

LA POSTE NAVALE FRANÇAISE

WORLD WAR II

Bruce Downs

22 May 2022

Background

- Washington Naval Treaty (1922) – limited size of navies
 - Britain and USA – 525,000 tonnes each
 - Japan – 315,000 tonnes
 - France and Italy – 175,000 tonnes each
- Italy (remember Mussolini) started building “Littorio” class battleship
 - Previous strategy for Italy and France was to build smaller ships and more of them.
 - Created competitive environment for France – concern about Italy’s alignment with Axis (Germany) goals.

French response -

- Laid keel for new “Richelieu” class of battleship to compete with Littorio class
- By 1939 two battleships started, Battleships Richelieu and Jean Bart
- Built other smaller and faster ships

Comparison

Littorio

Displacement 45,000 tons

Guns 9x 380 mm

12 x 155 mm

12 x 90 mm AA

20 x 37 mm AA

30 x 20 mm AA

Airplanes 3 x catapult

30 knots, 3920 nm

Richelieu

48,000 tons

8 x 380 mm

9 x 152 mm

12 x 100 mm AA

56 x 40 mm AA

48 x 20 mm AA

2 x catapult

3 x floatplanes

30 knots, 8500 nm

Another Comparison

USS Massachusetts

Displacement 43,200 tons

Guns 9x 406 mm

20 x 127 mm

68 x 40 mm AA

76 x 20 mm AA

2 x catapults

3 x floatplanes

28 knots, 15000 nm

Richelieu

48,000 tons

8 x 380 mm

9 x 152 mm

12 x 100 mm AA

56 x 40 mm AA

48 x 20 mm AA

2 x catapult

3 x floatplanes

30 knots, 8500 nm

Les bureau postaux navals

- La Poste Navale, pre-war, closed 19 July 1940
- Toulon-Naval office closed 31 July 1940
- Toulon R.P operational from 1 August to 31 December 1940
- Foreign office at Marseille Gare began operation 1 January 1941

Naval Postal Offices – FM mail

10 – Havre

11 – Marseille

12 – Port-Vendres

13 – Saint Nazaire

14 – Ajaccio

15 – Bizerte

16 – Brest

17 – Cherbourg

18 – Lorient

19 – Oran

20 – Rochefort/La Pallice

21 – Toulon

22 – Alger

23 – Dunkerque

24 – Casablanca

25 - Bordeaux

30 – Campagne – temporary
31 – Fort-de-France – temporary
33 – Dakar - temporary
34 – Diego-Suarez – temporary
51 – Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire)
53 – Dakar
55 – London
56 – Casablanca
58 – Bizerte
60 – Ajaccio
61 – Safi (Maroc)

72 – Le Havre

74 – Alger

75 – Toulon

81 – Paris

83 – Oran

85 – Brest

88 – Cotonou

89 – Diego-Suarez

91 - Saigon

Germany invades France - 1940

- French navy set sail to North Africa to escape.
- Battleship Richelieu (incomplete) set sail from Brest to Dakar to escape, then continued to Casablanca and back to Dakar. British warships noticed the ship and attacked the French fleet in Dakar to prevent the ships from being captured by the Germans (Vichy government was sympathetic to Germany)
- Richelieu was sunk in shallow water and used as a gun platform
- 6 months later Richelieu was refloated and set sail out of Dakar
- Battle at Dakar repelled the British – considered victory for the Vichy Government

French Navy switch sides – Nov 1942

- French fleet now working with Free French.
- French Fleet take up positions in North Africa – support Allies
- Initial correspondence with Canada and USA from European theatre used APO station at New York City
- Subsequent US duty in North Africa created APOs wherever troops went. Began Nov 8, 1942
- By 1944, there were > 300 APO offices in France
- RF overprint US 6c stamp, only used beginning 1943 in North Africa for destinations to USA and Canada

US and Canadian Allies

- Increased communication from soldiers to USA and Canada
- US and Canadian Military define solution for legitimate use of mail
- Large naval ships had own post office
- US to provide postage stamps and stamped envelopes

USN Directive March 13, 1943

“Where no French postage is available, and cancellation is made by a French Post Office, U.S. postage may be used with the letters “RF” overprinted thereon in accordance with International Postal Convention Agreement. French postage affixed must be cancelled by French postmark and US postage by US or US Navy postmark, unless such US Postage has been overprinted as described above.”

Tarif change in US

- Domestic airmail rate went from 6c to 8c on 26 March 1944
- To maintain troop morale, military mail kept at 6c
- Same rate, 6c, to Canada

Additional Directive June 22, 1944

- All mail censored with seal or bagged as uncensored letters
- Prepaid 6 cents with “R.F.”
- Anonymous date stamp “POSTE NAVALE”
- Local navy to make up “R.F.” overprinting device
- Instructions from Algiers, sent to Naval Bureau at Oran
- Genuine RF covers – 3/13/1944 thru 10/31/1945
- RF is supposed to be applied to stamps affixed to letters
- Mint RF overprint stamps are done by complaisance

Oran, Alger, Bône (Annaba), Algeria



Alger Type I Overprint



Alger Type I Overprint – believed fake





Believed Fake – opening of R is not square like, F serif at top does not end point-like



Genuine

Alger Type II Overprint



Oran, Algeria Overprint



Oran, Algeria - believed fake

The vertical bar on the F is not
slanted forward and the R foot is
curved relative to the genuine
one

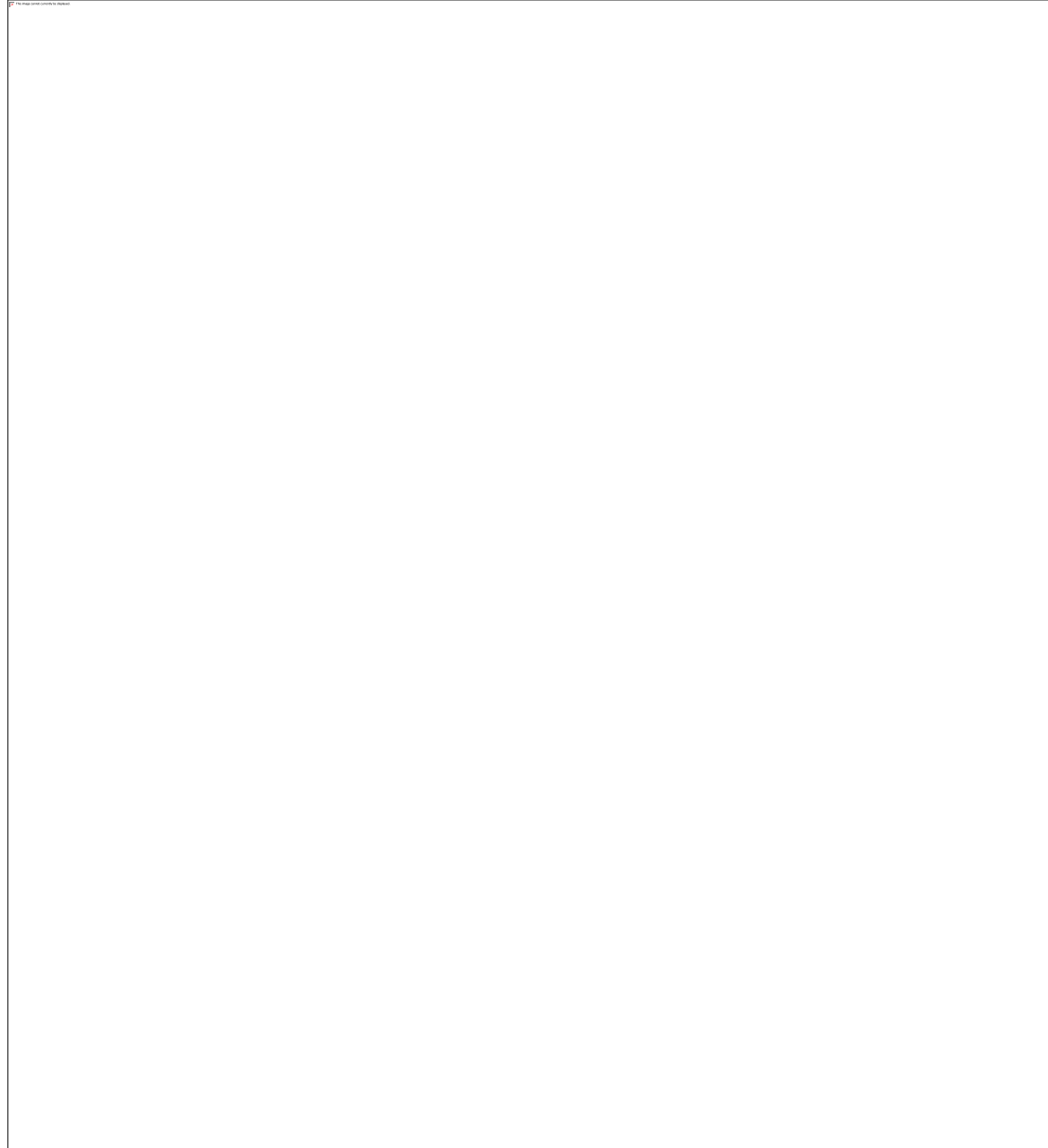


Bône (Annaba) Overprint



Dakar, Senegal

(French West Africa)



Dakar, Senegal Type I Overprint



Dakar Type II Overprint



Coutonou, Benin



Coutonou Type I Overprint



Coutonou Type II Overprint



Bizerte, Tunisia



Bizerte Type I Overprint



Catalogue des Timbres-Poste de France, 58ème Édition, Cérés Philatélie, 2000-2001, p. 376.

Bizerte Type II Overprint



Bizerte Type III Overprint



Bizerte Type III Overprint



Bizerte Type IV Overprint



Casablanca, Morocco



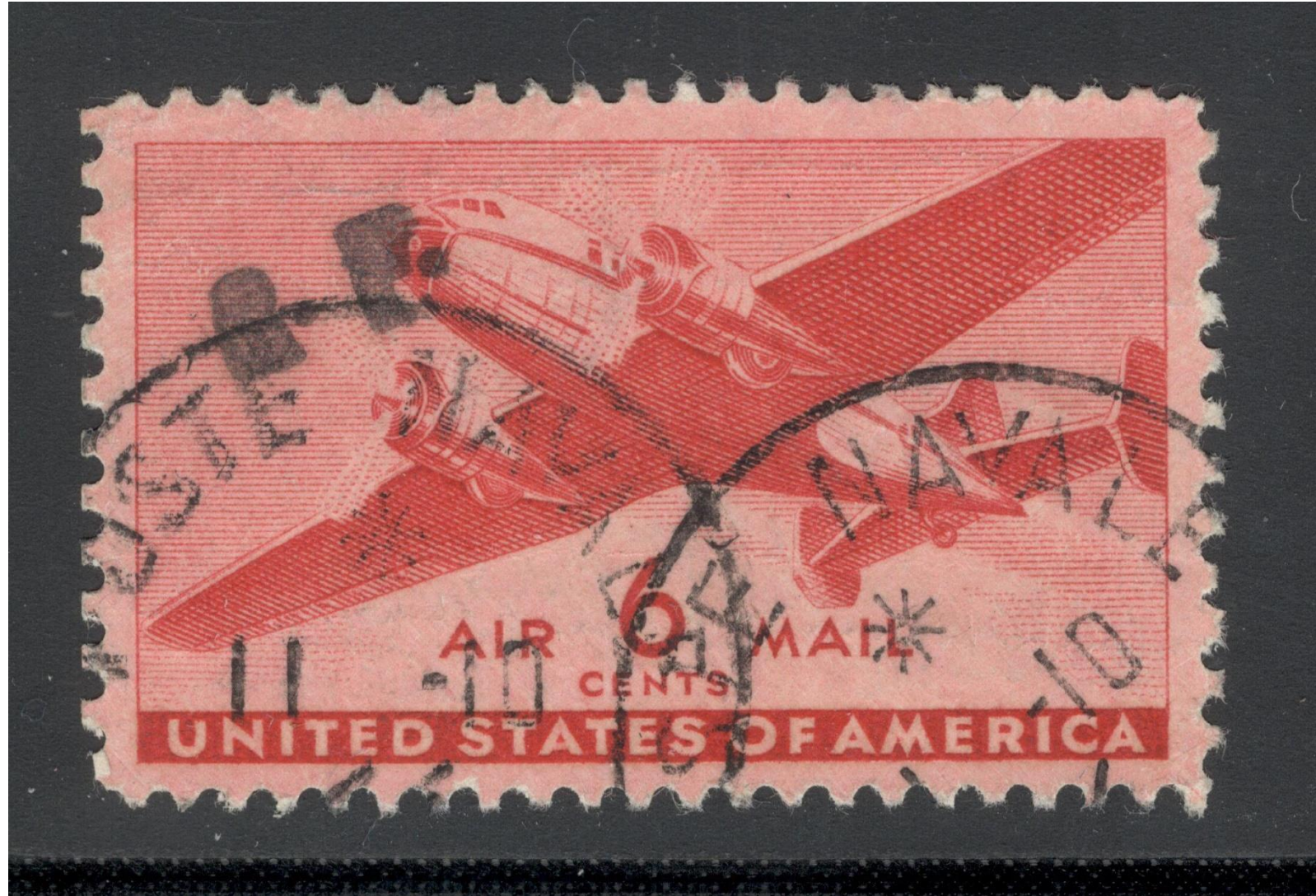
Casablanca Type I Overprint



Casablanca Type II Overprint



Casablanca Type III Overprint



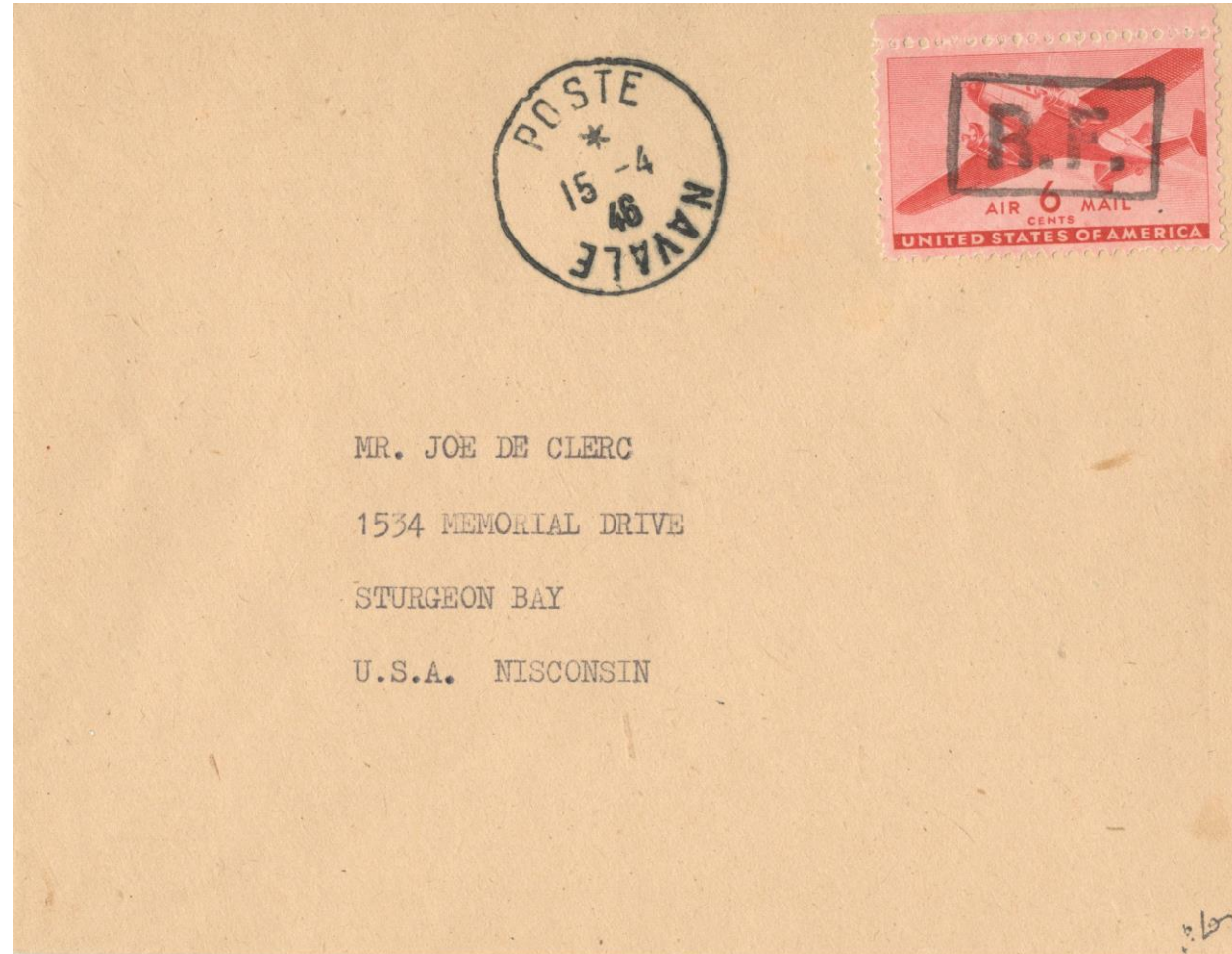
Toulon, France – Marseille, France



Toulon, France Overprint (Booklet stamp)



Marseille overprint

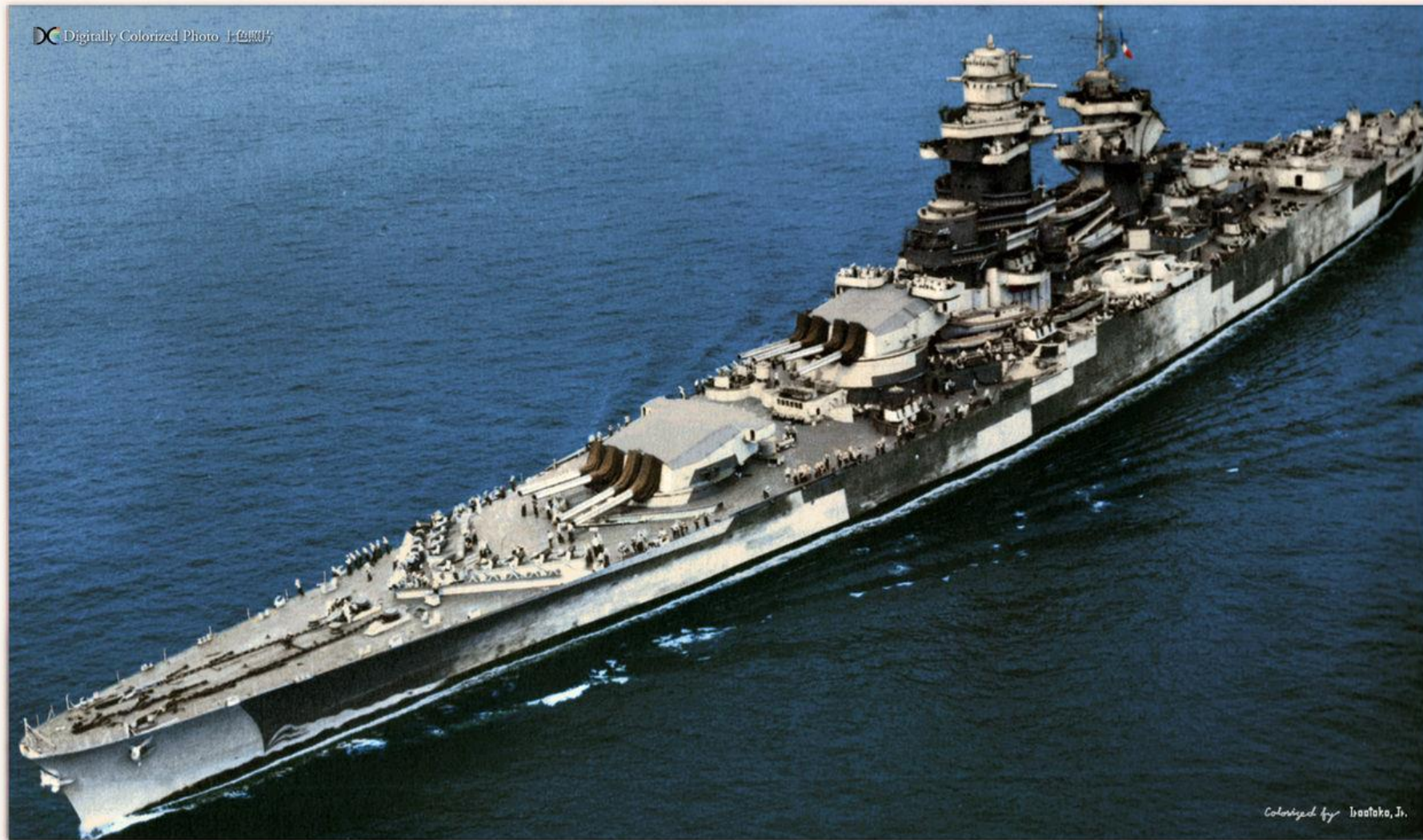


- There exist RF overprint covers of the USA embossed 6c orange airmail envelope, UC6
- March 13, 1944 to October 1945

RF Overprint Summary

- Served the purpose for getting mail from French ships to Allied destinations when French postage stamps were not available to the Free French Forces.
- Numerous offices required multiple hand made overprinting devices, creating variations of the RF overprint.
- Postally used copies on cover require a postal date stamp within the period of use and censors markings both outbound and inbound.

Battleship Richelieu



Marine nationale Le cuirassé "*Richelieu*" en septembre 1943, après réparations.



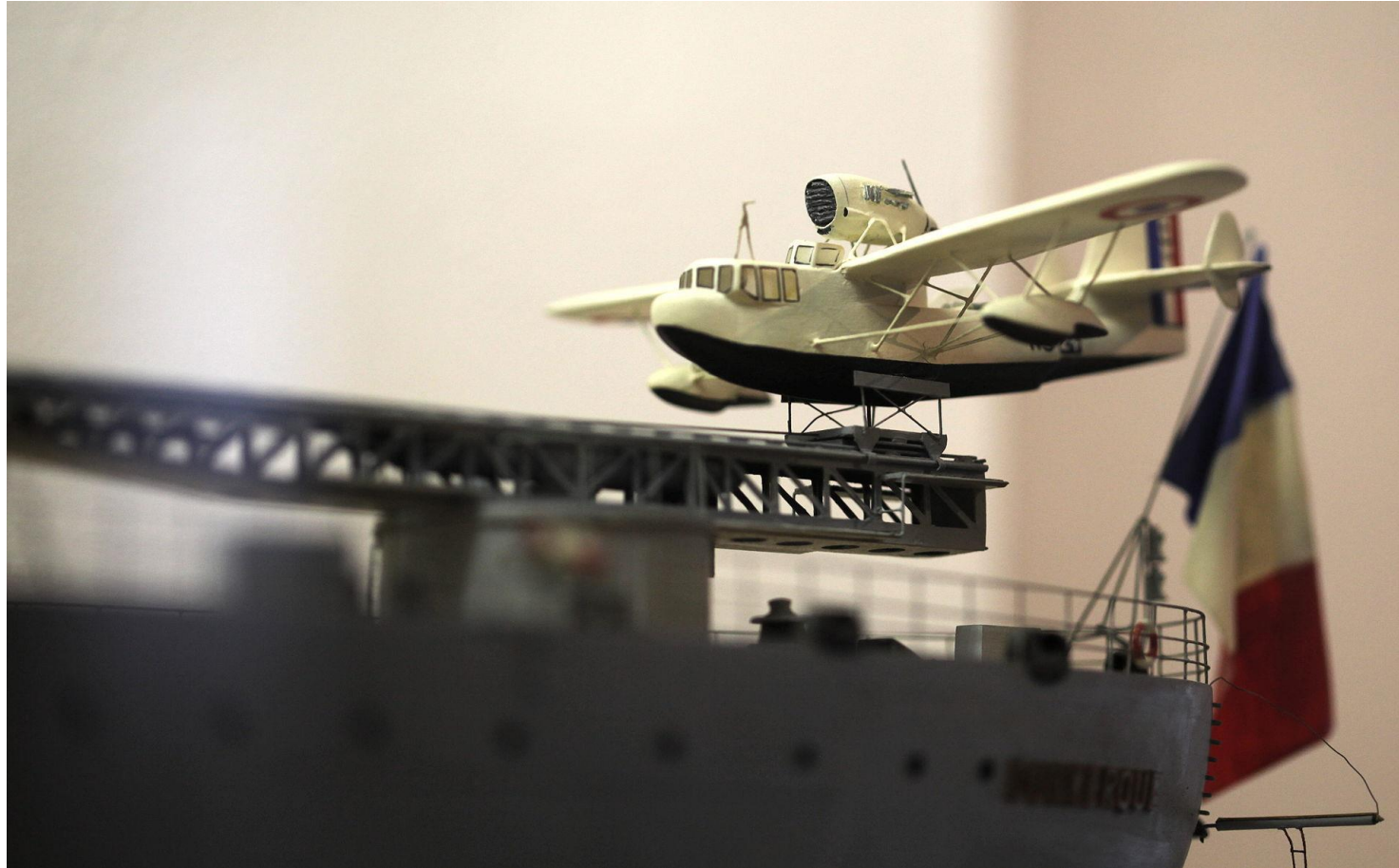
Statistics

- Built Brest, France
- Commissioned July 15, 1940
- Displacement full – 43293 tons
- Length – 813 feet
- Beam – 108 feet
- Draft – 31 feet
- Speed – 30 knots
- Crew 1670

Guns

- 4 pair 380 mm guns
- 3 triple 152 mm guns
- 6 pair 100 mm anti-aircraft guns
- 14 double pair 40 mm anti-aircraft guns
- 48 - 20 mm cannons
- Armor – 343 mm belt, 50-170 mm deck, 445 mm turrets
- 3 Flying boats (prior to refit in NYC)

Loire 130 Flying Boat



Richelieu Post Office

- Postal facilities onboard
- Special overprint applied to stamps used onboard
- If French stamps were unavailable, local stamps with overprint could be used

Travels of Battleship Richelieu

- July '40 After sinking, ship was repaired and used as gun platform in Dakar
- Sep '40 Allied engagement with Richelieu – more damage
- Apr '41 – went to sea at reduced speed, some gun damage
- North Africa at Casablanca and Dakar until November 1942
- Nov '42 – Operation Torch, Allied attack on Vichy forces, USS Mass. Attacks Jean Bart, Richelieu exchanges fire with UK Barham, French Navy switch sides

Repair and Refit at New York City

Ordered 30 Jan. 1943 to New York City for repairs

Docked at NYC 18 Feb. 1943

Political tensions, Franco-American, restricted how much modernization, major discussion over installation of radar – finally added

Torpedo damage repaired, installed modern anti-aircraft guns, additional ammunition added, additional men, removed catapults

Entering NYC

Upper most fire control tower had to be dismantled to get the ship under the Brooklyn Bridge.

Second Turrent is seen damaged here, with damaged inner starboard barrel removed.



Consequences

New York stamp dealers approached the ship's authorities with a request to send mail from the ship to NYC.

Ship's commander and the NY Post Office disallowed the practice and the idea silenced.

Some few correspondence did occur, however, originated by the ship's postmaster, M. Charvet.

Postal agent that allowed the few letters to pass through NY post office was brought up on charges with the Maritime Tribunal. He was later acquitted of the charges since he had no benefit from the operation.

Rare mail to US – 22-9-43



Following Repairs

- Richelieu repaired by the Allies
- Richelieu joins British Navy - Nov 1943 to Mar 1944 – Rare – note no overprint on British stamps



Covers found in Ref. 9

Travels of Battleship Richelieu

- Jan '43 New York Naval Yard refitting
- Nov '43-Mar '44 Joined British Navy
- Patrolled North African Atlantic Coast
- Ceylon Apr '44 (Sri Lanka, today)
- Casablanca Sep '44
- Indo-china and India – after V-E
- Retired as troop training ship 1948 for tours in the Atlantic and Mediterranean
- 1952 Stationed at Toulon as naval artillery training vessel
- Decommissioned 30 Sept. 1967 and scrapped at La Spezia, Italy

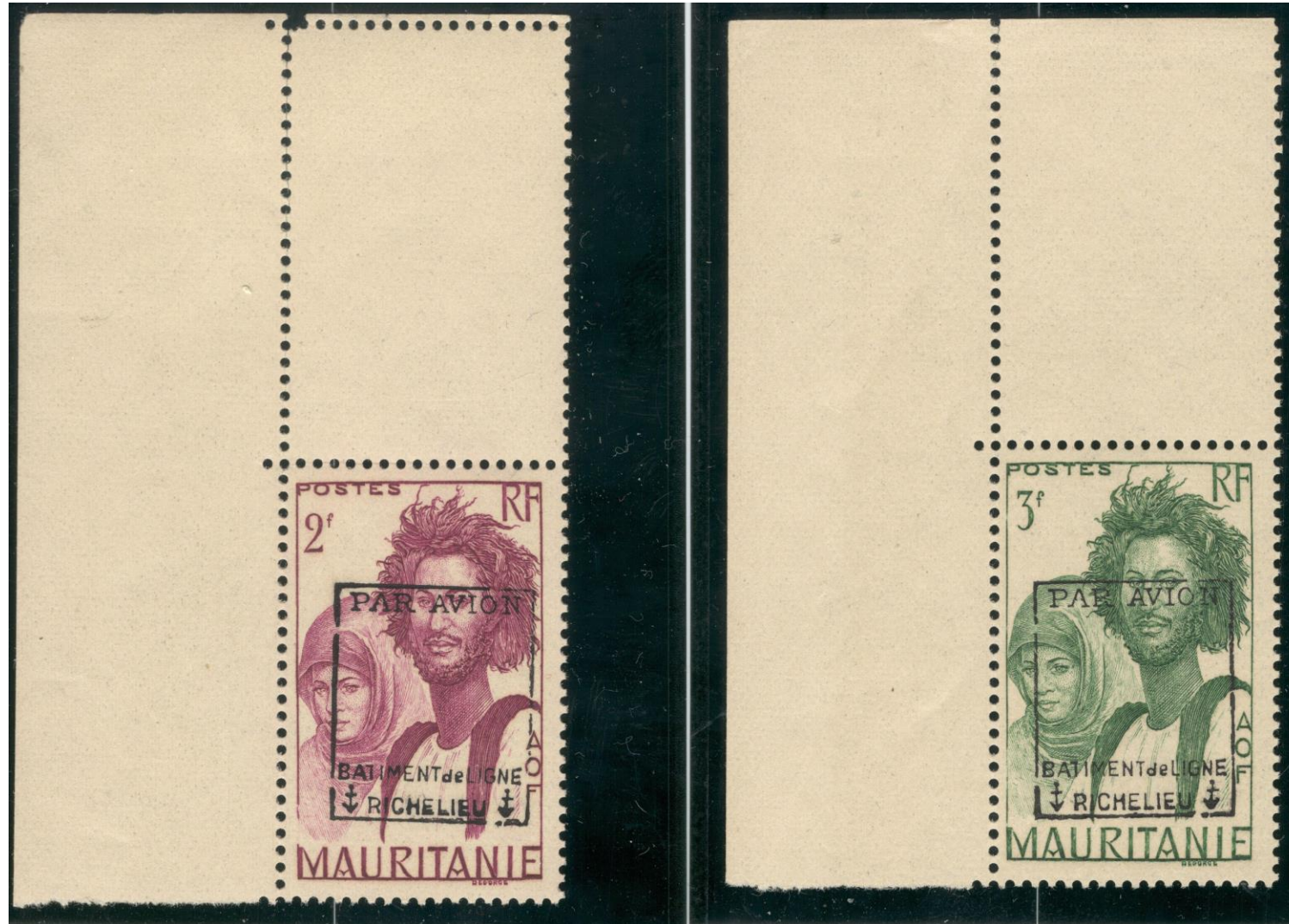
Battleship Richelieu – French Issues



Battleship Richelieu – more French Issues



Battleship Richelieu at Mauritania



Battleship Richelieu at Senegal



Battleship Richelieu at Senegal - more

Color Error



Correct Color

Battleship Richelieu at Senegal – even more



Battleship Richelieu at Algeria



Characteristics of genuine overprint

Surcharge has breaks in the border,

one at top above “o”,

two on the left border,

a double break on the bottom at right between the “U” and anchor.



The first “T” of BATIMENT has a top bar that is short on the right compared to the left.

All surcharges were hand stamped onto individual stamps

some pressure differences can occur

some inverted surcharges can occur

Battleship Richelieu Commemorative Cover

4th Republic President Vincent
Auriol (1947-1954)

15 Jules Auffret, Pantin,
Department Seine-Saint-
Denis, France



Summary

Richelieu surcharged stamps number about 2000 in quantity.

1.50F brown-red Pétain – about 1500

Other French Stamps, Senegal, Mauritania, and Algeria – about 500

La Postale Philatélie organized a sale exclusively of Richelieu overprint stamps in 2015.

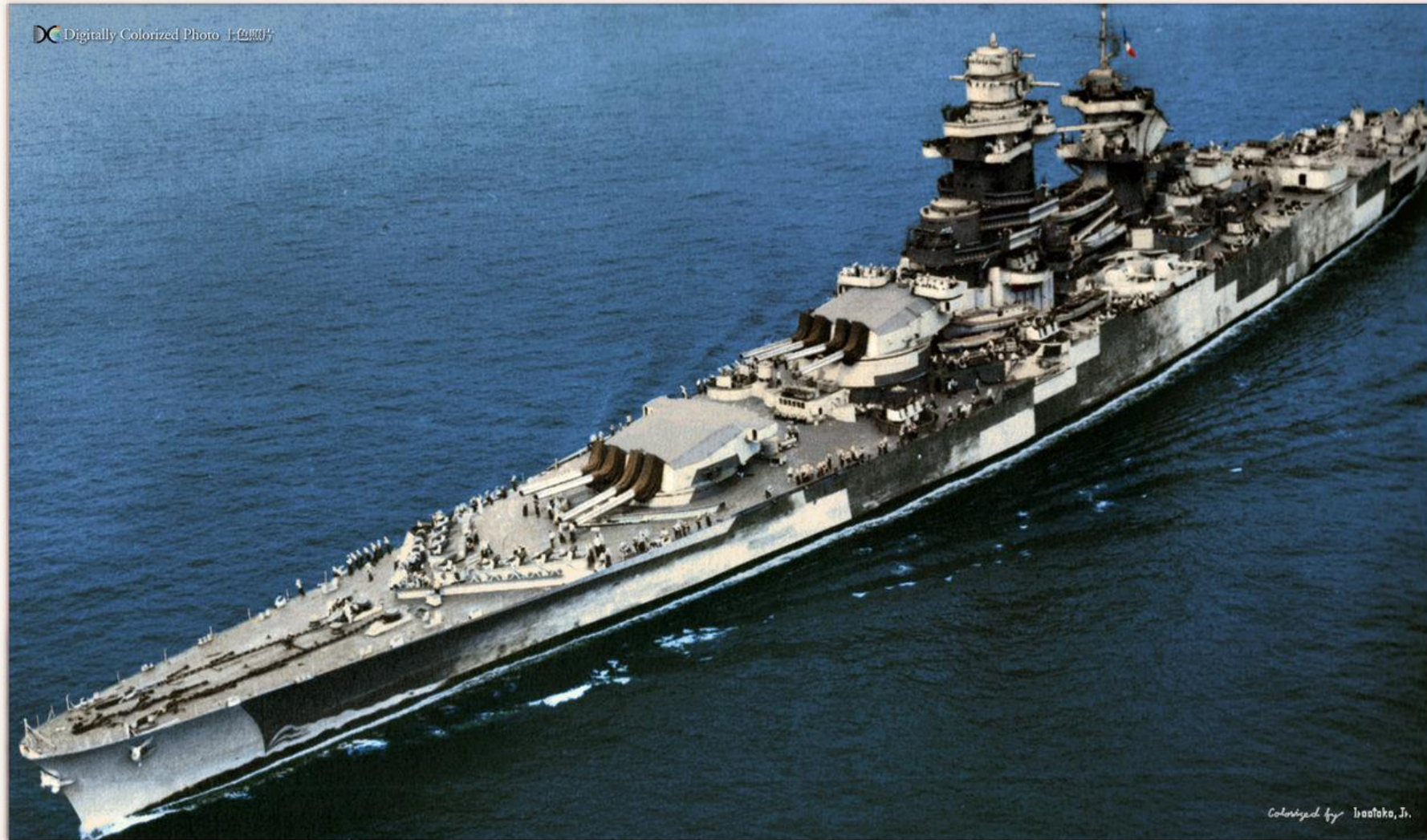
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Merci de votre attention



Marine nationale Le cuirassé "*Richelieu*" en septembre 1943, après réparations.

