

Mr Leslie Gordon Percival SHIERS FRCS

Interviewed by Malcolm McBain, on Tuesday, 4 February, 1997. Mr McBain interviewed Mr Shiers because he was present at the invasion of Madagascar in the Spring of 1942.

McB Mr Shiers, could you tell us something about your experiences at that time, perhaps starting off with the part you played in the assault on Tamatave.

S Yes, at that time I was an RNVR Surgeon Lieutenant in the light cruiser 'Dauntless' and she was a cruiser built prior to the First World War and her main armament was 4 six-inch guns. Now the initial assault on Madagascar was taken some months previously to capture the great harbour of Diego Suarez, a beautiful natural harbour, the biggest in the world, bigger than the great harbour at Sydney. And after the assault and the surrender of the French, the remainder of the island remained in Vichy hands and it was decided that the rest of the island should be taken.

Now we in 'Dauntless' had been swinging around a buoy in Diego Suarez harbour as guard ship for something like two months. Everybody was bored stiff so we were delighted when we were told there was going to be a second assault. Now in due course the fleet assembled off Tamatave, which is a port on the eastern side of Madagascar, nearer the north than the south. And amongst the ships were the great capital ships, 'Illustrious', the aircraft carrier, 'Warspite', the mighty warship, a number of Australian destroyers, the heavy cruiser 'Birmingham', 'Albatross' and ourselves in 'Dauntless' and a number of landing craft. Well at dawn, which came at about half past five, 'Illustrious' flew off aircraft and dropped leaflets on to the French saying that we had come as friends and would they please surrender to avoid any bloodshed. And a reply came from the Commanding Officer, whose name we've got, but I've forgotten it, saying his honour would not allow him to surrender. So we waited for half an hour, everybody closed up at action stations and made another signal 'would he please surrender' and back came the same reply in the negative. So the Admiral in Charge, Admiral Syfret, decided to send in an emissary under a white flag and the Captain of 'Dauntless', my Captain, Captain Hewitt, was chosen. And he came down to the Wardroom where I'd set out all my surgical instruments in case one had to treat the wounded there, and said 'What can we use for a white flag?' because the Royal Navy doesn't carry white flags. And I suggested the Ward Room tablecloth which was being used as an operating sheet. And so this was taken and strapped to a cross made of two oars which was put in the barge and the Captain went off to the shore, which was about two cables from where we were at anchor. And he'd got about half-way there, so about one cable off, when the French opened fire with a

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machine gun, which they had absolutely no right to do, they were firing on a white flag. The barge turned round immediately and headed back to the Fleet and without further orders the entire Fleet opened fire. We'd got off three or maybe four rounds when a Frenchman came rushing down the beach and clambered up a sort of tower, it was a sort of lighthouse with a circular stair around the outside, and I remember looking at this chap and he was about halfway up with this flag on a pole on his shoulder, when an Australian destroyer, the name of which escapes me, went creaming along the shore and let go with her after turret and blew the entire tower to smithereens. And that was the end of the action, cease fire straight away, and then the landing craft went in with the various troops. There was a slight hiccup because they went in on a falling tide and the landing craft were stranded on the beach and couldn't get back for more troops, but happily the French had surrendered so that was the end of the action. Later on we interviewed the French Supreme Commander and he'd been shot in the arm, a fragment had got him in his left arm, so he was able to surrender with honour and with dignity.

McB Now you mentioned to begin with that you had been present in Diego Suarez, the main harbour in the north, can you tell us why the capture of that harbour was so important to the British?

S Oh yes indeed. The Japanese were advancing rapidly, travelling westwards at frightening speed, and the Fleet had fallen back, we'd fallen back all the way to India and then back to Mombasa, on the East African coast, when it was decided at high level... Sir Winston Churchill realised that here was this great harbour in this offshore island, and if the Japanese could get there they could move their entire fleet there, and then they could get up to the north of Africa, join up with Rommel and really that would have been the end of the campaign and the end of the war. So it was decided to take Diego Suarez, which was brilliantly done by, really, fifty Royal Marines, because in the planning for the capture of this great harbour, which is two horns, rather like the Sydney heads, and the distance between the horns is one sea mile, and half the army were landed on the western arm, and the rest of the army at the capital, Antsirane, but when the army landed there to neutralise the guns on that cliff, they found most of them were rusty anyway, but nobody thought of putting boats at the base of the cliff to get the army back into the main action. So half the army sat on their bottoms at the top of this cliff and most of them got malaria, nasty malaria, malignant malaria, many of them died. Many of the casualties in Madagascar were due to the mosquito and not to the French. And the situation looked pretty tricky for something like twenty-four hours. And then it was suggested to Admiral Syfret that a diversion might be created

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by sending in a party of Royal Marines and fifty were taken from the battleship 'Ramillies' under the command of Martin Price, and the Second in Command was James Powell, Lieutenant Royal Marines, and they embarked in the destroyer, 'Anthony', which at great risk and incredible skill went into the harbour at twenty knots, full ahead stop both engines full astern to the amazement of the French. And the party was given orders to create a diversion, but not to attack the artillery base and the naval barracks. Immediately they landed they split into two parties, and James Powell, Lieutenant, attacked the naval base, while Martin Price and his men attacked the other stronghold. And it's a very interesting story about how Powell took his action. I'm not sure you'd want me to repeat this, would you?

McB No I think that sort of detail is fairly well covered in some of the other histories. But what is not covered to my knowledge and satisfaction is the part played in all this by the Japanese submarine crews

S Yes, I can tell you that, because one night in May, when during a dinner aboard 'Ramillies' and this was told me by James Powell, who later came to us as captain of Marines. They were dining when they felt a thud, no more, and they didn't know what it was and they went on deck and then there was another explosion and our oil tanker slowly sank to the bottom. We found out later on that a two-man submarine, a Japanese submarine, had been launched from one of their great I-class submarines which were operating in the Mozambique Channel, and they'd come in. We had no boom then at the entrance, but we put one up rapidly afterwards. And they'd come in, quite brave fellows, and they'd fired two torpedoes, one of which hit 'Ramillies' and one of which sank the tanker. But of course in a two-man submarine you don't carry the full size torpedo and no damage was done to 'Ramillies'. They almost made their escape but they ran aground on some rocks towards the entrance to the harbour and they were, later on, captured on the island by Royal Marines and suitably dealt with.

McB So there were large Japanese submarines actually operating in the Mozambique Channel?

S Oh yes, they sank a lot of shipping. It was estimated that some 94,000 tonnes of allied shipping was sunk to these. So there they were, right on our doorstep.

McB Was there any indication that they were being based in Diego Suarez?

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S Not that I know of. They were never in Diego Suarez but there was a rumour that they were in the Vichy-held ports right in the south of the island. And remember the island is a thousand miles long, it's some island you see. But later on, after the War, when the history of the thing came out, it appeared they were being fuelled and victualled by Japanese cruisers, rather like the Germans used to have their vessels out in the Atlantic for their raiders. But they were not based in ports down in the south of Madagascar.

McB There were no Japanese military soldiers anywhere in Madagascar?

S Not to my knowledge, no.

McB Do you have any recollection of what the French forces consisted of.

S No I haven't, but it is itemised. I know they had a lot of Senegalese there. I know they'd recruited some Malagasies, who were not terribly keen on fighting. Indeed the French weren't keen on fighting. All they were worried about was their pensions. And once they'd surrendered having put up a fight, that was secure, you see. They weren't at all militant. They weren't really militant. But there was fighting, and I can't remember the names of the regiments who came from the south and were force-marched through the jungle and there was fighting and they were wounded. But that is chronicled elsewhere. We in the Navy didn't know much about what the Army were doing down in the south.

McB I think there are about 130 graves in the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery at Antsiranana, the new name for Diego Suarez.

S What's the new name?

McB Antsiranana.

S Antsirane, but that was the name of the capital, Antsirane.

McB That's Antananarivo.

S Oh, is it? Antananarivo. Nosi Bé was the place on the port side.

McB Yes, 130 graves there in Antsiranana.

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S Are they allied graves or are they ...

McB Yes, all allied graves. There are no French graves.

S Well, they must be all Army.

McB Yes, all Army. And I have seen a quite impressive cairn put up by, I think, the Scots Guards, somewhere on that peninsula of land between that harbour and the west coast, Courier Bay, which commemorates a battle in which there were quite heavy casualties.

S Yes, I knew there was some action in Courier Bay, but we weren't part of that.

McB But the story about the Japanese mini-sub is quite fresh in your memory.

S Oh yes. Absolutely no doubt about it.