

Medals and Decorations of the French South Seas & Antarctic Expedition, 1837-40

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The French claim, with some justice, that Dumont d'Urville can rank with James Cook, the greatest navigator of them all. Like Cook he made three voyages round the world and important contributions to all the sciences, most of which were then in their lusty infancy.

Helen Rosenman, translator and editor
of D'Urville's accounts of South Seas voyages

Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville was born in Normandy in 1790, and his childhood saw the development of a keen intellect that served the makings of a future explorer. A lifelong passion for the study of languages first showed itself so early that by the age of ten d'Urville was fluent in Latin. Past voyages of discovery were also on the boy's mind and he devoured volumes about Cook, Anson and Bougainville. At 17, d'Urville joined the French Navy, but the service had fallen into disrepair after its defeat at Trafalgar and the Royal Navy's blockade kept French ships in port.



Dumont d'Urville, by Gérôme Cartellier, 1846. (Musée de Versailles, www.histoire-normandie.fr)

Not being one to waste time, d'Urville filled the void of inactivity by studying languages. At this time, he penned his motivations for joining the navy:

I found that nothing was more noble and worthy of a generous spirit than to devote one's life to the advancement of knowledge. There was this feeling that my interests were pushing me towards the navy of discovery rather than the purely fighting navy. Not that I was afraid of battle, but my naturally republican spirit could not envisage any real glory attached to the act of risking one's life and killing one's fellow men for differences of opinions over things and words.

By 1810, d'Urville was posted to the Mediterranean port of Toulon, and still with a good deal of free time on his hands, he reignited his youthful interest in botany in the hills behind the port. Passions for this and other areas of science would only grow with time, and over a decade later, d'Urville's botanical work earned him membership in the Britain's Linnean Society and he became a founding member of the French Geographical Society.

In 1814, d'Urville had a brush with his future. After Napoleon's exile to the island of Elba, the *Ville de Marseille* (with Ensign Jules Dumont d'Urville onboard) sailed to Palermo with the Duke of Orleans, so the latter could retrieve his wife and children. The Duke was the future King Louis Philippe, who nearly a quarter-century later would sponsor d'Urville's expedition to the South Pacific – and the Antarctic. It was to be France's last great scientific expedition carried out under sail.

From 1822-25, Lieutenant d'Urville circumnavigated the world as the executive officer on the *Coquille* during a South Seas expedition, and afterwards published a favorably received volume on the flora of the Falkland Islands. Between 1826-29, he commanded the *Astrolabe* (the renamed *Coquille*; an astrolabe is an instrument used for observing the positions of celestial bodies), tasked with augmenting the scientific knowledge amassed on the previous expedition. In his official instructions to d'Urville, Secretary of the Navy Comet de Charbol wrote:

A large collection of books, instruments and charts etc. was to have been sent to you by courtesy of the Director-General of Navy Stores.

Also 30 silver and 450 bronze medals that I had struck to commemorate the Astrolabe expedition have recently been forwarded to you, you will be able to distribute them in the countries you visit and wherever you deem it useful to leave some mark of your passage.



French South Seas & Antarctic Expedition Medal from author's collection.
(photograph by Spencer J. Fisher)

Supplying such medals to exploring expeditions can be traced back for several decades before this time and includes not only French, but British and Russian expeditions as well. The medals were given to native dignitaries in silver or bronze, presumably depending upon the individuals' social/political position. The very few number of silver medals carried on the above expedition would seem to indicate such pieces were only presented to very highly placed individuals.

During the voyage, d'Urville successfully searched for the wreckage and remains of the LaPérouse expedition, which vanished 40 years before. Among the relics recovered from native peoples were some of the 100 medals carried by that expedition.

Along with the following years of domestic life and mundane naval desk duties, d'Urville devoted time to continued studies of the ethnography and linguistics of South Pacific peoples. But as his research progressed, he noted missing pieces of knowledge, which could be remedied by a new expedition. By the end of February 1837, King Louis Philippe had seen and enthusiastically approved d'Urville's new expedition – but with a twist. Not only was the King interested in extending French influence and furthering hydrography, trade and science, he knew about British and American interests in the Antarctic regions, and ordered d'Urville to “extend your exploration towards the Pole as far as the polar ice will permit.” D'Urville was also in search of another pole – the South Magnetic Pole – “the point it was so important to fix for the solution of the great problem of the laws of terrestrial magnetism.”

The King was well aware that the British Antarctic explorer and sealer James Weddell had reached 74°15'S in 1823 – and now an opportunity to bring honor to France presented itself. Though d'Urville admired British polar explorers like Cook, Ross and Parry, he wrote:

I had never aspired to the honour of following in their wakes; on the contrary, I had always declared that I would prefer three years of navigation under burning equatorial skies to two months in polar climes.

Two ships would carry the flag of France to frozen shores. The *Astrolabe* and *Zélée* (zealous). The former carried 17 officers and 85 men, while the *Zélée's* complement was 14 officers and 68 men (the actual number of crewmen for each ship varied over time due to those invalided, deaths, desertions and new recruits). To promote interest in the expedition's progress, d'Urville asked for and received royal approval promising monetary rewards related to degrees of southern latitude attained by the *Astrolabe* and *Zélée*. Once 75°S was reached, each man would receive 100 francs, and then 20 francs for each additional degree above this latitude. Weddell had reached 74°15'S. As d'Urville flatly stated, “It was not much, but it was enough for the purpose.”

As with his previous voyage, d'Urville took with him a supply of silver and bronze medals with which to mark his passage throughout the southern Pacific Ocean. The 50 mm. diameter medals depict a profile of the King on the obverse, surrounded by the translated wording: LOUIS PHILIPPE I./KING OF FRANCE. Wording on the reverse specifically highlights the King's interest in Antarctic exploration. The encircling translated words read: VOYAGE AROUND THE WORLD, EXPLORATION OF THE SOUTHERN POLE, enclosing: CORVETTES/THE ASTROLABE AND THE ZÉLÉE/M^R DUCAMPE DE ROSAMEL/VICE-ADMIRAL/SECRETARY OF THE NAVY/M^R DUMONT D'URVILLE/CAPTAIN IN COMMAND OF THE EXPEDITION/M^R JACQUINOT/COMMANDER OF THE ZÉLÉE/1837.

The author has yet to find any documentation noting the number of silver and bronze medals struck for the 1837-40 expedition, but feels the figures are very close (if not identical) to those for the 1826-29 voyage. A bronze medal exists that is attributed to Gunner First Class Paul Plagne (*Astrolabe*), who received the Legion of Honor for his performance during the expedition. This suggests that some of the leftover medals were given to certain participants as mementos of their valued efforts and endurance of many hardships.

The *Astrolabe* and *Zélée* twice entered Antarctic waters during their three years away from home. In January 1838, they followed Weddell's track, but the weather and ice that had been kind to that British sailor in 1823 was now unkind to the Frenchmen. He retreated north and sought respite in the South

Orkney Islands, partly charting them. Upon returning south, an ice floe held the ships for five days, and it was not until 9 February that they escaped nature's grasp. Later on that month, d'Urville claimed Louis Philippe Land for his country (first charted by Bransfield in 1820 and named Trinity Land), in addition to Joinville Land (later known to be an island). The ships remained in the area of what is now the northern extreme of Graham Land on into March, surveying the discoveries, but they never got beyond 66°S. Afterwards, the expedition made for Chile with several cases of scurvy aboard each vessel. Two years later, he would again challenge the Antarctic.



Astrolabe and Zélée emerging from the pack ice, Feb. 9, 1838, by Louis Le Breton.

Approaching Antarctica from the Australian side, by mid-January 1840, d'Urville's ships were in the midst of icebergs, as passionately related by 27-year-old Ensign Joseph Duroch of the *Astrolabe*:

Never shall I forget the magical spectacle that then unfolded before our eyes!

But for the awesome grandeur, we could have believed ourselves amongst the ruins of those great cities of the ancient Orient just devastated by an earthquake.

We are in fact, sailing amidst gigantic ruins, which assume the most bizzare forms: here temples, places, with shattered colonnades and magnificent arcades; further on, the minaret of a mosque, the pointed steeples of a Roman basilica...

On 21 January, two boats landed on a rocky islet, a few hundred meters from the shore which d'Urville named after his wife – Adélie Land. The surrounding waters are now know as the Dumont d'Urville Sea. First Lieutenant Joseph Du Bouzet recorded the historic occasion in his diary on the *Zélée*:

It was nearly 9 p.m. when, to our great delight, we landed on the western part of the highest and most

westerly of the little islands. *Astrolabe's* boat had arrived a moment before us; already the men from it had climbed up the steep sides of this rock. They hustled the penguins down, who were very surprised to find themselves so roughly dispossessed of the island of which they were the sole inhabitants. We immediately leapt ashore armed with picks and hammers. The surf made this operation very difficult. I was obliged to leave several men in the boat to keep it in place. I straight away sent one of our sailors to plant the tricolour on this land that no human before us had either seen or set foot on.

Du Bouzet further penned an insightful and hopeful observation about France's Antarctic territorial claim:

...we did not dispossess anyone, and as a result we regarded ourselves as being on French territory. There will be at least one advantage; it will never start a war against our country.

Oddly, a little over a week later, the *Astrolabe* had an unexpected encounter with the USS *Porpoise*, a brig commanded by Lieutenant Cadwalader Ringgold. She was part of a six-ship squadron forming the United States Exploring Expedition (1838-42). Before leaving Hobart, Tasmania, D'Urville knew of both American and British polar expeditions. An unfortunate misunderstanding, resulting from the handling of the two vessels, caused a failure of the ships to make contact and each continued on its way. D'Urville left Antarctic waters for good without discovering the South Magnetic Pole; a series of coastal observations by the British expedition in the following two years put the Magnetic Pole well inland and nowhere near the French discoveries. Still, d'Urville had every right to be proud of his men and their significant Antarctic achievements.

After further South Pacific exploration over the next several months, the *Astrolabe* and *Zélée* arrived back in France in November 1840. D'Urville had a great many things to attend to, including “overseeing the despatch of the numerous objects destined for the Hydrographic Office, the Museum of Natural History and the Naval Museum”. Ever mindful of his men, he officially requested from the Navy Minister at least three, and as many as six months' leave for his sailors. D'Urville also submitted a carefully drawn up list, citing those he wished to be promoted and/or decorated. These requests were immediately acted upon and resulted in the Legion of Honor being awarded to several individuals by January 1841 (see list below). In spite of not achieving the intended 75°S latitude goal, the French government awarded 15,000 gold francs to be divided among expedition members.



Knight of the Legion of Honor (1830-48) (courtesy of Morton & Eden Ltd.)

Instituted by Napoleon on 19 May, 1802, the Legion of Honor is still awarded for distinguished military and civil services. The order exists in five classes: Knight, Officer, Commander, Grand Officer and Grand Cross. Though certain elements of its design have varied over the many years, the Legion of Honor remains today basically as it was when Napoleon created it.

The decoration issued for the French South Seas Expedition was a white enameled silver or gold badge (depending upon the class), with five rays with double points. In between the rays was a green enamel wreath of oak and laurel. The obverse center featured the effigy of King Henry IV (the first monarch of the Bourbon dynasty), and the reverse center had two crossed tricolor flags. The badge was suspended by a royal crown with a ring on top, through which passes a red ribbon.

Legion of Honor Recipients of the French South Seas & Antarctic Expedition (1837-40)

ASTROLABE

DUMONT D'URVILLE,.....Captain 1st Class.....Promoted to Rear Admiral on 31
 Jules Sébastien César December 1840 and made an Officer
 of the Legion of Honor, he also
 received the Gold Medal of the
 French Geographical Society.

BARLATIER DE MAS,.....Lieutenant
 François Edmond Eugène

VINCENDON DUMOULIN,....Hydrographer 3rd Class....Took over editing the publication of
 Clément Adrien & Cartographer the voyage after D'Urville's untimely
 death in 1842.

DUCORPS,Purser 3rd Class.....Promoted to Purser 2nd Class,
 Louis Jacques 26 December 1838 and Purser 1st
 Class, 2 September 1840.

HOMBRON,Surgeon 2nd Class.....Promoted Surgeon 1st Class,
 Jacques Bernard 11 October 1838.

DUMOUTIER,Naturalist & Phrenologist
 Pierre Marie Alexandre

LE BRETON,Surgeon 3rd Class.....Did additional duty as the
 Louis (Assistant Surgeon) expedition's Artist, replacing Ernest
 Auguste Goupil, who died of
 dysentery at Hobart, 4 January 1840.

PLAGNE,.....Gunner 2rd Class.....Promoted Gunner 1st Class,
 Paul (petty officer) 1 September 1837.



François Edmond Eugène Barlatier de Mas. (courtesy of E. Barlatier de Mas Santerre)

ZÉLÉE

THANARON,Lieutenant
Charles Jules Adolphe

JACQUINOT,Surgeon 3rd Class
Honoré (Assistant Surgeon)

AUGIAS,Coxswain 1st Class
Pierre Joseph (chief petty officer)

It is noteworthy that of the 11 recipients of the decoration, all but three were from the *Astrolabe*. This was probably due to the fact that the *Astrolabe* was d'Urville's ship and there existed a natural positive prejudice on d'Urville's part. Also, only one rating from each vessel received the Legion of Honor – both of whom were senior ratings.

The *Zélée's* Commander Charles Hector Jacquinot, d'Urville's closest friend and second-in-command, was not decorated. On d'Urville's recommendation, he previously received the Cross of Honor for the 1826-29 expedition, but reading between the lines of his naval service, one very much gets the sense that Jacquinot

probably cared very little about medals. After d'Urville's death, he assumed overall supervision for publication of the expedition's narrative. Through sheer hard work Jacquinet eventually became a Vice Admiral. During the 1854-55 Crimean War he was in command at Piraeus, Greece (receiving the Greek Order of the Redeemer). He died soon after retiring from the Naval General Staff in 1879; in keeping with his modesty, he had requested to be buried without any fanfare or military honors.

D'Urville wrote a lengthy letter to the Secretary of the Navy in 1841, explaining why one man was specifically *excluded* from being recommended for the Legion of Honor; this was Surgeon 2nd Class Elie Jean François Le Guillou (*Zéléé*). A detailing of this man's behavior is out of place in these writings, but suffice to say that Le Guillou was a determined man and eventually received the medal in 1860 – after years of wearing down the opposition. During the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War, he was the medical officer to the Corps de Francs-Tireurs (snipers). Interestingly, Cape Leguillou (note the spelling) appears on the Antarctic map to this day, located on the northern point of Tower Island, at the northeast end of the Palmer Archipelago.

After the 1837-40 expedition, with his health strained from three around-the-world voyages, D'Urville's days of exploring were behind him. He began writing up the narrative of his latest expedition, and just as the fourth volume was nearly ready for the publisher, tragedy overcame d'Urville and his family. Rear Admiral Jules Dumont d'Urville, his wife and son, were returning by train from an outing to Versailles on 8 May 1842, when the two locomotive engines jumped the track. The leading wooden carriages ran atop the engines and caught fire, and d'Urville and his family were engulfed in flames.

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