

French Naval Operations in Spitsbergen During Louis XIV's Reign

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LA FRANCE ARCTIQUE

In 1895 the Secretary of the Geographical Section of the Committee for Historical Works, Dr. Ernest-Théodore Hamy, published a detailed description of a highly unusual naval chart, undated but probably drawn around A.D. 1630.

This valuable document, the property of a British collector, showed "without question, Spitsbergen, the name places being partly in French while, in the middle of the chart, is a coat of arms showing the fleur-de-lys in the style of Louis XIII. The map is entitled LA FRANCE ARTIQUE (sic)!" (Hamy, 1895:159). Port-Louis or Refuge françois, (today Rekvedbukta or Wreck Bay) and Port Saint-Pierre (Kobbefjord) are along the coast from the Baie aux Anglois (Kongsfjord) and the Baie des Holandois, (Smeerenburgfjord), and southwest of the archipelago, a separate triangular-shaped island, recognizable as Jan Mayen, is named Ysle de Richelieu. To try to establish the exact date or provenance of this chart is beyond the scope of this paper. Dr. Hamy and Charles de la Roncière have both tried and reached different conclusions: the former dates the document from 1628-1631 and attributes it to the Havre seafarer Nicolas Toustain Du Castillon (Hamy, 1895: 181-182), whereas the latter dates it from about 1634 and ascribes the authorship to the Basque sailor Johannis Vrolicq (La Roncière, p. 1678). The essential importance of this chart is its spectacular proof of a continuous French presence in the waters and along the coasts of Spitsbergen, throughout the greater part of the seventeenth century.

THE FRENCH IN SPITSBERGEN UP TO 1671

From 1608 onwards, the English became increasingly interested in this archipelago, discovered 12 years before by Willem Barentz. After the preliminary survey carried out that same year by Henry Hudson, they quickly grasped that the new land was an ideal base for whaling, in spite of its forbidding approach and inhospitable climate. Beginning in 1609, more and more British ships set sail each year for Spitsbergen to carry on this lucrative trade. They soon came up against the antagonism of the Dutch, already embittered by the self-interest of the English, who in the same year (1609) stopped them from fishing for herring in their coastal waters. This naturally started a slow war of attrition between the two rival nations, both claiming the right to monopolize whaling at Spitsbergen and both employing more and more extreme measures to enforce their claims. Soon other rivals joined in the conflict, among them the French.

In 1611, the English captain Jonas Poole took with him to

Spitsbergen, as technical advisors, six sailors from Saint-Jean-de-Luz; he ordered his own sailors to treat them "very kindly and in a friendly fashion during the voyage" and "to watch carefully and to practise harpooning the whales so that they could do it as well as them" (Mirsky, 1967:73).

At that time, the Basques were renowned throughout Europe as the greatest whaling experts. Following the English example, the Danes, Flemish, and northern French also had to acquire from the Basques the vital know-how of this highly specialized technique, in which no extemporaneous variations could be allowed. As for the Dutch, for "a long time they were obliged to take harpooners and a second captain from France. They called the latter *speck snyder*, the 'blubber flenser'; in spite of this modest title, he was in command of everything which concerned fishing. The Dutch captain took the ship to its destination in the harbours of Spitsbergen. His function then more or less ceased and the *speck snyder* took over command" (La Jonkaire, 1830:14). Thus, in 1613, the Dutch captain Wilheem Van Muyden took with him to the Nordic islands 12 Basques from Saint-Jean-de-Luz, signed on by the shipowners for the duration of the campaign, "namely three expert harpooners, three masters of whale boats and six others to man the boiling vats and cut up the whales" (Hamy, 1895:171). The first attempts of the French shipowners to snatch from the English a share in this fruitful hunting field were individual and isolated efforts. In 1613, scarcely five years after Hudson's voyage, ships set sail from Bordeaux and La Rochelle to try to install the French flag at Spitsbergen for the first time. Their venture was unsuccessful: spread out and insufficiently armed, they were easy prey for the six powerful vessels equipped by the "Company of the Muskovia Merchants" of London to defend its virtual monopoly by force.

The sad recital of the difficulties, insults, and plundering suffered during this disastrous campaign by the French fishermen from Dunkirk and Biscay, together with several Dutch fishing boats, has been recorded in minute detail by Hessel Gerritsz. This severe setback seems to have discouraged the French shipowners temporarily, for there are only a few fleeting references to new voyages by Basque or Bordeaux whalers in arctic waters over the next eight years.

However, about 1620 a new impetus was given by François du Noyer, Seigneur of Saint-Martin, Supervisor General of Commerce, when he founded the "Royale Compagnie de la navigation et commerce pour les voyages de long cours à l'Inde...pesche des baleines et autres amesnagemens" (*Mercurie françois*, 1621:800-801). In fact, his projects were too ambitious and fell through because of insufficient capital (La Roncière, pp.481-484), but he seems to have inspired, at least

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in the sector of whale fishing, some solid short-term initiatives. For example, it is known that during the following years, the port of Le Havre simultaneously equipped six large ships for hunting whales (Hamy, 1895:171). Le Havre was then the national commercial centre for whalebone and whale oil, and even ships from Bayonne brought the produce of their expeditions there. It was, therefore, hardly surprising that in 1632 Le Havre was chosen to be the seat of a new company, intended to exploit the "pesche et fonte des balleines ès contrées du Nord et autres lieux" (the fishing and oil extraction of whales in northern and other regions). Financed by several merchants from Le Havre and Rouen, three vessels were equipped and put under the command of the Basque captain Johannis Vrolicq — a man who had regularly been in the Spitsbergen vicinity from at least 1618 on, and who had trained numerous Danish captains in whaling techniques. Even so, his wide experience was not enough to ensure the success of his voyages under the French flag: in 1632 and again in the following year, his ships were mercilessly chased from the seas around the archipelago by vastly superior Dutch naval forces (La Roncière, pp.676-678).

In 1634, a new campaign was more successful — Vrolicq, with six well-armed ships, had no difficulty in defeating the two English vessels of William Goodlad, who had attempted to expel him from "Port-Louis" (La Roncière, pp.678-679). A reversal came three years later from the Danes, who attacked the French whalers and chased them once again from the Spitsbergen region, without any gains to their credit. These costly ventures finally exhausted the limited capital of the Le Havre company. At the same time, Vrolicq, exasperated by a Spanish raid which laid waste to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Ciboure, and Socoa and captured 14 Basque ships loaded with whalebone and oil, contented himself from 1637 on with privateering against these new enemies.

The failure of the Le Havre company, however, did not discourage the French merchants and shipowners. In 1644, a still richer and more powerful consortium was formed under the direction of Claude Rousseau, a bourgeois of Paris. This "Compagnie du Nord établie pour la pesche des balleines" (Northern Company for Whale-Fishing) undertook to fit out 25-30 whaling vessels each year. In return, the company obtained, on 20 August 1644, the exclusive right to hunt whales in all the arctic seas (Fonds Français 18592:f°114). The violent protests of the Rouen merchants against this outrageous monopoly fell on deaf ears, because in the meantime, Cardinal Mazarin had obtained from the Regent, Queen Anne d'Autriche, the stewardship of the new company. In 1644, the company equipped 25 ships as agreed and exploited its rights for several years (Fonds Français 17329:f°424-427).

In 1648, the company amalgamated with the Compagnie de mer de Saint-Jean-de-Luz and on 3 August 1663 it obtained from the King of Denmark the right to put up dwellings and boiling vats at Spitsbergen, which right was renewed by the King in 1669. However, all this was to no avail: the company declined slowly but surely and by 1671, contemporary texts contain only tenuous and rare mention of French vessels in arctic waters.

SPITSBERGEN BECOMES A STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

After the elimination of the French, the Dutch were practically the sole masters of Spitsbergen and its riches. The large profits drawn from whaling in this region by the Netherlands fleet (*Mercurie françois*, 1636:36)¹ made it, in the event of open hostilities, a worthwhile objective in commercial warfare. This being so, the failure of the Compagnie du Nord led to a radical change of attitude towards Spitsbergen on the part of the French government, shipowners, and sailors in the last 40 years of Louis XIV's reign. Coveted for commercial reasons, the region was to be drawn into the theatre of military operations in the war against Holland, as an indirect consequence of this new attitude.

The first Frenchman to inaugurate this new kind of action was Captain François Panetié.² In 1674 this daring sailor from Boulogne, commanding a small squadron of three frigates, took the Dutch flotilla at Spitsbergen by surprise and captured 12 enemy whalers, of which he destroyed seven on the spot and returned in triumph with two, loaded with whalebone and oil (Doublet, 1883:37-38). Three years later, in July 1677, four corsairs from St. Malo — the *Vierge de Grâce*, *Victoire-Thérèse*, *Invincible*, and *Saint-Nicolas* (La Roncière, p.670) — repeated the successful exploit of Panetié, capturing or burning a dozen whalers in the North Bay and others in the South Bay, thus inflicting heavy losses on the insurers and shipowners in the Netherlands (Doublet, 1883:58).

However, it was during the subsequent conflict that the commercial war took on an importance on the naval front, as a direct consequence of France's strategic intentions. After the major battles of Bantry Bay, Béziers, Barfleur, and the renowned "campaign of the high seas" of Tourville, the squadron war gave way to less extensive clashes, carried out with more limited forces, in areas which were sometimes far afield. The primary objective of the new strategy was no longer to annihilate the enemy's naval forces, but to strike at the very heart of his economic power, by capturing or destroying merchant ships and fishing fleets. Thus, in 1693, Tourville's ships intercepted a rich Anglo-Dutch convoy from Smyrna off the Spanish coast and inflicted heavy losses. From the strategic point of view the Dutch whaling fleet at Spitsbergen constituted, even more than before, a military objective of the greatest importance. The outbreak of the war of the League of Augsburg brought about a certain caution and caused a temporary lull in activities, but in 1692 Dutch merchants and shipowners decided that the probable gains from a successful whaling expedition outweighed the inherent risks of such an undertaking. They therefore decided that their ships would again sail for the Arctic the following year. It was evident that the success of such an enterprise depended on absolute secrecy. Unfortunately for them, the Dutch greatly underestimated the efficiency of the French secret service.

It is impossible to know if this "intelligence victory" should be credited to the "official" agents maintained in the Netherlands by the government of Louis XIV, or laid at the door of a parallel network of informers in the pay of the St. Malo merchants. What is certain is that the secret information lost no

time filtering across the borders of Flanders. Before the very end of 1692, Charles de La Touche-Porée, a St. Malo ship-owner, ordered some privateers, clearly designed for action in a commercial war, to be built in the shipyards of Bayonne and Saint-Jean-de-Luz (Archives Nationales, Marine B²84:f^o542). At almost the same time, a former buccaneer captain, Jacques Gouin de Beauchesne, also from St. Malo, returning to his old corsair trade for the duration of the hostilities, outlined a similar scheme to the Duke of Gramont, Governor of Bayonne.³ Won over by the boldness of the plan, the Duke, a powerful man on friendly terms with the king, passed it on with his enthusiastic approval to the Secretary of State for the Navy, Louis de Pontchartrain, and from there to Louis XIV in person. Interested in his turn, the king immediately gave his approval to the plan and ordered a small squadron to be commissioned for this purpose at the beginning of 1693.

THE DIVISION OF MONSIEUR DE LA VARENNE

The planned operation demanded, above all, ships suited to the special conditions of navigation in arctic waters and courageous and experienced crews to man them. On the other hand, it was not necessary for the naval force entrusted with this mission to be strong in numbers or to be made up of particularly large ships. In fact, it would have been extremely unwise to send into such an action heavy ships of the line: their draught and lack of maneuverability would almost inevitably have reduced them to total impotence, not to mention the danger to them of fighting in narrow, unknown waters dotted with floating ice and hidden shoals (Hamy, 1895:38). In the end, the King and Ponchartrain chose three warships: the *Pelican*, a 50-gun vessel built in Bayonne the year before and just commissioned for the first time; and the *Aigle* and *Favori*, frigates of 300 tons and 36 guns (sometimes rated as vessels of the fifth rank), built in Bayonne in 1691 and endowed with remarkable seaworthiness of which they gave striking proof in the campaign which followed. Lastly, a large corsair ship of 500 tons and 44 guns, the *Prudent*, commanded by Gouin de Beauchesne, was permitted to join the small squadron.

The command of the whole expedition was given to Captain Antoine d'Arcy de La Varenne, born in 1656 and promoted to post captain in 1688. (Figs. 1, 2). A young and dynamic officer with a brilliant service record, he had, it is true, no experience of navigating in northern seas. However, he had the commendable good sense to rely on the expert and knowledgeable advice of his subordinates, to whom he gave wide autonomy in this domain. Once back in familiar waters, he lost no time in resuming his usual authority and belligerence.

The *Favori* was put under the command of Louis de Harismendy, a corsair captain from Bidart, who had temporarily joined the military Navy. He chose another Basque, Captain Larréguy, as his first officer. However, the latter was quickly assigned to the staff of Captain de La Varenne as technical advisor, a transfer which was not to save him from dying a brave death during the campaign.

The command of the *Aigle* was given to an officer whose meteoric rise in the Navy was as swift as it was brief: Johannis

au 2 Janvier 1693.
 Instruction pour le Sr de La Varenne
 Commandant sur le Vant de Bay & Pelican
 Le Roy ayant résolu de détruire les Vaisseaux
 de l'ennemi qui sont la poche de la Baie de
 Groenland, Sa Ma^{te} a lui choisi d'ut. de la Varenne
 pour avoir la conduite de cette expédition, etant
 persuadé qu'il s'en acquittera a son entière satisfaction
 Les delib. du Roy luy donna le 10^{me} Janvier 1693.

FIG. 1. Instructions of the King to Captain de La Varenne. "His Majesty having decided to destroy the Enemy's vessels going out to whale in Greenland [Spitsbergen], His Majesty has selected M. de La Varenne to command this expedition, resting assured that he will do it to His entire satisfaction..." (French National Archives).

qu'il s'en acquittera a son entière satisfaction
 Les delib. du Roy luy donna le 10^{me} Janvier 1693.
 Sa Ma^{te} veut qu'il brûle ou coule a fond sans
 quartier tous ceux qui auront le pavillon Anglois
 Hollandois ou Hambourgeois; et a l'égard de ceux qui
 auront le Pavillon Danois; il examinera s'ils
 sont effectivement Danois, et s'ils sont
 de la Baie de Groenland.

FIG. 2. Instructions of the King (continued). "His Majesty wants that he [M. de La Varenne] burns or sinks, without any exception, all the ships which fly the British, Dutch or Hamburg flags and, as far as those which sail under the Danish flag, the captain will make sure that they are really Danish..." (French National Archives).

de Suhigaraychipi, better known as Coursic or Croisic (Ducere, 1895:195-204; Rectoran, 1946:265ff.; Aman, 1975:3-4). Born in Bayonne, from his earliest years at sea he had gained great experience in the privateering war and detailed knowledge of navigation. These obvious qualities, together with his audacity, attracted the interest of the Duke of Gramont, who gave him the command of the *Légère*, a 24-gun frigate armed at the Duke's own expense. In this ship, in September 1691, Coursic did not hesitate to attack an enemy convoy under strong escort and he was able to capture a Dutch store-ship loaded with arms and ammunition. A few weeks later, on a provisioning trip along the Galician coast, he and 80 sailors stormed an entrenchment defended by 300 Spaniards and killed, wounded, or captured a good third of them (Ducere, 1895:196-198). On 18 February 1692, off Saint-Sébastien, he seized a naval supply ship, as well armed as his

own frigate, after four hours' fierce combat and three attempts at boarding (La Roncière, pp.173-174). An account of this triumphant feat was published in the *Gazette de France* on 1 March 1692, and three weeks later Louis XIV promoted Coursic to the rank of commander.

Coursic continued his attacks on enemy trade, but at the beginning of 1693, his customary recklessness led him into an unfortunate encounter. On meeting an unidentified squadron off Cape Ortegale, he immediately launched into an attack with his corsair flotilla, without bothering to hoist the regular recognition signals. At the last second, he saw that his supposed "enemy" was none other than the chevalier of Forbin. He had, in short, only by a hairsbreadth avoided the unpardonable sin of attacking a French squadron. This blunder was taken very seriously at Versailles and the over-zealous warmonger was "suspended" in March 1693. His punishment did not last long, as he was given command of the *Aigle* less than three months later. No one, in fact, seemed more qualified to lead a military expedition into these dangerous and little-known waters, which demanded great seamanship and initiative, than this exceptional officer, independent and at times undisciplined, but also fearless and enterprising. At the same time, the King's three ships embarked Basque officers, petty officers, and pilots, all specialists in the difficult approaches and hidden dangers of Spitsbergen.⁴

The fitting out of the *Pélican* was slow and suffered the usual delays customary at this period. At Bayonne, de La Varenne enlisted his crew of 230 men, and the superintendent Bégon at Rochefort sent him the remainder of his petty officers, as well as 50 soldiers. However, the fitting out of the ship was slower than expected. To make matters worse, during her sea trials the *Pélican* ran aground off Bayonne, but luckily escaped without damage (Archives Nationales, Marine B²89:f^o684 r^o-v^o, B²90:f^o533 v^o-534). At last she arrived in the natural harbour off Saint-Jean-de-Luz in June, where the three other ships of the division were already waiting, and in the morning of 30 June the small force sailed away from the coast of France.⁵

THE BATTLE OF BEAR BAY

The campaign began badly. Winds kept the division in the latitude of Santoña for six days. With the advent of more favourable weather, the *Pélican* and her consorts reached latitude 62°N on 20 July. The prudent de La Varenne then held a war-council with Coursic, Beauchesne, and Harismendy to discuss whether it was not too late in the season to risk maneuvers in the Spitsbergen area. The three captains, "having conferred amongst themselves and with de Larreguy were in favour of continuing to Spitsbergen since a favourable wind was heading them in the right direction and they could therefore hope to arrive with enough time to mount an attack on their enemies in accordance with His Majesty's orders. To this the aforesaid commander agreed" (Archives Nationales, Marine B⁴14:f^o522 v^o).

De La Varenne, having decided to accept the advice of the experts on his staff, continued north and on 28 July the coast of Spitsbergen appeared on the horizon. Military operations

began the next morning. The squadron took up attack formation off Magdalena Bay and then headed into South Bay (the southern part of Smeerenburgfjord, between Spitsbergen proper and Danes and Amsterdam islands), where they soon sighted Dutch whalers, intermingled with Danish ships which were protected by their neutrality. As soon as they saw the French fleet, the Dutch whalers hastily weighed anchor and tried to escape north. Several of them succeeded in eluding their pursuers by taking narrow, shallow channels where the *Pélican* and the frigates could not follow.

Over the next three days, de La Varenne gave complete freedom of movement to his subordinates, who threw themselves wholeheartedly into the hunt. Each brought back their captives — two Dutch store-ships for the *Aigle*, two more and a pinnace for the *Favori* — to South Bay where the *Pélican* had anchored. This meagre booty was insufficient to satisfy Coursic. Convinced that the major part of the enemy fishing fleet had taken refuge in the northern ice, he asked for permission to pursue them with his frigate and Harismendy's, both of which were faster and easier to handle in these dangerous waters than a ship of the line. "To which Mr. de La Varenne replied that he admired his zeal and that he would allow him to go on this expedition with the 'Favori'...but that he himself would stay in the same bay to guard the Dutch and Danish vessels which were there" (Archives Nationales, Marine B⁴14:f^o523 v^o). The *Prudent* had gone off northwest in pursuit of two Dutch store-ships and had not yet returned; so Coursic, to his regret, had to do without the help of the big corsair from St. Malo.

The two frigates left South Bay on 1 August and spent the next four days tacking about through floating ice without sighting anything. Finally, on 5 August, when they had just rounded Point Verlegen, the northern point of Spitsbergen, they glimpsed several ships. This made them suspect that they were cruising near the entrance to the "Baie aux Ours" or "Beersbay" (now Sorgfjord or Treurenburg Bay) (Fig. 3). Although this passage was notoriously dangerous,⁶ they immediately decided to reconnoitre. At first light on 6 August the *Aigle* and *Favori* cleared the entry to the bay, coming under the inaccurate and ineffectual fire of a makeshift field battery, hurriedly installed on a headland by the Dutch (see Fig. 3). It was then that Coursic and Harismendy saw, to their stupefaction, "40 ships, all flying the Dutch standard. Amongst them we could distinguish the flags of an admiral, a vice-admiral and a rear-admiral, whom they had obviously chosen amongst themselves at our approach. In general, the ships were all in good defensive order in the form of a crescent. However, we approached the enemy in our ships' boats to a distance of half the range of a 3-pounder but it was the only thing we could do because of the complete calm and the currents. We then dropped anchor and warped across by our stern cables.

"At this moment the enemy erupted into ironical shouts of 'Vive le Roy' (Long live the King) and other cries we could not understand..." (Archives Nationales, Marine B⁴14:f^o524). To the obviously warlike intentions of the Batavians, who were also numerically superior (about 1500 men to 300 and 300 guns to 72),⁷ the French displayed equal courage and

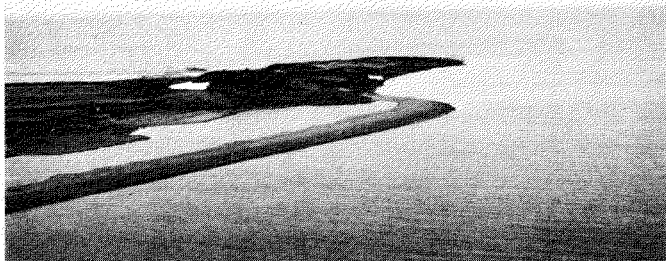


FIG. 3. The entrance to La Baye aux Ours and the peninsula where the Dutch guns were located. (Photo: L. Rey)

willingness to fight. Without much hope of success, Coursic sent Ensign d'Etchebehere, who spoke fluent Dutch, to deliver an ultimatum to the enemy admiral. It was no surprise to the French officer to receive the proud reply that "we must take them for arrant knaves by calling upon them to surrender to two medium-sized frigates like ours. They were far from agreeing to this and we had only to exert ourselves to our utmost and they would perform their duty" (Archives Nationales, Marine B⁴14:f^o524 v^o).

Even before the ships' boat, sent to parley, had returned alongside, the whalers opened fire. Soon, according to an anonymous eyewitness, the engagement had become general (Fig. 4): "At last, on the 6th of the aforesaid month, between 8 and 9 o'clock in the morning, the battle began fiercely. The enemy's heavy fire continued until 1 o'clock in the afternoon, as well as our own during that time and afterwards. As they were numerous and most of them had 10, 12, 14 and even up to 18 guns and 40 to 45 good sailors, their firing was as rapid as musket-fire, while they had enough powder. But our guns were as good and damaged them so much that it can be said that, had the sea been a little disturbed, while the water was as

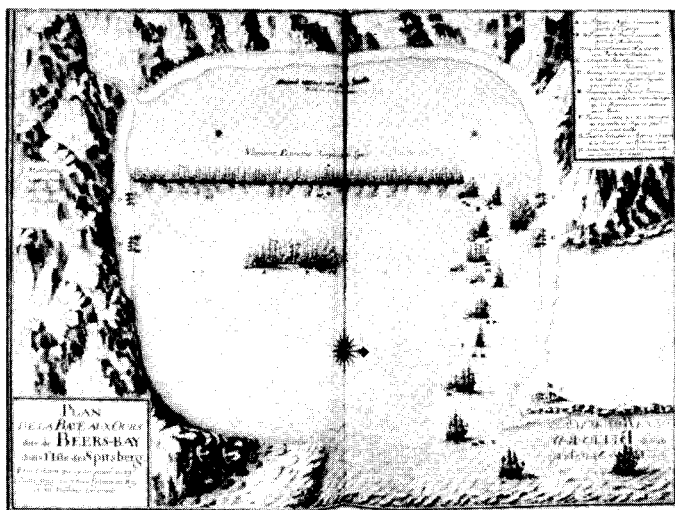


FIG. 4. The Battle of "la Baye aux Ours". Contemporary drawing from the Archives of His Grace the Duke of Gramont. (Reprinted with permission)

calm as a mill-pond, most of the ships would have sunk without a trace... [Each frigate had fired about 1600 shots].

"After five hours of hard fighting, the enemy slowed down, while we continued at the same rate as in the beginning, hoping to see them hoist the white flag demanding quarter, since they were only firing a shot from time to time. But while we were waiting we saw several vessels, their cables cut, being towed out by a large number of longboats, the smallest of them being pulled by six, and doing all they could to get out of the bay by means of the current and their boats. As we only had one boat to each frigate, all the others having been sunk by enemy cannon, we could do nothing else but use our anchors to warp towards them, which we did with all possible speed. We even cut our own cables to save time, but our plan did not succeed because we could not gain ground against the superior number of longboats that they had available. This is the reason that we only seized thirteen vessels, the others having taken flight, though badly damaged. Of these thirteen ships, we burned two in the aforesaid bay as being unnavigable." (Archives Nationales, Marine B⁴14:f^o524 v^o-525).

The frigates did not emerge undamaged from this furious gunfight. Their hulls and superstructures received many direct hits, not to mention their longboats, which were reduced to matchsticks. The *Aigle* had lost her foremast and had to join her lower yards, which had been split by the impact. As for the *Favori*, she signalled breaks in one of her top masts and in the main mizzen yard, plus one cracked gun and two others knocked from their carriages. The loss of life was lighter, though each ship had its wounded and dead (Fig. 5, 6). One of the casualties was none other than Larréguy, the second-in-command of the *Favori*, who had been attached to the staff of Captain de La Varenne, but had obtained special permission to rejoin his ship for the mission to North Spitsbergen.

Whatever the losses and damage suffered, Coursic and Harismendy had no intention of staying in the bay any longer: the threatening proximity of the floating ice gave them the impression of being at the bottom of a gigantic pit about to close over them. In the evening of 7 August after making hasty repairs, the *Aigle* and *Favori*, with their 11 prizes, started on the return journey. Two days later they met the *Prudent* who was



FIG. 5. The graves of the sailors on the peninsula. (Photo: L. Rey)

escorting two captured Dutch store-ships. On 10 August the naval squadron was once more complete in South Bay, to the great relief of Captain de La Varenne.

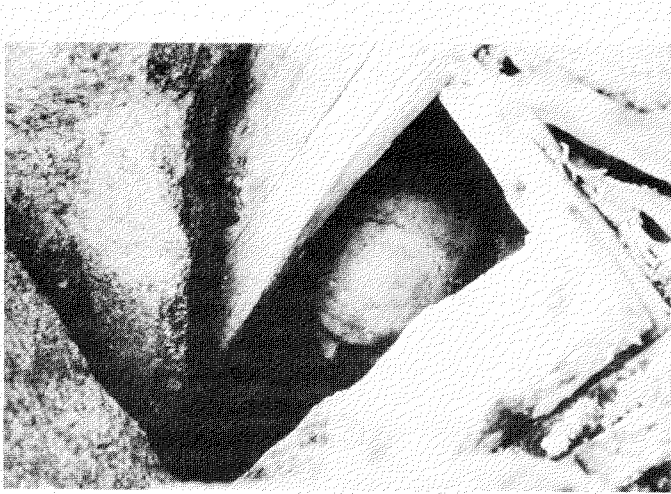


FIG. 6. Grave and coffin opened by polar bears. (Photo: L. Rey)

THE RESULT OF THE CAMPAIGN

Considering his principal mission accomplished, the chief of the expedition now hoped to leave these dangerous latitudes as soon as possible before the arrival of the winter season. From 12 August, onwards; therefore, they sorted out the 26 captured whalers: 15 of them were scuttled on the spot, once their cargoes of blubber and whalebone had been transferred to the other 11 ships. The Dutch crews were put on board the 16 Danish vessels, which had been detained and held in South Bay by de La Varenne. Although this arbitrary measure had resulted in almost total disaster for their fishing season, the so-called Danes thought that they had come out of the affair reasonably well, as most of them were, in reality, Hamburg ships (and thus enemies of France) protected by their sea-passes issued by King Christian V (Archives Nationales, Marine B⁴14:f^o526 v^o-527).

This done, the small naval force split up: Coursic and Harismendy set off to escort their captives to Bayonne, and the *Pélican* and *Prudent* left Spitsbergen to carry out the second objective of their mission — to patrol off the British coasts. Again, they were lucky: reinforced en route by two other corsair frigates from St. Malo (the *Phélypeaux*, with 44 guns, under Captain de Vaujoyeux, and the *Grénédan*, with 30 guns, under Captain Vaughan), off Cape Clear they intercepted an English convoy of a dozen sails returning from the West Indies on 30 September 1693.

Nothing could withstand the determination of de La Varenne and his men. The warship *Diamond* with 48 guns, the fire-ship *Cygné* with six, and nearly every one of the merchant ships, richly loaded with gold powder, piastres, sugar, and cocoa, fell into their hands without a blow being struck (La Roncière, pp. 176-177). The fury and sense of disgrace felt by the British authorities can be measured by the heavy punishment meted out afterwards to the the unfortunate commanders of the two escort boats: John Perry, the captain of the *Cygné*, was dis-

missed from the Navy, and Henry Wickham, the captain of the *Diamond*, was imprisoned for life. (He was pardoned in 1702 (Clowes, 1900:469, 472).

After this last, spectacular, success, de La Varenne regained La Rochelle, where he left the *Pélican* at the end of 1693 to take a well-deserved holiday and await another assignment.⁸ Chevalier of Saint-Louis in 1703, Governor-General of Martinique in 1716, he was promoted to the rank of rear-admiral in 1720 and died at Toulon on 27 March 1732.

During this time, Coursic and Harismendy were sailing independently towards France. They had left South Bay together on 14 August, but a thick mist had quickly separated them. In the end the *Favori*, with five prizes, reached the Basque coast on 9 September (Archives Nationales, Marine B⁴14:f^o527). The *Aigle*, which had tried without success to join the *Pélican* off the Orkneys, and the other six Dutch whalers, arrived, one by one, in Bayonne during the following weeks.

For the Dutch shipowners and underwriters who had vested interests in whaling the loss was severe. Of 89 whalers which left the Netherlands in 1693 for Spitsbergen,⁹ nearly a third never came back. Those which had the luck to escape the French squadron brought back, in the form of oil and whalebone, the equivalent of 175 whales, a total well below the catch for an average whaling expedition (J.B. Kist, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, pers. comm.). Without being a disaster to the enemy on the same scale as the catastrophe of the Smyrna convoy five weeks earlier (given that there was nothing comparable in the relative strengths of the fleets deployed in these two actions), the raid of de La Varenne and Coursic could be counted as an appreciable success in the trade war. Louis XIV himself, when he heard the news of the battle of Beerbay, expressed his personal satisfaction at this great victory by Coursic and Harismendy: "His Majesty", wrote Pontchartrain to the Duke of Gramont on 25 September 1693, "was very pleased with what the two officers and their crews did on this occasion and you can assure them that he will remember this on a future occasion" (Archives Nationales, Marine B²91:f^o666 v^o).¹⁰

One would expect that the magnificent naval and military exploit of the two Basque captains and their crews, carried out with total disregard for danger and in particularly dangerous navigational conditions, would have been given wide publicity in the gazettes of the time. In fact, their importance was overshadowed by the news of the interception of the Smyrna convoy by Tourville, which was a far more spectacular feat to the uninitiated. Though, for obvious reasons, the *Gazette Amsterdam* (1693) reported in two laconic articles the expedition of de La Varenne and Coursic to Spitsbergen, the French newspapers were strangely discreet about the whole affair. Even Saint-Simon and the Marquis de Sourches are silent in their memoirs; only the Marquis de Dangeau (1693) weighs up the outcome in his memoirs, albeit in a very exaggerated fashion.¹¹

On the other hand, it is likely that the event roused the interest and admiration of all the sailors of this epoch. Indeed, 10 years later, one of the most valiant of their number strove to repeat the trade-war operation, which had already on two oc-

casions borne fruit for the French Royal Navy in the waters of Spitsbergen.

THE ARCTIC CAMPAIGN OF DUGUAY-TROUIN

In 1703, René Duguay-Trouin had just reached his fortieth year. The feats of this young and fearless sailor from St. Malo had already become famous during the war of the League of Augsburg. He embarked on a corsair frigate as a volunteer at the age of 16, and scarcely two years later received his first command. He was finally promoted to Commander in 1697 for his exceptional valour in the war.¹² Peace interrupted the course of his exploits after this merited promotion, but the outbreak of a new conflict in May 1702 gave him a renewed chance to pursue the only activity which really suited his tastes and temperament. Given these conditions, it was hardly surprising that one of his first objectives during the War of Spanish Succession should be the Dutch whaling fleet at Spitsbergen.

He himself relates the events of this campaign in his memoirs: "The King granted me the warships 'Eclatant', with 66 guns, 'Furieux', with 62, and 'Bienvenu' with 30. [The *Bienvenu* was, in fact, an armed transport ship.] I boarded the first, but reduced the number of her guns to 58 and on the 'Furieux' to 56 to make them both lighter. Lieutenant Desmarais-Herpain¹³ took over the latter and the 'Bienvenu' was under Lieutenant Desmarques.¹⁴ I added to these two frigates from St. Malo with 30 guns apiece [the *Morinet*, with 30 guns, under Captain Dujardin-Daniel, and the *Natale*, with 28 guns, under Captain Fouquet], planning to take all five to destroy the Dutch fishing off the coasts of Spitsbergen" (Duguay-Trouin, 1969:80).

The small naval force left Brest and on 7 July 1703, off the Orkneys, ran into 15 warships under the Dutch admiral Van der Dussen. The thick mist, which had drawn them into this unfortunate encounter, luckily allowed the French ships to escape from this formidable adversary after a sharp engagement (La Roncière, pp. 425-426).

After this untoward incident the naval division headed straight for Spitsbergen where they took the Dutch fishing fleet by surprise and came within a hairsbreadth of destroying it completely. "We took, ransomed or burned more than forty whaling ships: the thick mist saved a great number of others. In my opinion there were two hundred in Grouenhav harbour [S'Gravenhagen Bay, today Isfjord]. I was just sailing between the headlands at the entry to the bay, when a mist came up so thick and a calm so great that our ships no longer answered to the helm. The currents swept us up north to the island of Vorland [Prince Charles Forland], latitude 81°N, so close to an immense ice barrier that we had great difficulty preventing our ships from striking.

"In the end a slight wind blew up and we could sheer off and return to the harbour at Grouenhav; there were no longer two hundred ships there. We learned that during the calm which had pushed us north, they had been towed out by the large number of boats they used for whale hunting and had gone on their way under the escort of two warships" (Duguay-Trouin, 1969:83-84).

Despite Duguay-Trouin's daring and pugnacious nature, he was too good a sailor not to realize that if he ventured his heavy warships in these dangerous and little-known waters in a blind chase after the fleeing enemy, he would be exposing his small fleet to a possible catastrophe. Presumably, too, he did not have on his staff a Basque pilot who could guide them through the drifting ice, reefs, and shoals scattered along the coast. He had to be content with their earlier captures. Even then, these did not all return to a home port: several boats got separated during the bad weather and some of them were shipwrecked while others fell back into enemy hands. At the final count, only 15 whalers sailed up the "river of Nantes" with Duguay-Trouin's ships in September 1703. While worth taking into account, the campaign was hardly more successful than that of Coursic and de La Varenne, in spite of having had a much stronger force. This partial failure left a bitter taste in the mouth of the great St. Malo sailor. On 28 November 1706, he submitted to the Secretary of State for the Navy a proposal for a new military expedition against the Dutch fleet at Spitsbergen (Archives Nationales, Marine 13431:f°12-16). However, other fields of operation opened up, with better prospects of glory and profit, and he never found the opportunity to revenge the arctic ice and mists which had inflicted on him one of the few setbacks of his successful career.

This moderate success ended more than a century of French maritime activity in Spitsbergen.

NOTES

¹In 1636, the *Mercure françois* put the value of the Spitsbergen campaign led by 16 Dutch boats at £800 000.

²Born in Boulogne about 1637, Panetié entered the Royal Navy at 15. Made post captain in 1665, he distinguished himself in the taking of Cayenne (1677) and in the battle of Bantry (1689), after which he was promoted to the rank of rear admiral and further shone in the battles of Béziers (1690) and Barfleur (1692). As Superintendent of Brest harbour, he contributed with Vauban and Langeron to the defeat of the English at Camaret in 1694. He died in Brest on 26 April 1696.

³Antoine-Charles (1641-1720), second Duke of Gramont and Count of Guiche and Louigny, had distinguished himself in the King's armies during the campaign against Holland in 1672 and during the siege of Besançon (1674). In 1693, he was Viceroy of Navarre and Béarn and Governor of Bayonne.

⁴Among the officers on board the *Aigle*, one should mention Ensign d'Etchebehere, to whom, seemingly, we owe one of the only two contemporary accounts of the campaign of de La Varenne and the battle of Bear Bay, to be found in the Archives Nationales under the heading Marine B⁴14:f°522-527. The account is, in fact, anonymous but it can most probably be attributed to d'Etchebehere. Another less detailed description of the battle of Bear Bay is in the unpublished memoirs of the Duke of Gramont. The relevant passage has, however, been published by Ritter (1974).

⁵The delay in equipping the *Pélican* was not in fact so great, since the King's instructions, given at Le Quesnoy on 2 June 1693, had fixed the theoretical date for weighing anchor as 20 June (Archives Nationales, Marine B²88:f°164 v°-167).

⁶"Beerbay is a very dangerous place... Ships which venture there are often taken by surprise and stuck in the ice, as happened in 1683 to 13 Dutch vessels which were frozen in and abandoned by their crews who were very lucky to escape... It is an established fact that the 'Aigle' and 'Favori' were the first French ships to enter 'Beerbay'." (Archives Nationales, Marine B⁴14:f°526).

⁷This numerical superiority in artillery was partly compensated for by the greater calibre of the frigates' guns (12 pounds, whereas the whalers probably only had six- and four-pounders.

⁸Hamy stresses a passage in a letter from Pontchartrain to de La Varenne: "...I am very happy to hear that you captured a considerable number of Dutch vessels, but it seems to me that you could have inflicted much more damage on the enemy if you had seen fit to be with the 'Aigle' and 'Favori' when they found the 44 ships against which they fought..." (Archives Nationales, Marine B²91:f^o591 v^o). He deduces that the conduct of this officer was censured by the minister. However, it seems difficult to deny that de La Varenne led the expedition with exemplary intelligence, knowing when to take advice from his staff and when to take calculated risks wisely without being carried away in the heat of the moment. Anyway, Pontchartrain's remarks seem fairly harmless compared with the bitter reproaches he had heaped, some weeks earlier, on Tourville, who was, in his opinion, guilty of negligence for "only" capturing or destroying 59 out of 100 merchantmen in the famous Smyrna convoy.

⁹According to Netherlands sources. However, the author of the previously quoted anonymous account speaks clearly of 28 enemy ships captured or destroyed. Perhaps one should add to the 26 Dutch whalers, victims of the French, two Hamburg boats which had neglected to obtain Danish passes.

¹⁰Unfortunately, Coursic did not live long enough to benefit from this promise, as he was mortally wounded on the poop of the *Aigle* on 10 September 1694, during an attack on the English settlements in Newfoundland (Aman, 1975:4). He died soon after at Plaisance (now Placentia). Harismendy, who was in the same action on the *Favori*, showed an ill-timed indecision and saved his life at the expense of his glory (Archives Nationales, Marine B⁴15:f^o374-378).

¹¹He mentioned on Sunday, 20 September 1693: "The English and Dutch merchants complained as much at the loss they had made whaling, where we had captured or sunk more than two hundred small boats, as they did over the losses they suffered over the defeat of their Smyrna fleet" (Dangeau, 1693:362).

¹²The best illustration of this was the capture of a Dutch convoy and its three escort warships coming from Bilbao, under Admiral Willem Van Wassenaar, on 25 March 1697 (La Roncière, pp. 228-230).

¹³Herpin Des Marets from La Tranche, in Poitou; sub-lieutenant in 1670, lieutenant in 1682, captain in 1691, degraded in 1693, re-established as lieutenant in 1701; died in Brest on 1 February 1729 (Archives Nationales, Marine C¹:161).

¹⁴Jean-Jacques Des Marques, from Soissons; midshipman in 1683, sub-lieutenant in 1691, lieutenant in 1696; died at Brest on 2 November 1719 (Archives Nationales, Marine C¹:150).

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