

Anglo-Free French strategy in Northwest Africa: operation against Dakar, september 1940.

Abstract

After the fall of France in 1940, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, tried hard to persuade Marshall Petain to continue the war from North Africa but his effort was of no avail. This is the reason why Winston Churchill accepted to mount a combined operation with the Free-French under the leadership of General de Gaulle to seize the French naval base of Dakar.

This article focuses on the preparation and execution of this operation, it then analyses its impact on different protagonists and finally shows why American interest for Northwest Africa started to grow.

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ملخص

بعد توقيع فرنسا على الهدنة و بالتالي انسحابها من المواجهة مع ألمانيا، وافق وينستون تشرتشل، الذي كان يبحث عن مخرج يمكنه من مواصلة الحرب، على طلب المساعدة الذي تقدم به الجنرال ديغول بشأن القيام بهجوم على قاعدة داكار ليتمكن من تجنيد المستعمرات الفرنسية في إفريقيا الغربية حول قضية "فرنسا الحرة" وهذا ما يسمح له: التقدم التدريجي نحو شمال إفريقيا. وفي هذا الإطار تم التخطيط والتنفيذ السريعين لعملية "سوزن"، وهي عملية جوية بحرية مشتركة بين القوات الأنجلو-ديغولية. أما تشرتشل فقد دعم هذه العملية تدعيماً مطلقاً واعتبرها خطوة أولى نحو تجسيد استراتيجيته

To rally the whole of Northwest Africa to the Free French cause, General de Gaulle, who had already gained some support in the area, turned to the British authorities for assistance and cooperation. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, realizing the strategic importance of Northwest Africa, quickly endorsed de Gaulle's idea of establishing a Free French government on the shores of West Africa, in Dakar. Indeed de Gaulle's move came as a great relief for the Prime Minister who had been a keen supporter of operation 'Susan', meant at establishing de Gaulle in Morocco, but operation 'Susan', to his regret, was ruled out by the objections of the Chiefs of Staff.

In the emerging strategy of peripheral war, Northwest Africa attracted the interests of European as well as American strategists. In this respect, Dakar, being the center of the French colonial power in West Africa, with substantial naval, ground and air forces and good equipments, was to become a matter of bitter fightings. Owing to the geographical position of Dakar, seizing it would bring about an effective control over the northsouth naval communications in the Atlantic. If Dakar were to fall into the Axis hands, as both Britain and the United States feared, the former would be in a position to stretch their influence into Latin America.

وتطويق العدو و حماية المسالك البحرية
البريطانية قبل الشروع في الهجوم على
جيوش المحور على اراضي أوروبا
نفسها.

يتناول هذا المقال ظروف تنظيم هذه
العملية و تنفيذها ثم يتطرق إلى انعكاساتها
على المتناحرين و يبين أسباب اهتمام
الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية المتزايد
بشمال إفريقيا.

It was from West and North Africa that de Gaulle planned to initiate his struggle for the restoration of France and its empire relying in this enterprise first on the strategic position of the French colonies and second on their human and economic potentialities. De Gaulle's view in this operation was founded on the belief that the French colonial authorities would spontaneously or through a combination of persuasion and show

of force join his movement. The early declaration of allegiance to the Free French movement of Equatorial Africa, the Gabon and Chad, boosted the morale of the de Gaulle and his supporters and contributed to give their plans more weight and credibility. Thus, in view of the apparently growing support for de Gaulle in Africa, Great Britain and the Free French optimistically envisaged a combined operation in West Africa.

Dakar was singled out as the best strategic target for a combined Anglo-Free French operation; and the Prime Minister viewed it as important for the Free French as it was important for Britain as a basis in the battle of the Atlantic (1).

However, each party had their own view as to how the operation against Dakar should be led. Of his plan de Gaulle wrote:

"The idea was to land at a great distance from the base a resolute column which would progress towards the objective, progressively rallying the territories through which it passed and the elements which it encountered. One could thus hope that the forces of Free France, growing by contagion, would reach Dakar by land. Conakry was the place where I planned to land the troops.... But to prevent Dakar naval squadron from annihilating the expedition, the latter had to be covered from the sea - and this cover was to be requested from the British Fleet" (2).

This plan, however presented the serious disadvantage of immobilizing a substantial part of the British naval forces for a long time off the westerncoasts of Africa at a time when Great Britain badly needed all her forces for the defense of the British Isles. This latter preoccupation determined the British view as to how the operation against Dakar should be mounted and led. For the British, this operation initially christened 'Scipio', later rechristened 'Menace', was to be a direct action against Dakar. The British plan presented the advantage of being a rapid action, which would permit the British naval forces to return quickly to participate in the defense of the home waters. Furthermore, this view was strengthened by a report from the British Consul-general in Dakar which stated that the French Mayor of the city considered that a British show of force would stimulate French European patriots to undertake action to overthrow the Vichy authorities (3).

On August 3, 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill approved the Free French project to establish themselves in West Africa. Besides the strategic and political advantages the capture of Dakar would bring to de Gaulle and Britain, Winston Churchill was very much interested in the Belgian and Polish « gold wrongfully held in the interior and the great battleship Richelieu, by no means permanently disabled » (4) and stationed in Dakar. The British view which was finally adopted provided that after

consolidating themselves in this area, the Free French would move northward to rally to their cause the French colonies of North Africa.

From August 7, 1940, the British became more and more committed to the operation. The Prime Minister and the Chiefs of Staff agreed that the expedition should have enough British backing to ensure its success. The Inter-Service Planning Staff produced a plan along the lines defined by the Prime Minister's instructions providing for the participation of ample British naval and air forces. The plan provided for « separate landings at dawn on six beaches on the North, West and South shores of the Cape Verde Peninsula and on Gorée Island with a view to surprising and confusing the defense. The landing parties were to be mainly British, with Free French elements to proclaim their friendly intentions » (5).

However, the execution of the operation was going to suffer from a succession of nine postponements taking it from August 28 to September 1940. On August 17, Vice-Admiral J.H.D. Cunningham Commander of 'Menace' and R.H. Haining, Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff, on the basis of weather, material and intelligence ground went as far as to propose that the operation should be postponed to 10th/11th October. The Prime Minister, on the other hand, judging that time was an essential factor for the success of the operation had used much of his influence and authority to speed up the procedures for an early date of the execution of the operation. The plan for the attack of Dakar suffered a further setback when General de Gaulle expressed his reluctance to be a party in 'Menace' if it were meant -to be a deliberate assault on his countrymen. These delays and hesitations brought forward the possibility of an alternative operation against Conakry, Guinea.

In comparison with 'Menace', such an operation was thought to be relatively simple and could be carried out without delay (6). But the Prime Minister was determined not to let 'Menace' down. On August 27, The War Cabinet gave their approval to the plan drawn up by Vice-Admiral Cunningham, Major General N.M.S. Irwin and Major General E.L. Spears. The objectives remained as previously defined but the new plan insisted 'Menace' « should, if at all possible, be carried out without bloodshed... » (7).

Finally, on August 26, 1940, the French material and store ships, with their escort, sailed from Liverpool in a convoy for Sierra Leone. They were soon followed by the remainder of the British and French ships taking part in the operation.

It was on the way that the Commanders and their staff started to work out the detailed plans of the operation in order to have them ready for distribution at Free Town. However shortage of staff and printing material together with the problem of coordination between the British Joint Commanders and de Gaulle delayed the planning. Consequently, 'Menace' underwent its sixth postponement. By then, the British learnt that some Vichy France warships had left Toulon and were to pose a serious threat to 'Menace' if they were permitted to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar. Warnings against the Vichy move came in from three different sources, and reached among others, Admiral D. North at Gibraltar, the Foreign Office, the Admiralty, 'Force H' stationed in the Mediterranean but no action was taken to prevent the passage of the French convoy through Gibraltar. On the contrary, the War Cabinet which was meeting on September 11 decided that the French convoy should be allowed to reach Casablanca but prevented from going to Dakar if it desired to do so. But once the French ships had crossed Gibraltar, it proved impossible to prevent them from

interfering with 'Menace.' When London learnt that the French warships were in fact heading for Dakar they decided to stop them even if that meant a further postponement of 'Menace.' The task of stopping the French warships was left to Admiral Cunningham who deployed his naval force at full speed with the aim of intercepting the French vessels but by then it was too late. Indeed the convoy was nearing Dakar, which it reached on September, 14.

At their meeting of September 16, the War Cabinet concluded that operation 'Menace' should be called off and to this effect sent a message to the Joint Commander of 'Menace' giving them new instructions on the basis of the last developments. The message suggested that as an alternative, de Gaulle's forces should land at Duala to consolidate the Free French in Cameroon, Equatorial Africa and the Chad. The British forces, the message suggested, should, for the moment, remain at Freetown. But the idea of abandoning 'Menace' infuriated de Gaulle who, for the sake of keeping this option alive proposed a plan of action in which his forces would attack Dakar from the interior with British naval and air cover (8). Finally, the War Cabinet softened their instructions leaving it to the Joint Commanders, on the spot, to go ahead and do what they thought was best in order to give effect to the original purpose of the operation. However, D day was once more postponed to allow de Gaulle's agents in Dakar to carry out some propaganda work and by doing so allow more time for the planners to finalize the plan for operation 'Charles,' the contingency alternative to 'Menace.'

On D day, September 23, the Anglo-Free French forces took position off Dakar and a peaceful approach was initiated by the Free French who sent naval and air officers in an attempt to convince the Vichy forces at Dakar to join them. This approach was made in conjunction with leaflets dropping on Dakar and a radio broadcast by de Gaulle. This approach was however met by fire from Dakar, which indicated that the Vichy forces were prepared to resist any landing attempt. The intention of the Vichy forces to resist was further emphasized in a message from General Boisson, the French High Commissioner in West Africa (9).

In such conditions, aggravated by bad visibility, fire from the Anglo-Free French forces was to no avail. If they were to advance further to distinguish their targets, they would put themselves within a convenient range of the French warships and forts batteries. So, it was decided that the Anglo-Free French forces should withdraw and prepare to undertake operation 'Charles'; but following a mess in communications between the Joint Commanders and de Gaulle, the former decided to call off operation 'Charles'. The de Gaulle's forces were in the meanwhile heading for Rufisque, their target, unaware of the cancellation of the operation. Their attempt was repelled by fire (10).

From London, the Prime Minister urged the Joint Commanders to « go on to the end. Stop at nothing » (11). Practically, this meant that they had to make new attempts to seize Dakar the next day (September 24), with full knowledge that Boisson, the Governor General, would put all his forces in the battle to repulse the landing forces.

On September 24, visibility was still very poor. This prevented the British forces from operating from a long range position. The British battleships were redeployed to allow a short-range bombardment of Gorée Island, Fort Manuel and the battleship Richelieu. But again the Vichy forces opposed a determined resistance and an accurate firing from behind smoke screens. At 13:25, the British battleship Barham was

seriously hit. Air force strikes operated by aircraft from Ark Royal were repelled with heavy losses. In their report to the Admiralty, the Joint Commanders indicated that the: "reduction of the defenses and neutralization of French battleship Richelieu and French cruisers present an impossible project for available forces in any weather while morale of defenses remains as high as at present" (12).

On the same day, the Richelieu guns were turned to the native quarters of the city killing hundreds of people among the natives who were demonstrating in favor of de Gaulle (13).

Despite their failure to achieve any significant gain on the second day, the Joint Commanders decided to give it a further try the next day. Another attempt was thought to be worthwhile now that information obtained from the crew of a French aircraft indicated that great damage was inflicted on some of the French vessels by British bombardments. In the poor visibility that prevailed at Dakar on September 24, it was difficult to verify the validity of this information, which later turned out to be incorrect. (14).

Thus on September 25, for the third consecutive day, the Anglo-Free French forces initiated a further attempt to capture Dakar. Visibility was good but communications and coordination between commanders remained very poor. Due to this weakness in coordination and communications, a surprise attack by fighters from Ark Royal on Ouakam airfield from where French aircrafts operated was ruled out. The British warships renewed their bombardments but the French replied heavily and accurately hitting badly the British battleship Resolution. With Resolution being crippled the combined operation against Dakar reached its final stage. Informed of the new development, the British Prime Minister decided to put an end to 'Menace' (15). The British naval forces taking part in 'Menace' were rapidly deployed to insure a good cover for Resolution, which was immediately withdrawn.

Thus was brought to an end the operation against Dakar, which delivered a severe blow to the Anglo- Free French forces. The reasons of their failure were numerous and could be summed up as follows:

Dakar had been in the minds of the British strategists from as early as mid-June 1940. The Chief of Staff considered it essential to deny it to the Axis Powers (15). However, in view of the increasing difficulties facing Great Britain, the Chiefs of Staff were not willing to engage in a distant and demanding operation. But in the Prime Minister's global strategy, Dakar and the western coast of Africa held a key position. For Churchill, it was essential to take hold of the French colonies of Northwest Africa and bring them into the war on the British side. General de Gaulle and his forces were, for reasons relating to the operational aspect of 'Menace', viewed as a key element and a convenient political force around which to rally the French colonies. However, the political issue in the operation was given too much importance because de Gaulle wanted, as a partner in the operation, full recognition. Indeed, if the operation needed Free French colors, the promotion of de Gaulle to full partnership in the operation created a series of problems ranging from leakage to a total chaos in communications and fighting coordination detrimental to 'Menace'. With so many quarters involved in the preparation of this operation, not to mention the numerous objections raised against it, it became difficult to guarantee hundred per cent the secrecy of 'Menace'.

In this matter, the Inter-Service Security Board quickly investigated and reported, on September 25 - when it became clear that operation 'Menace' was a total failure - that leakage had taken place through the Free French. According to the Inter Service Security Board, when purchasing a large quantity of tropical equipment at 'Simpson's', Piccadilly, de Gaulle remarked in public that his destination was West Africa. And Dakar became common talk among the Free French forces (17).

The early hesitations as to whether to carry out 'Menace' or not caused a great delay to the operation. As a matter of fact, the planning staff was yet busy trying to produce the detailed plans that were to be distributed at Free Town, while the Anglo-Free French forces were sailing off the coast of West Africa. Though the detailed plans were produced and distributed on time, the commanders were left with very little time to discuss them. And later de Gaulle did not have enough time for rehearsal of operation 'Charles', the alternative to 'Menace'.

On D-day, the poor visibility conditions worsened the communication problem between the British Joint Commanders and de Gaulle. The result being that on September 24, the Joint Commanders failing to get in touch with de Gaulle, called off operation 'Charles' while the French general was heading for the assigned objectives of the operation. When finally de Gaulle got the Joint Commanders' message calling for the cancellation of the operation, his forces had already been repulsed.

Furthermore, communications with London were also poor with the consequence that the Prime Minister and the Chief of Staff were not fully informed of the new developments in Dakar. Relying on the early optimistic assessment of the situation in Dakar and the early reports indicating strong support for de Gaulle, the Prime Minister kept urging the Joint Commanders for action. In this respect, it is worthwhile recalling that on August 28, 1940, an intelligence assessment of the state of feeling at Dakar was provided by the British agents who were on the spot. Their assessment, which came a day after the final approval of 'Menace', concluded that it was not wise to go ahead with the operation against Dakar. Furthermore, this assessment was made far before the arrival at Dakar of the powerful French vessels to reinforce the defense of West Africa against the de Gaullists' attempts to rally it to the Free French cause.

Later it was claimed that Pierre Boisson, the Governor General of West Africa and commander of Dakar was writing out his surrender when operation 'Menace' was called off. The agent who was member of the US mission in North Africa, told Whitehall that on September 25 1940, the day 'Menace' was called off, « the French garrison and ships were down to their last rounds of ammunition » (18). But in the light of the resistance the Vichy forces put in the battle, the Joint Commanders and de Gaulle did not distinguish any sign of weakness. Given the fact that the forces of Governor Boisson were well equipped and were recently reinforced with warships, ammunition and troops, it was highly unlikely that they had so quickly used up their ammunition. Professor A.J. Mader says « I find [this] story highly improbable... there is no reference to it anywhere in the British records » (19). There were speculations that Vichy France with her fleet and North Africa declare war on Great Britain. Paul Baudouin, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, described the attack on Dakar as « a deliberate outrage, out of pure greed and a desire to ruin the French Empire » (20). But despite the bitterness and the hostile tone of the rhetoric in Vichy, the French measured their reaction and limited it to some bombardments of Gibraltar on the September 24

and 25, 1940. This reaction worried the British Admiralty, which feared a chain reaction against the British in the Mediterranean and more particularly the reaction of Admiral René Godfroy, who was commanding the French squadron at Alexandria. It was only on September 28 that Admiral Cunningham was able to report to the Admiralty that the French Admiral had told him that even if Vichy were to declare war he had no intention of joining them. However, it was only on September 29 that Admiral Cunningham was able to resume his operational activities in the Eastern Mediterranean essentially aiming at rescuing Malta.

Dakar was a severe blow for the de Gaullists. Their image in Europe and America was tarnished; their recruitments in the colonies were negatively affected.

In Great Britain, there were questions about the wisdom of embarking the British forces in an operation that was not totally in British hands. In the Commons some MPs asked for full inquiry to determine responsibilities.

In the United States, the American authorities, which had maintained their relations with Vichy, were very critical of de Gaulle's 'troublesome' activities. The Free French general was singled out as being the prime responsible for the debacle at Dakar. For the Americans this intrusion in Western Africa had brought the war to the Western Hemisphere and meant that US vital interests were seriously menaced. This episode decided the US to initiate, through Vichy, a strategic move towards Northwest Africa with the aim of maintaining it in friendly hands. The first move the US made in this area was the reopening of their consulate at Dakar (21).

Following the failure of the attack against Dakar, in Syria, a group of Frenchmen called off a *coup d'état* it was organizing against the Vichy authorities in this country. (22)

In addition to all the aforesaid setbacks, the de Gaullists were yet more affected by the new attitude of the British authorities *vis-à-vis* their movement. Indeed, after Dakar, the British had discovered that « de Gaulle was unable to make good his assurances that the French colonies would break away from Vichy and rally to his standard if only the British would provide a favorable opportunity of lending him support » (23). Henceforth, the British, without abandoning totally de Gaulle and his movement, showed more interest in establishing high level contacts with Vichy France representatives. In Madrid, the British Ambassador Sir Samuel Hoare was in contact with the Vichy Ambassador de la Baume. In London, professor Louis Rougier, on behalf of Marshal Pétain, had talks with Prime Minister Winston Churchill on October 25, 1940 and with other British high-ranking officials who promised that « Britain might allow food shipments from North Africa to France and would agree not to allow de Gaulle to attack French colonies, on the understanding that no effort should be made by Vichy to reconquer the dissident colonies » (24). The Franco-British talks held while de Gaulle was still in Equatorial Africa, aimed essentially at reestablishing confidence between Britain and Vichy and at easing tension between them. Churchill was sounding out the possibility of finding a substitute for de Gaulle to bring North Africa into the war on the British side. The Frenchman in view for this role was General Maxime Weygand who had just been appointed, by Marshal Pétain, Delegate General for North Africa and who was said to enjoy respect in this area. Professor Rougier told Churchill that General Weygand was willing to enter the war with North Africa on the British side when conditions allow it. This prompted Churchill to write

directly to General Weygand to urge him to head a rebellion in North Africa (25). Thus Great Britain and Vichy France entered a new phase in their relations.

On the other hand, the United States Government was severely shocked by the Anglo-Free French attack against Dakar, which had revealed that the European war was slowly, but steadily creeping into the Western Hemisphere. This new development prompted the American authorities to act quickly in order to prevent that Northwest Africa become the next major theatre of war for the Europeans. The American apprehension, in this field, was shared by Pierre Boisson, the French Governor of West Africa, who was convinced that « if de Gaulle had succeeded, the German High Command would have been obliged to occupy parts in French North Africa and perhaps Gibraltar » (26). This appreciation shows the weakness of Vichy France and the fragility of the balance of power in this area. Had the coup against Dakar succeeded, France would have, willy-nilly, adopted a closer stand towards the Axis in the Mediterranean allowing them to use, at least, North Africa's port facilities.

But the first operation of Churchill's and de Gaulle's projected peripheral strategy which aimed at taking control of the French colonies of West and North Africa in order to use them as a spring board for future operations against the Axis in Europe failed; furthermore, this operation demonstrated that in naval operations of this magnitude, a long preparation and a high degree of integration of armed and naval forces was essential which the Anglo- Free French were unable to achieve in 1940.

Operation 'Menace' showed the difficulties and complexities of combined naval operations and demonstrated that the war could easily extend from Europe to the Western Hemisphere. This prompted the Anglo-Americans to initiate a more diplomatic approach towards Vichy and its representatives in North and West Africa. The United States being very much concerned by the security of the western hemisphere and having maintained good relations with Vichy was the designated actor for this part, pending the time when the Anglo-Americans could mount combined naval operations far beyond the capacity of French resistance to take control of North and West Africa.

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3. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol.V, London, 1983-1986, p. 719.
4. Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, their Finest Hour*, vol. II, Cassel and Co. Ltd., London, p.431. At the outbreak of the war, the French, Belgian and Polish gold were shipped to Dakar and after the attack, of the latter, it was taken to Kayes, Mali. Before the attack of Dakar, the Germans had pressed Vichy to hand them this gold. Belgian gold was taken to Germany.
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6. Ibid., p. 6.
7. Ibid., Annex 6, p. 31.
8. Churchill, op. cit., p. 429.
9. Great Britain Cabinet Office, « The Dakar Operation », op. cit., p. 18.
10. Bri. General Spears, at General de Gaulle's headquarters, reported however that at Rufisque the Free French forces landed with the help of native Senegalese but the operation was called off because (a) signal called off 'Charles', (b) bad visibility, (c) presence in vicinity of French cruisers and (d) inability to locate British support. (Ibid., Signal from Bri. General Spears to the Joint Commanders, Annex15, p. 36.)
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