The said lord King has levied such a fine and large navy that its equal has not been seen for a thousand years.¹

The naval campaign in the Channel during the summer 1545 fittingly balanced the accidental blowing up of Admiral d’Annebault’s flagship, the Philippe, with the débacle of the Mary Rose. It was also the most serious cross-Channel conflict in the first half of the sixteenth century. A fleet of at least 250 ships – the largest assembled by France in the Channel since the 14th century, some said not for a thousand years – was joined in Normandy by an army of 25–30,000 men.² At what stage was the decision made in France to transform the war into a grand naval confrontation? The naval war needs to be understood in context.

THE FRENCH WAR EFFORT AT SEA

It was usually difficult to restrain the enthusiasm of privateers when war approached. At the start of 1543, it was reported from Normandy that ‘Frenche shipps preparing to warfare…howbeit the same was not

¹ Declaration of Marin de Montchenu to the city of Paris on behalf of Francis I, 11 July 1545 (Registres…Paris, III, p. 58): ‘Ledict seigneur…a levé une si belle et grosse armée de mer qu’il n’en fut veue une pareille, passé à mil ans.’
by any commaundment of the Frenche Kynge, but by the fantasye of
the owners and mariners of the shippes for theire owne sake. For of
late before many good and ryche pryses were taken by some of them.'3
A French fleet had been occupied in the North Sea, where Jean de
Clamorgan had been sent with a squadron to Denmark to claim the
aid due to France by the treaty of 1541 (six ships and 1000 troops).4
Francis was obliged under the treaty of 1541 to contribute 100,000 écus
to Christian III’s expenses but, as he brought no money, the Danish
king was not prepared to move. This made it all the more difficult for
Francis to ask Christian for aid in 1545, when he promised to transfer
funds to Strasbourg should Christian agree to join the sea war. All
Clamorgan achieved was to capture some rich ships from a merchant
fleet taking Flemish goods to Spain.5 The mission of a squadron sent
to Scotland in May–June 1543 was even less happy. These had set off
from Dieppe, by their own account, to waylay the Flemish Iceland
fleet, specifically instructed not to attack the English. Their leading
ship the Sacre managed to repel borders from the Minion and the
Primrose off Orfordness in July but of 16 ships, half were lost before
they took refuge in the Firth of Forth.6 An engagement took place on
22 July 1543 between ships from Barfleur and Brittany and an English
squadron attacking Cherbourg. A couple of Breton ships drove them
back to Barfleur, where there was an artillery exchange. There, the
Great Martin of London was sunk and 80 prisoners, including a ‘gros
millourt,’ taken.7 The squadron prepared to escort the French expedi-

3 Intelligence from Normandy, 12 Jan. 1543, NA SP1/175, fos. 33–34 (Lé-P, XVIII,
i, 40.2). This was encouraged by a French royal ordinance of March 1543 which per-
mitted the seizure of goods on ships of the king’s enemies ‘affin que nosdictz subiectz
reprennent leur curage et ayent...desir et occasion d’equipper navires en guerre.’
Article xliii added that since ‘aucuns de nosd. alliés et confederez vouldroyent porter
grand faveur à noz ennemys et adversaires que à nous’ the contracts of lading were to
be presented in the Admiralty courts. NA SP1/176, fo. 172 (Lé-P, XVIII, i, 344).
4 Mémoires du sieur Richer, fo. 2r, 11v.
5 La triomphante victoire faite par les Français sur la mer par Monsieur de Serres capitaine coronal des trois galeres tant de Honfleur que du hable le Roy (Rouen: Jehan
Lhomme, xx jour de juing 1544), BN Res 8, Lb/30, no. 93 (repr. Rouen, 1899, ed. M. De
la Germonière). Gosselin, Documents authentiques pour... l’histoire de la marine nor-
mande. Rouen, 1874, p. 25, ‘Chanson faicte sur le triomphe que les Dieppois ont fait
sur la mer.’
6 Sadler to Henry VIII, 22 July 1543, Hamilton Papers, I, p. 586; Lé-P, XVIII, i, 796,
807, 810, 827, 844, ii, 69, 70, 84, 85. J.D. Tracy, ‘Herring Wars,’ 249–272.
7 Francis I was alert to the threat to Cherbourg and Granville in June (to Matignon,
camp of Maroilles, 23 June 1543, Correspondance de Matignon, no. CXVI); Mémoire
on what is necessary for the defence of Cherbourg 26 July 1543, ibid., pp. 76–77;