

Richelieu

The *Richelieu* cover, below, always makes me pause...for two reasons. I cover Cardinal Richelieu each year in my History class, so that always crosses my mind. And, it always reminds me that there are *other* Navy Ship covers out there besides the much more familiar U.S. and Canadian entries. Of course, the topic screams 'History!'...Richelieu (the French First Minister and namesake), Richelieu (the French ship), battleships in general, and World War II.

Most of us are familiar with Richelieu, the man, only as the evil villain portrayed by Alexandre Dumas in his *Three Musketeers*, and, in fact, History's perception of him has not been kind, but many are more inclined to see him as a true believer in French absolutism, who believed that the end justified the means, and, indeed, that's how Richelieu presents himself in his autobiographies. In France, he's seen as a national hero, so, not surprisingly, they named a battleship after him. In fact, before WWII, the French had built, or were building, some notable battleships, but most ship construction ended when Germany over-ran France in the opening stages of the war. "Richelieu" was the name for an entire class of battleships, and the *Richelieu* was the prototype. Its wartime crew numbered 1,670 men. While not the equal to the *Bismarck*, she was armed to the teeth, very heavily armored, and very fast [...sort of reminds me of my ex-wife!].

Richelieu was built by Arsenal de Brest. She was laid down October 22, 1935; launched on January 17, 1939; and was just about completed by July 1940, but by then the Germans had overrun France. [are we still allowed to refer to ships as 'she', or has that been politically corrected out of existence, as well?] She was sent to Dakar after the French surrender. On the way, the *Richelieu* was temporarily immobilized by a British attack on July 8, 1940, when she was damaged by a torpedo. Still, she was repaired in time to oppose the combined British and Free French assault at Dakar in Sept. 1940.

But, in 1942, as the fortunes of war and politics had shifted yet again, *Richelieu* this time joined the Allies and was sent to America for a significant refitting, which was completed in October 1943. In this refitting, the battleship's aircraft and catapults were removed, and the 37mm and 13.2mm guns were removed, as well. They were replaced by the bigger 56 x 40mm guns in quad mountings and 48 x 20mm guns in single mountings. She was dangerous before; now, even more so.

From 1944 until the end of the war, she joined the British Eastern Fleet, but, again because of the fortunes of war and the declining presence of Germany naval shipping that late in the war, she didn't see all that much action.

In 1956, she was placed in reserve, and decommissioned in 1959. From that point on, she was used as an accommodation ship at Brest until finally being scrapped in 1964.

