

IRONCLADS IN ACTION.

CHAPTER XVI.

(pages 1-4)

FRENCH NAVAL OPERATIONS IN TUNIS AND THE EAST, 1881 - 1884-5

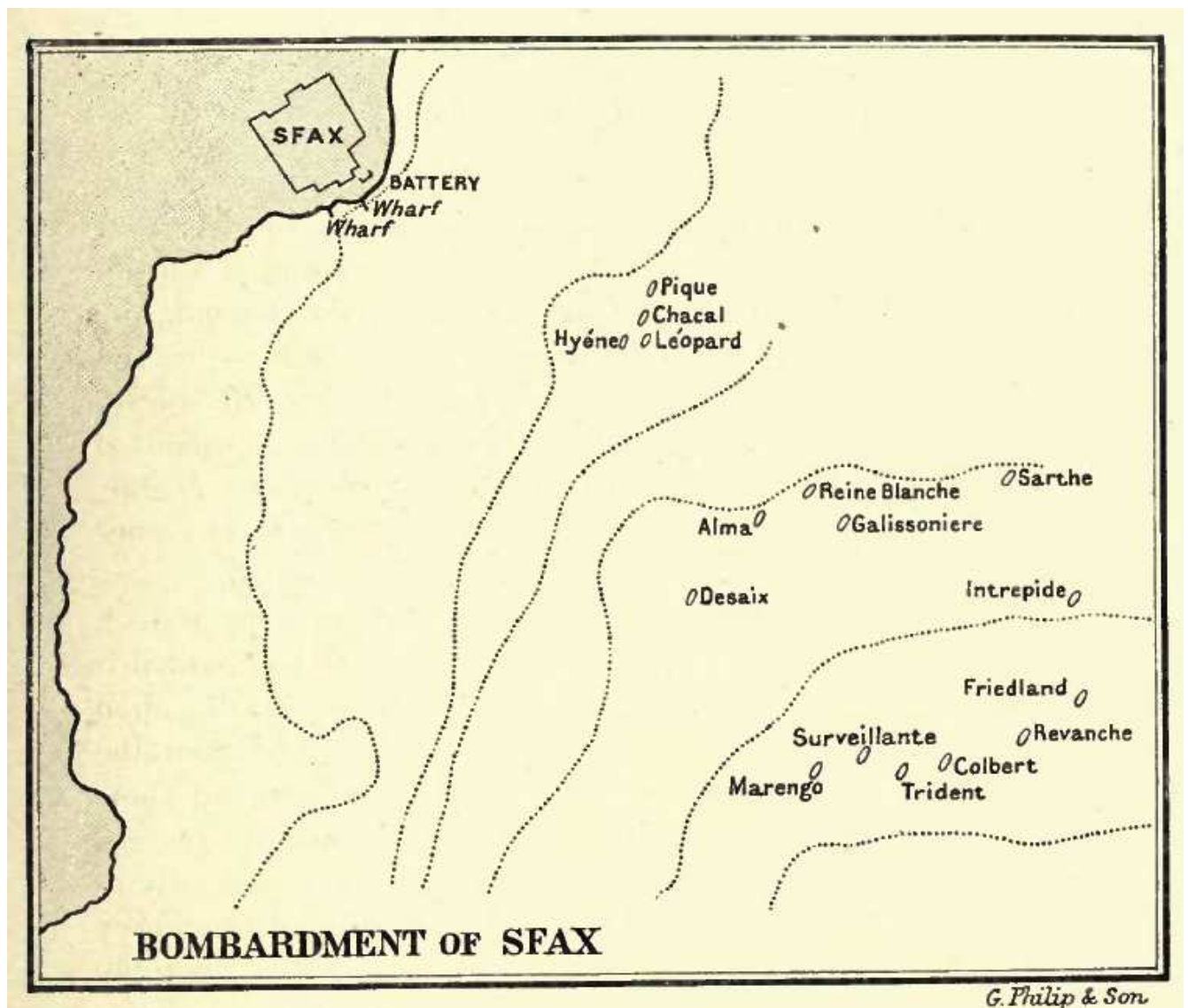
IN 1881, difficulty with the Khroumirs, a Tunisian tribe on the Algerian frontier, and the fact that the Bey of Tunis was in secret abetting them, led France to take vigorous measures against Tunis. In the last week of April the army on land commenced operations whilst the fleet supported it. On April 25th, Tabarka, an island on the coast of Tunis, which was protected by an antiquated castle, was bombarded by the gunboat Hyene, supported by the Surveillante, Tourville, Chacal and Leopard. A very feeble resistance was offered by the Arabs, and next day a detachment of troops landed and occupied the place. A week later Bizerta was seized to serve as a base for the French operations. On May 7th, Beja was captured, and it was supposed in France that the war was over. A few days later the Bey practically accepted the protection of France, and about the middle of June the French army was recalled. But as a matter of fact the Arab population was by no means ready to submit to France. Fostered by Mussulman agitators, an insurrection against the Bey, who was accused of selling his country, broke out in the south. Sfax was seized and occupied by the insurgents, and the foreign residents in the country were in grave danger.

The French did not quietly acquiesce in these proceedings, On the contrary, as might be expected, they at once made preparations to re-conquer Tunis. For operations on the coast they had a formidable squadron ready in the Mediterranean under Vice-Admiral Garnault and Rear-Admiral Martin. The first had for his flagship the Colbert, the second, the Trident. The other ironclads of the squadron were the Galissoniere, Friedland, Marengo, Surveillante, Revanche, Alma, and Reine Blanche. With these were the unarmoured vessels Tourville, Hironnelle, Desaix, Voltigeur, Hyene, Chacal, Leopard, and Gladiateur. To the force thus constituted the Intrepide, Sarthe, and Pique were added.

On July 5th, the Reine Blanche and Chacal appeared off Sfax, and the latter reconnoitred the place, and bombarded at a range of 5000 yards, directing her fire especially upon the water battery, which was some little distance from the town wall, and making a breach in it. Only eighteen shots were fired in reply. Next day two more formidable vessels, the Reine Blanche and Alma, opened upon the town, early in the morning. They continued to shell it till midday when they were joined by the gunboats Pique and Chacal. As the reply of the Tunisians was exceedingly feeble and ill-directed, the gunboats ventured in to 2400 yards ; in the evening the Hyene arrived. This day the batteries only fired thirteen shots. On the 7th, the

Reine Blanche and Alma resumed their slow bombardment of the town, assisted by the Hyene and Chacal. A lighter, mounting one r 4-centimetre smooth-bore, was also employed, and was of great value, since it drew very little water and could therefore be taken close in to the town. The depth of water in the Bay of Sfax was indeed the chief difficulty which the French had to face, as it prevented their heavier and more powerful ships from playing that part in the operations which would have been expected from vessels of their size and strength.

On July 8th, a boat attack was made upon the place. The boats approached within 1000 yards of the land and opened a vigorous fire upon the Arab trenches and lines. They were supported by the Chacal and Hyene. After this some days of inaction followed, during which the two ironclads shelled the town from time to time.



On July 14th, the rest of the French squadron arrived, and on the following day the bombardment was resumed with increased vigour. The attack was delivered by the ironclads, gunboats, and boats of the

squadron. The ironclads anchored according to their draught at a mean distance of 6500 yards from the town. They were in, two groups : in the first, furthest out, were the Marengo, Surveillante, Colbert,

Revanche and Friedland ; in the second, the Alma, Reine Blanche and Galissoniere, with the unarmoured cruisers Desaix, Sarthe and Intrepide. Nearer in, at a distance of 2200 yards, were the gunboats. Finally, the boats of the squadron, armed with Gatlings and machine-guns, moved to .and fro only 500 yards from the shore. The boats were supported by two lighters on one of which was a 1 6-centimetre rifle, and on the other a 1 4-centimetre smooth-bore. The fire maintained by the ships was slow and steady, and did much damage to the town.

On the next day, the 16th, it was decided to effect a landing. The beach was of soft yielding mud and the shallowness of the water made approach difficult, but this was overcome by the construction of a temporary floating jetty. Six of the ironclads had been ordered each to prepare a raft of spars and topmasts on the evening of the 15th. When ready, these rafts were towed in separately by launches and fastened together as close to the shore as possible. The boats laden with men were to be ranged as near in as they could go by four o'clock in the morning, and, at a given signal from the gunboats, were to dash in and land the men on the jetty. There were eighteen boats in all, armed with four 12-centimetre and one 4-centimetre gun, besides thirteen various machine-guns. By daylight the preparations were completed, and at 4.30 a shot from the Colbert opened an unusually fierce bombardment.

The boats were massed 500 yards from the batteries and only waited the signal to dash in. The landing party numbered 3000 men, and was composed of 1600 sailors and 1400 soldiers. At three in the morning the raft was secured firmly inshore about 400 yards from the mole ; at six, the signal for the troops to land came, and they made for the shore with some little confusion. The Arabs, however, had been unable to hold the trenches under the fire of the ships and boats, and to add to their discomfiture a great quantity of esparto grass near their lines was set on fire by shells, and burnt fiercely. The French sailors and soldiers quickly carried the water-battery, and forced the gates of the town. The loss of the fleet was not heavy. In all it amounted to eleven killed and fifteen wounded.

The attack upon Sfax was well conceived and well executed, but, of course, little resistance could be offered by the Arabs to the powerful artillery of the French squadron. Here, even more than at Alexandria, the attacking force was so much stronger than the defence that the result of the fighting was bound to be very one-sided. No damage was done to any of the ships.

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A Sketch of Naval Warfare
FROM 1855 TO 1895
WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF THE
DEVELOPMENT OF THE BATTLESHIP IN
ENGLAND

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