

29 December: Milne of J S White called, could do a Q CI [destroyer] in 6 months less than the fully H.A. destroyer [BATTLE]. ... Told Cole not to invite Min of War Trans[port] to join Shock C'tee. ...

30 December: At Admy. With Pigott, DCW & Sanders discussed acceleration of VANG[UARD]. Contr will not cancel 2 sloops but will suspend BELLEROPHON [became TIGER building at John Brown, the sloops SNIPE and SPARROW were transferred to Denny in 1942]. Contr & ACNS(W) agreed to bow with more sheer & accept reduced elevation from A turret guns. [A long overdue decision] ... Contr wants a Woolworth carrier, said I would get a private firm busy in order to get merchant ship practice. [The genesis of the light fleet carrier from Vickers-Armstrongs.] Syfret [Rear Admiral E N, 18th Cruiser Squadron] came in I was very disappointed he came across ultra-nervous & has most heretic ideas about stability, said I would fly somebody out to Gib to lecture Force H. [Syfret took command in January] ...

Review of 1941: A year that started well for the RCNC & ended very badly. ILLUSTRIOUS took a terrific hammering splendidly. FIJI & L CI are doing well as are Ts & Us [submarines] & HUNTS. But HOOD tho' not unexpected was a blow, ARK ROYAL worse tho' she should not have been lost. P. of WALES the worst blow conceivable. E in C after clever subterranean work has come into the open in his attempt to put the marine engineer into our place as principal technicians of the Navy. Started move to get RCNC into Navy but Contr won't bite. Sorely handicapped by lack of constructors, and no. [number] of old men compared with those between 35 & 45 the right age with a war on. The senior officers particularly Sanders & T L Mathias reacted badly to my efforts to reorganise & get younger men into higher positions.



The ex-French cruisers D'Entrecasteaux and Desaix¹

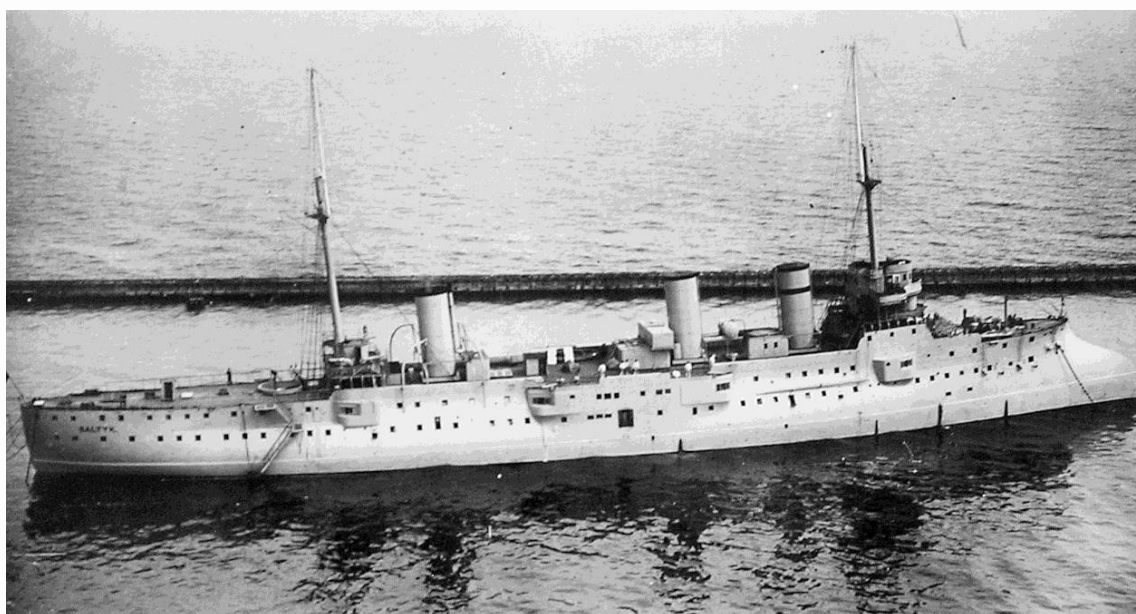
Dr David Chessum and Dr Donald Stoker

D'ENTRECASTEAUX was a protected cruiser completed for the French Navy in 1898. After service in World War 1, the obsolete cruiser was employed as a training ship at Brest from 1919-1921 for signalmen,

¹ Parts of this article are adapted from Donald Stoker, *Britain, France and the Naval Arms Trade in the Baltic, 1919-1939: Grand Strategy and Failure* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

shipwrights, and reserve officers.² In 1922, D'ENTRECASTEAUX was loaned to Belgium for use as a floating barracks. The French justified this transfer as being outside the restrictions of the Washington Naval Treaty on the basis that this vessel had been disarmed, was immobile, and had therefore been deprived of its character as a combat ship.³ This interpretation was accepted by default by Great Britain.⁴ The hulk was returned by Belgium to France in June 1926 on completion of the loan.⁵

On 18 June 1923, Poland began negotiations with France for the obsolete armoured cruiser DESAIX, an old vessel that had been decommissioned and disarmed. Poland wanted the cruiser for a stationary training vessel, and had no intention of rearming the ship, or of even making her seaworthy, and planned to permanently moor her in Gdynia.



BALTYK, ex-D'ENTRECASTEAUX, as a training hulk at Gdynia during the 1930s.
[Private collection, courtesy of Philippe Caresse]

The French Navy initially recommended permanently lending the vessel to Poland, which would only have to pay the costs associated with putting her into a serviceable condition and moving her to Poland. At some point in the bureaucratic process, the Navy's intention to lend DESAIX for an unlimited amount of time transformed into ceding the

² J.L. Couhat, *French Warships of World War I* (Shepperton: Ian Allen, 1974), p. 67.

³ Letter from the French Ambassador to Great Britain, 23 May 1927, TNA: ADM 1/8721/265.

⁴ Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI) Minute, 15 June 1927, and notes thereon, TNA: ADM 1/8721/265.

⁵ "D'ENTRECASTEAUX," 2016, retrieved 3 Feb 2020 from <http://www.marinebelge.be/d'entrecasteaux.html>.

ship. In March 1924, the French Foreign Minister agreed to the cession of the vessel as long as this did not violate the Washington accords. By early 1925, the Naval Ministry wanted the Poles to pay the value of the hull because France was now giving the ship to Poland and not merely lending it.

As the matter dragged on the French began to worry. Borel, the French Naval Minister, feared that appearing hard to please might generate discontent in France's ally, while Admiral Charles Jolivet, head of the French naval mission to Poland, insisted that resolving the situation was important because of the potential of sales related to the impending Polish naval programme.

June 1925 saw inter-ministerial conferences to resolve the issue. Eventually, the ministers concluded that parliament had to approve ceding the ship to Poland. The government had no desire to put the matter to the Chamber, and as a result, the French floated a number of other proposals.

Continued inquiries on the part of the Polish government failed to bring quick French action. As the matter dragged on, the Poles began to grow suspicious, as well as fearful that France might link cession of DESAIX to Poland's plans to purchase several submarines and minesweepers from foreign builders.

The deal was finalised on 14 July 1926.⁶ The Poles agreed to pay 1,200,000 francs for the hull, and an additional 2,420,000 francs to refit *Desaix* and tow the ship to Gdynia. The money for the purchase price came from French credits granted to Poland.

On 15 July 1926, the *Berliner Börsenseitung* reported the proposal in the Polish Cabinet to purchase DESAIX,⁷ and on 23 August 1926 *Le Dépêche Coloniale* reported that DESAIX had been purchased for the Polish Navy and was being reconditioned and undergoing important alterations in the Toulon dockyard.⁸ The British Foreign Office was initially unsure about what course of action to take on the matter. It not only feared being the first to raise objections to the sale, but also being the only protester. It also wanted to defer any decision while considering a request by the Chilean government to purchase British destroyers.⁹

The Foreign Office enquired at exactly what date DESAIX ceased to form part of the French Navy because if this was after the Washington Naval Treaty, then Article XVIII of the Treaty would apply, and France

⁶ Donald Stoker, "Unintended Consequences: The Effects of the Washington Naval Treaties on the Baltic," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 31 (1), (2000), p. 89.

⁷ Naval Attaché Berlin to DNI, 20 Jul 1926. TNA: ADM 1/8721/265. The vessel's name was incorrectly reported as DASAUX.

⁸ Naval Attaché Paris to DNI, 23 Aug 1926, TNA: ADM 1/8721/265.

⁹ W.M.J. Troman, *Anglo-Polish Naval Relations 1918-1947* (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2000), p. 121.

would be obliged to ensure that *Desaix* was not disposed of in a manner that permitted her to become a war vessel in another power's navy.¹⁰

The Admiralty advised that DESAIX had ceased being part of the French seagoing fleet in 1921 or 1922, but was still shown in the French official '*Lists de la Flotte*' as awaiting sale as recently as 1 April 1926.

On 4 November the British Government passed this information in an *aide mémoire* to the US Government so that as conveners of the Washington Naval Conference, the US could make appropriate enquiries of the French Government. The US State Department queried the French, who replied that negotiations on the matter were still 'ongoing' and that no definite decision had yet been reached—comments the Americans relayed to London.

In December 1926, the British Naval Attaché in Paris reported that the US Naval Attaché in Paris had been ordered by his government to approach the French Ministry of Marine with regard to DESAIX, and on the 10th of that month, the British Naval Attaché reported that the US Naval Attaché had been advised by the Head of the Intelligence Bureau of the French Ministry of Marine that the transfer of DESAIX to Poland had been contemplated but had now been abandoned. After waiting some three years for the French to decide the fate of DESAIX, Poland had asked if France would give them D'ENTRECASTEAUX instead. The Poles agreed to pay 1,622,745 francs for the vessel, its fittings, and towing it to Gdynia.

After deciding to sell D'ENTRECASTEAUX, the French notified the other signatories of the Washington Naval Treaty. Britain did not object to the transfer on the grounds that it could not now do so, having failed to object to the previous transfer of this vessel to Belgium. A Foreign Office official remarked that 'if there's any question about this the US can raise it.' The ship was towed to Poland where it was used as a stationary training ship, and harbour flagship of the Fleet Commander under the name KARL LADISLAW IV and then BAŁTYK. In 1933, the ship was hulked and permanently moored at Oksywie naval base (near Gdynia), with concrete blocks placed under her keel to support her. The hulk was captured by the Germans on 19 September 1939 and broken up by them in 1941-42.