



French submarine *Surcouf*

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Coordinates: 10°40′N 79°32′W﻿ / ﻿

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Surcouf [syʁ.kuf] was a large French gun-armed [cruiser submarine](#) of the mid 20th century. She carried two 203 mm guns as well as anti-aircraft guns and (for most of her career) a floatplane. *Surcouf* served in the [French Navy](#) and, later, the [Free French Naval Forces](#) during the [Second World War](#).

Surcouf disappeared during the night of 18/19 February 1942 in the [Caribbean Sea](#), possibly after colliding with the US freighter *Thompson Lykes*, although this has not been definitely established. She was named after the French privateer and shipowner [Robert Surcouf](#). She was the largest submarine built until surpassed by the first Japanese [I-400 class](#) aircraft carrier submarine in 1944.

Design [[edit](#)]

The [Washington Naval Treaty](#) had placed strict limits on naval construction by the major naval powers in regard to displacements and artillery calibers of battleships and cruisers. However, no agreements were reached in respect of light ships such as frigates, destroyers or submarines. In addition, to ensure the country's protection and that of the empire, France started the construction of an important [submarine fleet](#) (79 units in



Surcouf c. 1935

History



France

Name	<i>Surcouf</i>
Namesake	Robert Surcouf
Ordered	4 August 1926
Builder	Cherbourg Arsenal
Laid down	1 July 1927
Launched	18 November 1929
Commissioned	16 April 1934
In service	1934–1942
Refit	1941
Identification	Pennant number : N N 3 Designation number: 17P ^[1]
Honors & awards	Resistance Medal with <i>rosette</i>
Fate	Disappeared, 18 February 1942

General characteristics

Type	Cruiser submarine
Displacement	3,250 long tons (3,302 t) (surfaced) 4,304 long tons (4,373 t) (submerged)

1939). *Surcouf* was intended to be the first of a class of three submarine cruisers; however, she was the only one completed.

The missions revolved around:

- Ensuring contact with the [French colonies](#);
- In collaboration with French naval squadrons, searching for and destroying enemy fleets;
- Pursuing enemy convoys.

Surcouf had a twin-gun turret with [203 mm \(8-inch\) guns](#), the same calibre as the guns of a [heavy cruiser](#), provisioned with 60 rounds. She was designed as an "underwater heavy cruiser", intended to seek out and engage in surface combat.^[2] The boat carried a [Besson MB.411](#) observation [floatplane](#) in a hangar built aft of the [conning tower](#) for reconnaissance and [observing fall of shot](#).

The boat was equipped with ten [torpedo tubes](#): four 550 mm (22 in) tubes in the bow, and two swiveling external launchers in the aft superstructure, each with one 550 mm and two 400 mm (16 in) [torpedo](#) tubes. Eight 550 mm and four 400 mm reloads were carried.^[3] The 203 *Modèle 1924* guns were in a pressure-tight turret forward of the conning tower. The guns had a 60-round magazine capacity and were controlled by a [director](#) with a 5 m (16 ft) rangefinder, mounted high enough to view an 11 [km](#) (5.9 [nmi](#); 6.8 [mi](#)) horizon, and able to fire within three minutes after surfacing.^[4] Using the boat's periscopes to direct the fire of the main guns, *Surcouf* could increase the visible range to 16 km (8.6 [nmi](#); 9.9 [mi](#)); originally an elevating platform was supposed to lift lookouts 15 m (49 ft) high, but this design was abandoned quickly due to the effect of [roll](#).^[5] The Besson observation plane could be used to direct fire out to the guns' 26 [mi](#) (23 [nmi](#); 42 [km](#)) maximum range. Anti-aircraft cannon and machine guns were mounted on the top of the hangar.

Surcouf also carried a 4.5 m (14 ft 9 in) motorboat, and contained a cargo compartment with fittings to restrain 40 prisoners or lodge 40 passengers. The submarine's fuel tanks were very large; having enough fuel for a 10,000 [nmi](#) (19,000 [km](#); 12,000 [mi](#)) range and supplies for 90-day patrols.

	2,880 long tons (2,926 t) (dead)
Length	110 m (361 ft)
Beam	9 m (29 ft 6 in)
Draft	7.25 m (23 ft 9 in)
Installed power	7,600 hp (5,700 kW) (surfaced) 3,400 hp (2,500 kW) (submerged)
Propulsion	2 × Sulzer diesel engines (surfaced) 2 × Electric motors (submerged) 2 × Propellers
Speed	18.5 knots (34.3 km/h; 21.3 mph) (surfaced) 10 kn (19 km/h; 12 mph) (submerged)
Range	<i>Surfaced:</i> 18,500 km (10,000 nmi ; 11,500 mi) at 10 kn (19 km/h; 12 mph) 12,600 km (6,800 nmi ; 7,800 mi) at 13.5 kn (25.0 km/h; 15.5 mph) <i>Submerged:</i> 130 km (70 nmi ; 81 mi) at 4.5 kn (8.3 km/h; 5.2 mph) 110 km (59 nmi ; 68 mi) at 5 kn (9.3 km/h; 5.8 mph)
Endurance	90 days
Test depth	80 m (260 ft)
Boats & landing craft carried	2 × motorboats in watertight deck well
Capacity	280 long tons (284 t)
Complement	8 officers and 110 men
Armament	2 × 203 mm (8 in) guns (1 × 2) 2 × 37 mm (1.5 in) anti-aircraft guns (2 × 1) 4 × 13.2 mm (0.52 in) anti-aircraft machine guns (2 × 2) 6 × 550 mm (22 in) torpedo tubes 4 × 400 mm (16 in) torpedo tubes
Aircraft carried	1 × Besson MB.411 floatplane
Aviation facilities	Hangar

The test depth was 80 m (260 ft).

The first commanding officer was **Frigate Captain** (*Capitaine de Frégate*, a rank equivalent to **Commander**) Raymond de Belot.

The boat encountered several technical challenges:

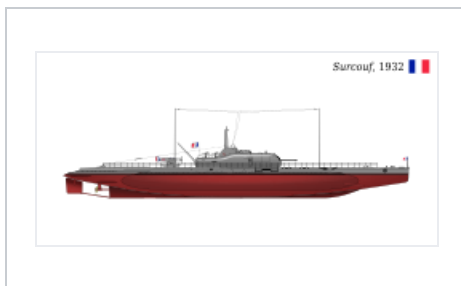
- Because of the low height of the rangefinder above the water surface, the practical range of fire was 12,000 m (13,000 yd) with the rangefinder, increased to 16,000 m (17,000 yd) with sighting aided by periscope, well below the guns' maximum range of 26,000 m (28,000 yd).
- The duration between the surface order and the first firing round was 3 minutes and 35 seconds. This duration would be longer if the boat was to fire **broadside**, which meant surfacing and **training** the turret in the desired direction.
- Firing had to occur at a precise moment of pitch and roll when the ship was level.
- Training the turret to either side was impossible when the ship rolled 8° or more.
- *Surcouf* could not fire accurately at night, as fall of shot could not be observed in the dark.
- The guns' ready **magazines** had to be reloaded after firing 14 rounds from each gun.

To replace the floatplane, whose functioning was initially constrained and limited in use, trials were conducted with an **autogyro** in 1938.

Appearance [[edit](#)]

'From the beginning of the boat's career until 1932, the boat was painted the same grey colour as surface warships, but thereafter in **Prussian dark blue**, a colour which was retained until the end of 1940 when it was repainted with two tones of grey, serving as camouflage on the hull and conning tower.

Successive configurations of *Surcouf*



Original configuration, 1932



1934 configuration, with **Prussian blue** paintwork



1938 configuration: radio mast removed and different conning tower



1940 configuration, with two-tone gray paint and 17P identification number on the conning tower

Career [\[edit \]](#)

Early career [\[edit \]](#)

Soon after *Surcouf* was launched, the [London Naval Treaty](#) finally placed restrictions on submarine designs. Among other things, each signatory (France included) was permitted to possess no more than three large submarines, each not exceeding 2,800 long tons (2,845 t) standard displacement, with guns not exceeding 6.1 in (150 mm) in caliber. *Surcouf*, which would have exceeded these limits, was specially exempt from the rules at the insistence of Navy Minister [Georges Leygues](#),^[4] but other 'big-gun' submarines of this boat's class could no longer be built.



Second World War [\[edit \]](#)

In 1940, *Surcouf* was based in [Cherbourg](#), but in May, when the Germans invaded, she was being refitted in [Brest](#) following a mission in the [Antilles](#) and [Gulf of Guinea](#). Under command of Frigate Captain Martin, unable to dive and with only one engine functioning and a jammed rudder, she limped across the [English Channel](#) and sought refuge in [Plymouth](#).

On 3 July, the British, concerned that the French Fleet would be taken over by the German *Kriegsmarine* at the French armistice, executed [Operation Catapult](#). The [Royal Navy](#) blockaded the harbours where French warships were anchored, and delivered an ultimatum: rejoin the fight against Germany, be put out of reach of the Germans, or scuttle. Few accepted willingly; the North African fleet at [Mers-el-Kebir](#) and the [ships based at Dakar](#) (French West Africa) refused. The French battleships in North Africa were eventually attacked and all but one sunk at their moorings by the [Mediterranean Fleet](#).

French ships lying at ports in Britain and Canada were also boarded by armed marines, sailors and soldiers, but the only serious incident took place at [Plymouth](#) aboard *Surcouf* on 3 July, when two Royal Navy submarine officers, [Commander](#) Denis 'Lofty' Sprague, captain of [HMS Thames](#), and [Lieutenant](#) Patrick Griffiths of [HMS Rorqual](#),^{[6][7]} and French warrant officer mechanic Yves Daniel^[8] were fatally wounded, and a British seaman, Albert Webb,^[6] was shot dead by the submarine's doctor.^[9]

Free French Naval Forces [\[edit \]](#)

Seizure of <i>Surcouf</i>	
Part of World War II	
Date	3 July 1940
Location	Plymouth , England , United Kingdom
Result	British capture of <i>Surcouf</i>
Belligerents	
 United Kingdom	 France
Casualties and losses	
3 killed	1 killed

By August 1940, the British completed *Surcouf*'s refit and turned her over to the [Free French Naval Forces](#) (*Forces Navales Françaises Libres*, FNFL) for convoy patrol. The only officer not repatriated from the original crew, Frigate Captain Georges Louis Blaison, became the new commanding officer. Because of Anglo-French tensions with regard to the submarine, accusations were made by each side that the other was spying for [Vichy France](#); the British also claimed *Surcouf* was attacking British ships. Later, a British officer and two sailors were put aboard for "liaison" purposes. One real drawback was she required a crew of 110–130 men, which represented three crews of more conventional submarines. This led to Royal Navy reluctance to recommission her.

Surcouf then went to the Canadian base at [Halifax, Nova Scotia](#) and escorted trans-Atlantic convoys. In April 1941, she was damaged by a German plane at Devonport.^[8]

On 28 July, *Surcouf* went to the [United States Naval Shipyard](#) at Kittery, Maine for a three-month refit.^[4]

After leaving the shipyard, *Surcouf* went to [New London, Connecticut](#), perhaps to receive additional training for her crew. *Surcouf* left New London on 27 November to return to Halifax.

Capture of St. Pierre and Miquelon [[edit](#)]

Main article: [Capture of Saint Pierre and Miquelon](#)

In December 1941, *Surcouf* carried the Free French Admiral [Émile Muselier](#) to Canada, putting into [Quebec City](#). While the Admiral was in [Ottawa](#), conferring with the Canadian government, *Surcouf*'s captain was approached by *The New York Times* reporter [Ira Wolfert](#) and questioned about the rumours the submarine would liberate [Saint-Pierre and Miquelon](#) for Free France. Wolfert accompanied the submarine to Halifax, where, on 20 December, they joined Free French "[Escorteurs](#)" *corvettes* *Mimosa*, *Aconit*, and *Alysse*, and on 24 December, [took control](#) of the islands for Free France without resistance.



French postage stamp celebrating the capture of Saint Pierre and Miquelon (1961).

[United States Secretary of State Cordell Hull](#) had just concluded an agreement with the Vichy government guaranteeing the neutrality of French possessions in the Western hemisphere, and he threatened to resign unless President of the United States [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) demanded a restoration of the status quo. Roosevelt did so, but when [Charles de Gaulle](#) refused, Roosevelt dropped the matter. Ira Wolfert's stories – very favourable to the Free French (and bearing no sign of kidnapping or other duress) – helped swing American popular opinion away from Vichy. The Axis Powers' [declaration of war on the United States](#) in December 1941 negated the agreement, but the U.S. did not sever diplomatic ties with the Vichy Government until November 1942.

Later operations [[edit](#)]

In January 1942, the Free French leadership decided to send *Surcouf* to the [Pacific theatre](#), after she had been re-supplied at the [Royal Naval Dockyard](#) in [Bermuda](#). However, her movement south triggered rumours that *Surcouf* was going to liberate [Martinique](#) from the Vichy regime.

In fact, *Surcouf* was bound for [Sydney](#), Australia, via Tahiti.^[4] She departed Halifax on 2 February for Bermuda, which she left on 12 February, bound for the [Panama Canal](#).^[8]

Fate [[edit](#)]

Surcouf vanished on the night of 18/19 February 1942, about 130 km (70 nmi) north of [Cristóbal](#), [Panama](#), while *en route* for [Tahiti](#), via the [Panama Canal](#). An American report concluded the disappearance was due to an accidental collision with the American freighter *Thompson Lykes*. Steaming alone from [Guantanamo Bay](#) on what was a very dark night, the freighter reported hitting and running down a partially submerged object which scraped along her side and keel. Her lookouts heard people in the water but, thinking she had hit a U-boat, the freighter did not stop although cries for help were heard in English. A signal was sent to Panama describing the incident.^{[10][11]}

The loss resulted in 130 deaths (including 4 Royal Navy personnel), under the command of Frigate Captain Georges Louis Nicolas Blaison.^[12] The loss of *Surcouf* was announced by the Free French Headquarters in London on 18 April 1942, and was reported in *The New York Times* the next day.^[13] It was not reported *Surcouf* was sunk as the result of a collision with the *Thompson Lykes* until January 1945.^[14]

The investigation of the French commission concluded the disappearance was the consequence of misunderstanding. A [Consolidated PB](#), patrolling the same waters on the night of 18/19 February, could have attacked *Surcouf* believing her to be German or Japanese.

Inquiries into the incident were haphazard and late, while a later French inquiry supported the idea that the sinking had been due to "friendly fire"; this conclusion was supported by Rear Admiral [Gabriel Auphan](#) in his book *The French Navy in World War II*.^[15] Charles de Gaulle stated in his memoirs^[16] that *Surcouf* "had sunk with all hands".

Legacy [[edit](#)]

As no one has officially dived or verified the wreck of *Surcouf*, her location is unknown. If one assumes the *Thompson Lykes* incident was indeed the event of *Surcouf*'s sinking, then the wreck would lie 3,000 m (9,800 ft) deep at [10°40'N 79°32'W](#).^[4]

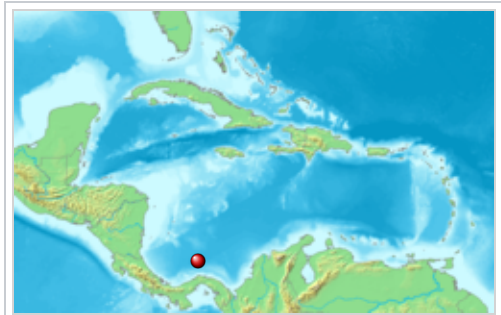


The Free French Memorial on [Lyle Hill](#), [Greenock](#): À la mémoire du Capitaine de frégate Blaison, des officiers et de l'équipage du sous-marin *Surcouf* perdu dans l'Atlantique Février 1942 ("To the memory of Frigate Captain Blaison, the officers[,] and the crew of the submarine *Surcouf*[,] lost in the Atlantic February 1942").

A monument commemorates the loss in the port of [Cherbourg](#) in Normandy, France.^[17] The loss is also commemorated by the Free French Memorial on [Lyle Hill](#) in Greenock, Scotland.^[18]

As there is no conclusive confirmation that *Thompson Lykes* collided with *Surcouf*, and her wreck has yet to be discovered, there are alternative stories of her fate. [James Rusbridger](#) examined some of these theories in his book *Who Sank Surcouf?*, finding them all easily dismissible except one: the records of the [6th Heavy Bomber Group](#) operating out of Panama show them sinking a large submarine the morning of 19 February. Since no German submarine was lost in the area on that date, she could have been *Surcouf*. He suggested the collision had damaged *Surcouf*'s radio and the stricken boat limped towards Panama hoping for the best.^[19]

A conspiracy theory, based on no significant evidence, held that the *Surcouf*, during her stationing at New London in late 1941, had been caught treacherously supplying a German U-boat in Long Island Sound, pursued by the American training subs [Marlin](#) and [Mackerel](#) out of New London, and sunk. The rumor circulated into the early 21st century, but is false since the *Surcouf*'s later movements south are well documented.^[20]



Possible site of the *Surcouf*'s sinking, if she collided with the *Thompson Lykes*.



Model of *Surcouf* in Paris.

In popular media [[edit](#)]

The *Surcouf* is the subject of an underwater search by the fictional organization *NUMA* and international terrorists in the [Clive Cussler](#) novel "The Corsican Shadow", published in 2023. Cussler and his co-writer, Dirk Cussler, writes the *Surcouf*'s wreck was discovered "...some eighty miles off the Panama coast." The sinking is even attributed to *Surcouf*'s radio antenna being damaged in the collision with the *Thompson Lykes*, and then finished off by the reported attack of an A-17 bomber the next morning.

[Douglas Reeman](#) wrote "Strike from the Sea", a novel published in 1978, about a French cruiser submarine named "Soufriere", modeled on the *Surcouf*.

Honors [[edit](#)]

- *Médaille de la Résistance avec Rosette* ([Resistance Medal](#) with rosette) - 29 November 1946
- Cited in Orders of Corps of the Army - 4 August 1945
- Cited in Orders of the Navy - 8 January 1947^[21]

See also [[edit](#)]

- [French submarines of World War II](#)
- [Fusiliers Marins](#)

- [Georges Cabanier](#)
- [HM Submarine X1](#)
- [HMS M2 \(1918\)](#)
- Japanese *I-400*-class submarine
- [USS Dorado \(SS-248\)](#) a US submarine sunk in the same area under similar circumstances
- [List of submarines of France](#)
- [Submarine aircraft carrier](#)


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- ↑ **a** **b** **c** **d** **e** [Croiseur sous-marin Surcouf](#) , netmarine
- ↑ [Sous-marin croiseur Surcouf: Caractéristiques principales](#)
- ↑ **a** **b** Smith, Colin (24 June 2010). *England's last war against France: Fighting Vichy 1940–42* (paperback ed.). Phoenix. Chapter 4. [ISBN 978-0-7538-2705-5](#).
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External links [\[edit \]](#)

- [NN3 Specs](#) (in French)
- [Surcouf and M.B.411](#)
- [War History Online](#)
- [\[1\]](#) Roll of Honor



Wikimedia Commons has media related to [Surcouf \(submarine, 1934\)](#).

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V • T • E	Shipwrecks and maritime incidents in July 1940	[show]
V • T • E	Shipwrecks and maritime incidents in February 1942	[show]

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