

September 1939 (Marine Nationale)

From having been the world's second largest navy for much of the 19th century, by its close the French Navy has fallen to 4th position and was falling. This sad state of affairs was to have been arrested by the naval programme of 1912. Unfortunately the First World War got in the way with little having been achieved, then thanks to the need to recover from the war, the navy got little attention until the mid to late 20's when construction of new ships began.

A programme of building cruisers, large destroyers and submarines was begun, while the existing battleships would be updated as much as possible. The policy was altered only when the Germans announced their "Panzerschiffe" in the late 20's and France responded with the Dunkerque-class of fast battleships. The threat from a resurgent Germany and a potentially hostile Italy saw the need for an expansion of the navy in the 30's, and four battleships and two carriers were either laid down or had been authorised by September 1939. Only one of the battleships was near completion at the outbreak of war.

The French never got a chance to show what the Marine Nationale could really do before France was swept aside in May 1940 and effectively removed from the war.

Commander in Chief of the French Navy Admiral of the Fleet (JLX (Francois) Darlan)
Chief of the Naval Staff (Vice-Admiral Francois Michelier)

At the outbreak of war there five Maritime Regions – administrative centres - in France and North Africa.
Maritime Regions:

1st HQ Dunkerque
2nd HQ Brest
3rd HQ Toulon
4th HQ Bizerte
5th HQ L'Orient

Each region was commanded by an admiral who was responsible for the defence of his region, and was provided resources as circumstances dictated. With the outbreak of war so these commands were rationalised into three shore-based theatre commands, and two additional commands were added.
Theatre commands:

North (North Sea and the English Channel) – Vice Admiral Raoul Castex (Incorporating the 1st Maritime Region)

West (North Atlantic) – Vice Admiral Jean Labourde (The 2nd and 5th Maritime Regions were merged)

South (Mediterranean) – Vice-Admiral Jean-Pierre Esteva (The 3rd and 4th Maritime Regions were merged)

New:

South Atlantic - Vice Admiral Emmanuel Ollive (based in Casablanca)

Western Atlantic – Vice Admiral Georges Robert (based in Martinique)

Apologies but for the other overseas commands I cannot seem to get any positive confirmation for what I am about to write. If anyone knows better please let me know! However, my best guess is that the

following overseas commands located in the colonies were directly under the control of the Commander in Chief's office and included:

Force navales d'extreme-Orient
Division navales du Levant
Station navales de l'Océan Indien
Station navales du Pacifique

So where were the ships of the Marine Nationale in September 1939?

Note:

BB - Battleship
CV - Fleet Carrier
CA - Heavy Cruiser
CL - Light Cruiser
DL – Large Destroyer
DD - Destroyer
SS - Submarine

Brest

Force de Raid (Vice-Admiral Marcel Gensoul)
2 x BB: Dunkerque and Strasbourg
3 x CL: Georges Leygues, Montcalm and Gloire
8 x DL of the 3rd Light Squadron

Also at Brest as part of Command West

2 x BB: Courbet and Paris
1 x CV: Bearn
3 x DL of the 2nd Large Destroyer Squadron
12 x DD of the 2nd Destroyer Squadron
12 x SS of the 4th Submarine Squadron
6 x Sloops of the 2nd Sloop Squadron

L'Orient

3 x DD of the 14th Destroyer Division
6 x Sloops of the 5th Sloop Squadron

Oran

3 x BB: Bretagne, Lorraine and Provence
9 x DD of the 1st Destroyer Squadron
3 x DD of the 8th Destroyer Division
Seaplane Tender: Commandant Teste
Submarine Tender: Jules Verne
12 x SS of the 2nd Submarine Flotilla

Toulon

6 x CA: Algerie, Colbert, Dupleix, Duquesne, Foch and Tourville

9 x DL: Albatros, Cassard, Gerfaut, Kersaint, Le Chevalier Paul, Maile Breze, Tartu, Vauquelin and Vautour

Also at Toulon as part of Command South

3 x DL of the 4th Large Destroyer Division

3 x DD of the 13th Destroyer Division

11 x SS of the 3rd Submarine Squadron

8 x SS of the 5th Submarine Squadron

8 x SS of the Toulon Submarine Centre

4 x Sloops of the 3rd Sloop Squadron

Dunkirk and Cherbourg

3 x DD of the 11th Destroyer Division

6 x Sloops of the 1st Sloop Squadron

4 x SS of the 16th Submarine Division

Minelayer: Pollux

Bizerte

4 x CL: Emile Bertin, Jean de Vienne, La Galissonniere and Marseillaise

3 x DL of the 1st Large Destroyer Division

3 x DL of the 3rd Large Destroyer Division

2 x DL of the 11th Large Destroyer Division

3 x DD of the 12th Destroyer Division

3 x Sloops of the 4th Sloop Squadron

Depot Ship: Castor

17 x SS of the 6th Submarine Squadron

Beirut

Sloop: D'Iberville

3 x SS of the 11th Submarine Division

Casablanca

2 x DD of the 9th Destroyer Division

4 x SS of the 4th Submarine Division

Dakar

3 x CL: Duguay-Trouin, Primaguet, Jeanne d'Arc

Minelaying Cruiser: Pluton

1 x SS: Surcouf

Saigon

CA: Suffren

CL: Lamotte Picquet

2 x Sloops

2 x Gunboats

1 x SS

7 x Gunboats and 4 x Sloops based in China.

Station navale de l'océan Indien[?]

Escort Vessel: Bougainville

Station navale du Pacifique [New Caledonia?]

Escort Vessel: Dumont d'Urville

Ships under Construction in September 1939

3 x BB: Clemenceau, Jean Bart and Richelieu

1 x CV: Joffre

1 x CL: De Grasse

8 x DD

I am one submarine and three destroyers "missing" so am more than happy with that!