

FRANCE

Situated at the crossroads of the great European migrations and first populated with Celts, France was civilized by the Romans and then conquered by Germanic tribes who gave the country its name. The history of France is linked to that of Christianity. In 1066, William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, invaded England and had himself crowned King, sowing the seeds of a family quarrel which set the two nations one against the other for a long time, with a bitterness equal to that of the conflicts between France and other neighbouring countries such as Spain, the Austria of the Hapsburgs and Prussia. It is only during the second half of the XXth century, after two world wars, that the European Union put an end to those deadly feuds.

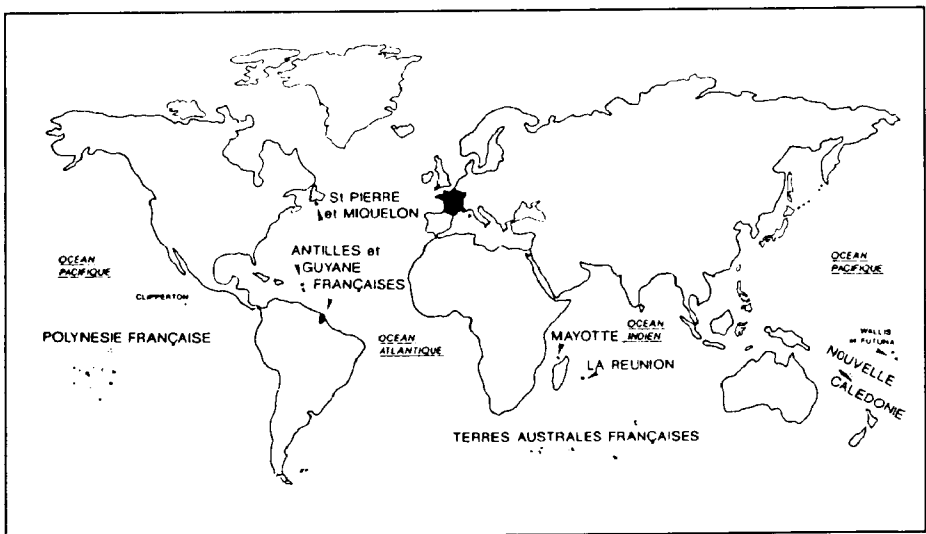


FIG. 1.- France.

"I am the State" would already declare the Sun King (Louis XIV). In 1789, the "spirit of system" which had animated the Kings of France since the Middle Ages found its accomplishment through the great Revolution, which gave the country the means to apply the reforms required for the advent of a strong and modern centralized State. France's influence in the sphere of ideas and action is illustrated

by such dissimilar personalities as JOAN OF ARC, CALVIN, DESCARTES, NAPOLEON, PASTEUR, Dr. SCHWEITZER or DE GAULLE. The geographical variety of the country is every bit equal to the diversity of more than 55 million inhabitants: from the mists of the Rhine Valley to the palm trees of the Côte d'Azur, from the plain of Flanders to the 4,800 metres of Mont-Blanc, from the desert of Aubrac or the Gaelic borders of Cornouaille to the hustle and bustle of Paris - only to mention the continental area - France, a country of contrasts and ancient traditions, possesses a spirit that is much harder than one might think.



FIG. 2.- Oceanographic Vessel D'ENTRECASTEAUX.

Although on an atlas France appears to be mainly a maritime country, with access to the North Sea, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, having 5,500 km of coastline, overseas departments and territories and an EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) of 11 million km², historical tradition has always favoured continental strategies, Nevertheless France was also the cradle of well-known explorers (Jacques CARTIER, BOUGAINVILLE, LAPÉROUSE, DUMONT D'URVILLE, etc) and she has always been present on the seas. She can take pride in creating the first Hydrographic Office when setting up the "Dépôt des Cartes" in 1720 and moreover in giving a "Father" to hydrography with BEAUTEMPS-BEAUPRÉ himself. The French Navy, which is still proud to have contributed, during the XVIIIth century, to the birth of the young United States of America, has been able to conquer its place (ranging fourth in the world), as an efficient tool in the service of the foreign policy of the country; it has been operating an autonomous component of the strategic nuclear force continuously since 1972. The merchant fleet, on the other hand, is in serious decline, from the eighth largest in the world in 1960 (4.9 M gross tons) to the 25th in 1995 (5.0 M gross tons). After a time of crisis followed by drastic restructuring, the markets for pleasure crafts and highly specialised vessels still keep alive a French shipbuilding industry.

The Naval Hydrographic and Oceanographic Service (SHOM)

Heir to the "Dépôt des cartes", SHOM carries out, under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence, double duties as both a civil and a military service.

The civil duties encompass nautical information and documentation for general purpose. To fulfil these duties, SHOM provides mariners with a collection of more than 60 publications (Sailing Directions, Lists of Lights, Tide Tables, etc.), a portfolio of 1 300 nautical charts and weekly Notices to Mariners.

Defence duties correspond to military oceanography, which designates military applications of the knowledge of the ocean environment. SHOM Military Centre of Oceanography was created in 1990 to develop these applications.

To fulfil its tasks, SHOM is structured as follows:

- a head office situated in Paris (about 25 persons), which supervises and coordinates the activities of SHOM other branches and carries out a large share of external relations.
- an establishment, SHOM Main Establishment (EPSHOM - about 450 persons), located in Brest, with two sub-branches in Toulouse and Lannion. It is both a centre for information processing, production and distribution of documents and products, research activities and support and training (Hydrographic School). The sub-branches in Toulouse (SHOM/Météo France Research and Study Bureau - BRESM - and Navy Environment Operational Unit - CELENV) and Lannion devote themselves on the one hand to research in satellite oceanography and on the other hand to exploitation and distribution of operational information in aid of forces at sea.
- the hydro-oceanographic missions, responsible for carrying out surveys at sea, are three in numbers:
 - The Atlantic Oceanographic Mission (MOA), based in Brest, has the use of oceanographic vessel D'ENTRECASTEAUX (2 200 t) and first class survey vessel L'ESPERANCE (1 200 t). MOA has a small sub-branch in Toulon with part-time assistance of regional support vessel GAZELLE (400 t).
 - The Atlantic Hydrographic Mission (MHA), also based in Brest, utilizes second class survey vessels (SV2) BORDA and LAPEROUSE (900 t).
 - The Pacific Oceanographic Mission (MOP), divided between New Caledonia and French Polynesia, has the use of SV2 LAPLACE and ARAGO (900 t).

Besides its operational activities, SHOM sustains a continuous effort in "research and development", in order to improve the quality of the services provided to military and civilian users, through adapting new technologies and scientific

progress. This effort concerns for instance the use of multibeam sounders in hydrographic surveys, computer assisted cartographic production of digital data sets for "electronic charts" and the exploitation of Earth remote sensing satellites in hydrography as well as in oceanography.

SHOM plays an active part on the international scene. Member of many regional hydrographic commissions, it participates also in most IHO working groups and committees. It contributes to the influence of the French-speaking community and endeavours to support various bilateral or multilateral cooperation programmes with developing countries (training, technical assistance, expertise).