 October 1940.

⁷⁸ Though not in the case of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon as Muselier sailed to the islands in the submarine *Surcouf* which was accompanied by the British-built corvettes *Alysse*, *Mimosa* and *Aconit*.

Mediterranean and the Pacific as well as the deployment of *fusiliers marins* troops and shore-based aviation squadrons dispersed among the colonies which had rallied to the *croix de Lorraine*. The head of the Free French Navy summarily dismissed this vision as a wasteful dispersal of heterogeneous forces that could be neither self-sufficient nor combat effective. Muselier instead favoured concentration on the core missions of convoy escort in the Atlantic and littoral operations in Europe as the most effective contribution the fleet could make to the war effort.⁷⁹ This difference in military vision was never resolved; it was overtaken by political considerations. Denouncing de Gaulle's domineering approach to the Free French movement, Muselier dramatically resigned as commissioner on the *Comité national français* (French National Committee, formed on 24 September 1941 to replace the *Conseil de défense de l'Empire*). The old seafarer sought to retain his military responsibilities afterwards but the general adroitly exploited this outburst to fire him from the top naval post as well, appointing Rear Admiral Philippe Auboyneau as Commander of the *FNFL* in April 1942.⁸⁰

Ironically, Auboyneau adopted an approach very similar to that of his predecessor with regards to naval affairs, though he proved much more apt in dealing with the imperious de Gaulle. Relocating to Algiers in the summer of 1943, he was also called upon to facilitate the amalgamation of *FNFL* and former Vichy elements into a once again unified *Marine nationale* that served with distinction for the remainder of the war, an effort requiring skills that may not have been Muselier's *forte*. Be that as it may, the role of the latter in the earliest years of the Free French Navy and his support to the nascent Free French movement as a whole cannot be ignored. The sheer will he showed in overcoming insurmountable odds through the dire circumstances of 1940-42 to assemble a "good, workable little fleet to start with"⁸¹ would prove essential to de Gaulle's rise during the war years and France's return to prominence after the conflict. The memoirs of the grizzled admiral remain an important contribution to the historiography of the period by providing a little-known perspective in contrast to the prevailing hagiography of de Gaulle, even tainted as it is by the bitterness of their rivalry.

Conclusion

The assistance of Great Britain to de Gaulle's navy at the dawn of the Free French movement, as ambiguous as it may have been, proved critical to the rise of *la France libre*. Despite the reluctance of his closest advisors, Churchill promoted de Gaulle throughout the summer of 1940 as a viable alternative to Pétain. The acting brigadier, for his part, urgently needed to establish his legitimacy on the triple pillars of authority, territory and armed

⁷⁹ Chaline and Santarelli, "L'activité des FNFL," 72.

⁸⁰ For the protagonists' views of this controversial episode, see de Gaulle, *L'Appel*, 220-223 and *The Call to Honour*, 258-261; Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, 320-348. Philippe Auboyneau had rallied the Free French movement in July 1940. He then commanded at sea for the bulk of the following two years, rising to take charge of all *FNFL* forces in the Pacific before being recalled to London in April 1942. *Ordre de la Libération, Philippe Auboyneau*, last modified 21 September 2001, http://www.ordredelaliberation.fr/fr_compagnon/41.html.

⁸¹ As once remarked with reference to the Canadian post-war navy. Minister of National Defence Douglas Abbott, 22 October 1945. Dominion of Canada, *Official Report of Debates – House of Commons – 1st Session, 20th Parliament, 1945* Vol. 2, 1368.

forces. Ships and submarines flying the *croix de Lorraine* and manned by Free French crews would contribute to such an ambition early, at once sailing to the remotest corners of the empire to rally colonies and making an immediate contribution to the allied war effort. The fleet grew slowly through the years 1940-1942 as it quickly tackled humble and yet critical tasks such as convoy escort in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, coastal defence duties along the British shores, and early raids against German defences on France's Channel shoreline. A total of 567 Free French sailors had been listed as killed or missing by the time the *FNFL* were amalgamated with that of the former Vichy units in August 1943.⁸²

These losses, few as they may have seemed when gauged against the cataclysmic scale of the Second World War, clearly showed the commitment of Muselier's fledgling navy on the side of the allies, especially during the forlorn years of 1940 and 1941 when Great Britain needed every operational warship that could put to sea in the face of the Axis onslaught.

Though they came to despise each other, de Gaulle and Muselier proved equally adept in adopting an approach that balanced implied dependency on British assistance and proclaimed autonomy for the Free French Forces. The relationship, while it lasted, was shaped around six factors: 1) refurbishing former French ships; 2) transferring existing and new warships under British construction; 3) continued maintenance and upgrading of *FNFL* units as war fighting at sea evolved; 4) training of French sailors in British establishments and sea-going units; 5) sustained provision of logistical and financial support; and 6) employment of French assets under British operational control while they remained under French national command. Though the product of an ambiguous partnership between the British and the Free French, the results left a legacy that would shape relations between France and its allies for the remainder of the war and well into the following decades of a stormy peacetime relationship within the context of the Cold War.

⁸² Auphan et Mordal, *La Marine française*, 250-251.