

# FRANCE'S ELEGANT WARRIOR

ESCAPING FROM THE GERMAN ADVANCE THROUGH FRANCE, THE BATTLESHIP RICHELIEU WOULD SURVIVE BRITISH ATTEMPTS TO DESTROY HER BEFORE GOING ON TO FIGHT WITH THE ALLIES IN THE PACIFIC

BY ROBERT J. CRESSMAN



French Adm. Jean de Laborde made the wise decision to order *Richelieu* out of France. Considered one of Europe's strongest countries, France would last only 40 days against the Germans. Over 1,000,000 Frenchmen were made POWs and 84,000 died in the fighting.

The Battle of France was not going well for any country except Germany. The military and social structures of France were rapidly crumbling — so much so that on 17 June 1940 the French government requested an armistice — many called it a surrender — with Germany. As word of this got out, French military units were thrown into a state of even more confusion and began retreating in a haphazard manner. The British were doing the same. The Royal Air Force had been destroyed by the *Luftwaffe* and the troops of the British Expeditionary Force were heading toward the beaches.

Some

French and British units fought desperate rear-guard actions against the seemingly invincible *blitzkrieg*.

On the morning of 18 June 1940, the well-trained *panzer* divisions of Gen. Hermann Hoth rumbled into the city of Rennes, located on the Brittany peninsula. Among the prisoners taken by the victorious Germans was Gen. Rene Altmayer, Commander of the

however, with its shrinking distances, comparative isolation was practically useless.

Altmayer informed the admiral that Rennes had fallen. Hoth's *panzer* divisions were bound for the coast, he continued, and there was virtually nothing to stop them from reaching Brest. De Laborde — a popular and energetic man — had reason for concern. A look at the map and the clock told him that the Germans could probably be at Brest within nine hours!

De Laborde was then faced with an almost insurmountable task. He had to clear 159 ships — of which 83 were warships — from the harbor. The port was congested with vessels that only shortly before had been bringing British troops bound for the western front or that had been bringing French troops back from the ill-fated Norwegian campaign. However, among the 83 naval vessels

French Army's V Corps. As the Germans swept forward, rolling over all resistance, and capturing thousands of prisoners, they made a big mistake — they allowed Gen. Altmayer the use of a telephone. They did this by forgetting to cut his telephone lines as they surged forward.

Altmayer took advantage of the Germans' oversight and placed a call at 1100 on 18 June to Adm. Jean de Laborde, who was the commandant at the naval district of Brest, in the key seaport situated at the very top of Cape Finisterre — "the end of the earth." Aptly named, that part of Brittany had long been practically invulnerable to assault owing to its comparatively isolated position. In modern warfare,



The *panzer* divisions of Gen. Hermann Hoth were rolling through France and heading to the sea. Hoth and his officers made the big mistake of letting Gen. Rene Altmayer warn Adm. Jean de Laborde that the Nazis would soon be in Brest.

Magnificent portrait of *Richelieu* departing New York and underway to the Atlantic Ocean on 26 August 1943 following her refit in the New York Naval Shipyard. This view shows her all-forward 15-inch armament in two quad turrets to advantage.