

ADMIRAL NORTH INQUIRY DEMANDED:

Upon Admiral Sir Dudley North in his Dorset home - retired since 1942 - public attention is focused by publication of articles stating he has long been the victim of an injustice. In 1940 he commanded the North Atlantic Station at Gibraltar; a respected friend of the King when he commanded H.M. Yachts. But why, in 1980, was he relieved of his North Atlantic command? And does Sir Dudley (now 75) agree that there should be an enquiry?

"No, I don't think an enquiry is necessary. I have made my answers out quite clearly and that should be sufficient"

In 1940 the Western Mediterranean witnessed high drama. France had surrendered and against Gibraltar, where Sir Dudley North had fewer ships than he could have wished, hostile forces could have struck from both sides of the Straits. Close at hand lay a potential enemy whose threat could not be disregarded. For within striking distance, of this Gibraltar fleet lay a powerful Vichy French force at Oran. Stationed at Gib (and firm friends of North, Admiral Somerville commanded H-Force. His instructions - to proceed to Oran, and if the French refused to come over to Britain, bombard them.

Somehow, through the annihilating fire, the cruiser Strasbourg and five smaller ships escaped, but when Strasbourg's dash brought her to the safety of Toulon, the French learned that three battle ships and many lesser vessels were destroyed or out of action at Oran. Not only at Toulon but throughout Vichy France the bombardment left a bitter legacy of bad feeling against Britain.

The following September from Toulon, bound for West Africa, sailed three French Cruisers, three destroyers. Admiral North knew their intention, but not even when they were opposite Gibraltar had the Admiralty replied to his warning signal, sent two days earlier. Feeling bound by existing orders from London, North allowed the ships through the Straits. Neither from Downing Street nor from First Sea Lord, Sir Dudley Pound, did any answers come to the signals from Gibraltar. Nor did the Prime Minister intervene.

Meanwhile, by unhappy coincidence, a large Anglo-French force was nearing Dakar. More than 4,000 British, and under Free French leader General De Gaulle, nearly 3,000 French were bound for the capital of French West Africa. Their mission, to persuade the Vichy French authorities there to come over to our side. Then came the disconcerting news that the six warships that escaped from Toulon were already at Dakar, so when De Gaulle's emissaries went ashore they couldn't count on a friendly reception.

They brought back a sad tale. They had been threatened with arrest and two were wounded as they hastened to escape.

Many believed that but for the six warships from Toulon De Gaulle would have won Dakar. Two years later Admiral Darlan deserted Vichy and crossing to North Africa, gave General Eisenhower all the help he could to ensure that the French there would not oppose the Allies.

At the same time the French Admiral commanding at Toulon burned and scuttled the great fleet in the harbour there. For by this time Vichy believed that the Germans would take over the French Navy.

Even the Strasbourg, survivor of the Oran bombardment, was badly damaged. Going back to the Gibraltar affair we asked Admiral North why he did not attack the escaping French ships:

"Admiral Somerville and I had decided before directively deciding that we would not engage them unless we got the Admiralty's instructions to do so"

Did the Admiral believe that if he had attacked and the French had fought back the British would have won the engagement?

"Perfectly certain we should have lost it"

Surrounded by photographs and other reminders of his great days afloat Admiral North has reflected upon what he and many others consider the great injustice done to him when he was deprived of his Command in 1940. And though he now has no interest in an Enquiry, several brother admirals, some M.P's and thousands of the public say that to a gallant commander elementary justice must be accorded.