

# BATTLE FOR AN AFRICAN QUEEN

WINSTON CHURCHILL'S OPERATION MENACE AND THE ATTACK ON THE FRENCH BATTLESHIP RICHELIEU WERE PART OF A PLAN TO FORCE VICHY FRENCH FORCES TO JOIN THE FREE FRENCH. HOWEVER, THE ENTIRE OPERATION TURNED INTO ONE OF WORLD WAR TWO'S BIGGEST BLUNDERS

BY JIM HUFFSTODT

In the early hours of 23 September 1940, the French fast battleship *Richelieu* rode quietly at anchor behind a web of anti-torpedo nets in the sultry West African port of Dakar. That milky dawn would bring a violent confrontation with a British fleet dispatched by Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a bold attempt to deny the powerful *Richelieu* to the Axis.

The *Richelieu* was a tempting prize. The newly-completed warship had escaped from Brest before the Nazi occupation. Lead ship of the *Richelieu*-class, she was built as a response to the Italian *Littorio*-class. Based on her immediate predecessors of the *Dunkerque*-class, she was a sleek, exotic design accentuated by the placement of her main 15-inch battery in two four-barrel turrets on the forecastle. Nine six-inch guns were mounted in

three triple-turrets aft. Her powerful turbines could propel her 48,000 tons at a fast 32 knots. The ship's vitals were sheathed with a 13.6-inch armored belt.

Laid down in 1935, *Richelieu* was launched in 1939 just before Nazi Germany invaded Poland, work on the ship had been rushed to prepare her for commissioning during April 1940. The French naval command had decided to slow work on other less complete warships to focus all effort on *Richelieu* and sister ship *Jean Bart*. As a point of interest, the decision to lay down these two ships put the country in violation of the Washington Treaty, which was to expire on 31 December 1936 as the combined tonnage of the two *Dunkerques* and *Richelieu* exceed 71,000 tons that had been allotted to France during the moratorium

on new battleship construction. France used



*Richelieu* under construction. Ready to depart France was a battle against time as advancing German troops neared Brest.

the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, which Britain had unilaterally signed with Germany in June 1935 to dismiss British objections to the new ship, though they nevertheless slowed construction of *Richelieu* to ease British concerns. Work was also slowed by shipyard strikes for better pay and working conditions. However, as tensions built, construction plans would be moved forward.

Initial testing began on 15 October as fitting-out work continued. Engine testing began on 14 January 1940 and a week later the last barrel in her main battery was installed. Formal acceptance trials began on 14 April and fire control



Combining her heavy armament in two mighty forward turrets had numerous detractors but during the fight at Dakar the arrangement worked well for the French.

equipment for the main and secondary batteries were

installed. On 13 June, the fast battleship conducted full-power trials and hit 32.63 knots, exceeding her design performance. Test firings of the guns were conducted on 13/14 June and work was completed on 15 June, just days before the surrender of France. *Richelieu* built up steam with her six Indret Surai boilers and four Parsons geared turbines (offering a combined 179,000-shp) before Capt. Marzin set course to Dakar in French West Africa. This was done to keep the new warrior under French control and to use it as a bargaining chip in dealings with the victors (an initial plan to send the French fleet to Britain was

dropped). Material that had not yet been installed had been hastily loaded into the ship for installation at Dakar. This included 198 quarter charges of propellant for her main battery, which amounted to powder sufficient for 49 shots. She also took aboard gold reserves from the Bank of France along with 250 cadets from the *Ecole Navale* (Naval Academy).

There was also insufficient time to allow the full complement to assemble and board the ship and *Richelieu* got underway while German troops approached Brest. *Richelieu* steamed in company with the destroyers *Fougueux* and *Frondeur* while *Luftwaffe* aircraft made several ineffective attacks against the ships. Anti-aircraft fire did not hit any



The sleekly elegant lines of the *Richelieu* are captured in this photograph of the battleship as she heads to Dakar.