

# NUNAWADING MILITARY HISTORY GROUP

## MINI NEWSLETTER No. 17

### The Attack on Mers-el-Kebir 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1940

*"It is impossible for us, your comrades up to now, to allow your fine ships to fall into the power of the German enemy. We are determined to fight on until the end, and if we win, as we think we shall, we shall never forget that France was our Ally, that our interests are the same as hers, and that our common enemy is Germany. Should we conquer we solemnly declare that we shall restore the greatness and territory of France. For this purpose we must make sure that the best ships of the French Navy are not used against us by the common foe. In these circumstances, His Majesty's Government have instructed me to demand that the French Fleet now at Mers el Kebir and Oran shall act in accordance with one of the following alternatives;*

*(a) Sail with us and continue the fight until victory against the Germans.*

*(b) Sail with reduced crews under our control to a British port. The reduced crews would be repatriated at the earliest moment.*

*If either of these courses is adopted by you we will restore your ships to France at the conclusion of the war or pay full compensation if they are damaged meanwhile.*

*(c) Alternatively, if you feel bound to stipulate that your ships should not be used against the Germans lest they break the Armistice, then sail them with us with reduced crews to some French port in the West Indies—Martinique for instance—where they can be demilitarised to our satisfaction, or perhaps be entrusted to the United States and remain safe until the end of the war, the crews being repatriated.*

*If you refuse these fair offers, I must with profound regret, require you to sink your ships within 6 hours.*

*Finally, failing the above, I have orders from His Majesty's Government to use whatever force may be necessary to prevent your ships from falling into German or Italian hands.*

*Admiral of the Fleet Sir James Fownes Somerville*

The **Attack on Mers-el-Kébir** (Battle of Mers-el-Kébir) on 3 July 1940, during the Second World War was, a British naval attack on French Navy ships at the naval base at Mers El Kébir, at Oran, on the coast of French Algeria. The attack was part of Operation Catapult, a British plan to neutralise or destroy French ships to prevent them falling into German hands in the aftermath of the Allied defeat in the Battle of France. The British bombardment of the base killed 1,297 French servicemen, sank a battleship and damaged five other ships, for a British loss of five aircraft shot down and two crewmen killed.

The attack by air and sea was conducted by the Royal Navy, after France had signed armistices with Germany and Italy, coming into effect on 25 June. Of particular significance to the British were the five battleships of the *Bretagne* and *Richelieu* classes and the two fast battleships of the *Dunkerque* class, the second largest force of capital ships in Europe after the Royal Navy. The British War Cabinet feared that the ships would fall into Axis hands. Admiral François Darlan, commander of the French Navy, assured the British that the fleet would remain under French control but Winston Churchill and the War Cabinet judged that the risk was too great.

The French thought they were acting honourably towards their former ally in terms of their armistices with Germany and Italy. The British attack was almost universally condemned in France and resentment festered for years over what was considered a betrayal by their former ally. Marshal Philippe Pétain, who was appointed the prime minister of France on 16 June, severed diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom on 8 July. The next day, deputies of the National Assembly met at Vichy and voted to revise the constitution, bringing the French Third Republic to an end and Pétain was installed with full powers as leader of the new French State.

French aircraft retaliated by bombing Gibraltar several times and French ships exchanged fire several times with British ships, before a tacit truce was observed in the western Mediterranean. On 27 November 1942, after the beginning of Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of French North Africa, the French navy foiled Case Anton, a German and Italian operation to capture the rest of the French fleet at Toulon by the scuttling of the ships. The British attack at Mers-el Kébir remains controversial but some historians have written that it demonstrated to the world that Britain would fight on.

### **French–German armistice**

After the Fall of France in 1940 and the armistice between France and Nazi Germany, the British War Cabinet was apprehensive about control over the French navy. The French and German navies combined could alter the balance of power at sea, threatening British imports over the Atlantic and communications with the rest of the British Empire. In Article 8, Paragraph 2 of the Armistice terms, the German government "solemnly and firmly declared that it had no intention of making demands regarding the French fleet during the peace negotiations" and there were similar terms in the armistice with Italy but they were considered by the British to be no guarantee of the neutralisation of the French fleet. On 24 June, Darlan assured Winston Churchill against such a possibility. Churchill ordered that a demand be made that the French Navy (*Marine nationale*) should either join with the Royal Navy or be neutralised in a manner guaranteed to prevent the ships falling into Axis hands.

At Italian suggestion, the armistice terms were amended to permit the French fleet temporarily to stay in North African ports, where they might be seized by Italian troops from Libya. The British made a contingency plan, Operation Catapult, to eliminate the French fleet in mid-June, when it was clear that Philippe Pétain was forming a government with a view to ending the war and it seemed likely that the French fleet might be seized by the Germans. In a speech to Parliament, Churchill repeated that the Armistice of 22 June 1940 was a betrayal of the Allied agreement not to make a separate peace. Churchill said, "What is the value of that? Ask half a dozen countries; what is the value of such a solemn assurance?... Finally, the armistice could be voided at any time on any pretext of non-observance...".

The French fleet had seen little fighting during the Battle of France and was mostly intact. By tonnage, about 40 per cent was in Toulon, near Marseilles, 40 per cent in French North Africa and 20 per cent in Britain, Alexandria and the French West Indies. Although Churchill feared the fleet would be used by the Axis, Hitler and Mussolini did not intend to employ a combined Franco–Italian–German force. The *Kriegsmarine* and Benito Mussolini made overtures but Adolf Hitler feared that an attempted take-over would provoke the French fleet into defecting to the British. Churchill and Hitler viewed the fleet as a potential threat; the French leaders used the fleet (and the possibility of its rejoining the Allies) as a bargaining counter against the Germans to keep them out of unoccupied France (*zone libre*) and French North Africa. The armistice was contingent on the French right to man their vessels and the French Navy Minister, Admiral François Darlan, had ordered the Atlantic fleet to Toulon to demobilise, with orders to scuttle the ships if the Germans tried to take them.

### **British–French negotiations**

The British tried to persuade the French authorities in North Africa to continue the war or to hand over the fleet to British control. A British admiral visited Oran on 24 June, and Duff Cooper, Minister of Information, visited Casablanca on 27 June. The French Atlantic ports were in German hands and the British needed to keep the German surface fleet out of the Mediterranean, confine the Italian fleet to the Mediterranean and to blockade ports still under French control. The Admiralty was against an attack on the French fleet in case the ships were not sufficiently damaged, France declared war and the French colonies would be less likely to defect. The Royal Navy lacked the ships permanently to blockade the French naval bases in North Africa and keep the Atlantic approaches open, which made the risk of the Germans or the Italians seizing the French capital ships too great. Because the fleet in Toulon was well guarded by shore artillery, the Royal Navy decided to attack the base in North Africa.





**Blackburn Skuas of No 800 Squadron Fleet Air Arm prepare to take off from HMS Ark Royal**

*Strasbourg*, three destroyers and one gunboat managed to avoid the magnetic mines and escape to the open sea under attack from a flight of bomb-armed Swordfish from *Ark Royal*. The French ships responded with anti-aircraft fire and shot down two Swordfish, the crews being rescued by the destroyer HMS *Wrestler*. As the bombing had little effect, at 6:43 p.m. Somerville ordered his forces to pursue and the light cruisers HMS *Arethusa* and *Enterprise* engaged a French gunboat. At 8:20 p.m. Somerville called off the pursuit, feeling that his ships were ill-deployed for a night engagement. After another ineffective Swordfish attack at 8:55 p.m., *Strasbourg* reached Toulon on 4 July.

The French *aviso* (gunboat) *Rigault de Genouilly*, en route to Oran, met Force H at 7:33 p.m. and sailed towards *Hood*, only to be fired on by *Arethusa* and *Enterprise* at 12,000 and 18,000 yd (5.9 and 8.9 nmi; 6.8 and 10.2 mi; 11 and 16 km) respectively, along with several 15 in (380 mm) shells from *Hood*, against which the French ship fired nineteen 5.45 in (138 mm) shells before being hit by *Enterprise*. On the next day, the British submarine HMS *Pandora* encountered the ship off the Algerian coast, mistook it for a cruiser and sank it. The French Air Force (*Armée de l'Air*) made reprisal raids on Gibraltar, including a half-hearted night attack on 5 July, when many bombs landed in the sea.



**Battleship *Bretagne* on fire, still under bombardment**

### Actions of 8 July

The British believed that the damage inflicted on *Dunkerque* and *Provence* was not serious and raided Mers-el-Kébir again on the morning of 8 July, with Swordfish aircraft from *Ark Royal*. A torpedo hit the patrol boat *Terre-Neuve*, moored alongside *Dunkerque*, full of depth charges. *Terre-Neuve* quickly sank and the depth charges went off, causing serious damage to *Dunkerque*. The last part of Operation Catapult was another attack on 8 July, by aircraft from the carrier HMS *Hermes* against the battleship *Richelieu* at Dakar; the battleship was seriously damaged.

### Aftermath

#### Analysis

Churchill wrote "This was the most hateful decision, the most unnatural and painful in which I have ever been concerned". Relations between Britain and France were severely strained for some time and the Germans enjoyed a propaganda coup. Somerville said that it was "...the biggest political blunder of modern times and will rouse the whole world against us...we all feel thoroughly ashamed...".



**The French destroyer *Mogador* running aground, after having been hit by a 15-inch shell.**

The attack revived Anglophobia in France but demonstrated British resolve to continue the war and rallied the British Conservative Party around Churchill (Neville Chamberlain, Churchill's predecessor as prime minister, was still party leader). The British action showed the world that defeat in France had not reduced the determination of the government to fight on and ambassadors in Mediterranean countries reported favourable reactions.

The French ships in Alexandria under the command of Admiral René-Émile Godfroy, including the old battleship *Lorraine* and four cruisers, were blockaded by the British on 3 July and offered the same terms as at Mers-el-Kébir. After delicate negotiations, conducted on the part of the Brit-

ish by Admiral Andrew Cunningham, Godfroy agreed on 7 July to disarm his fleet and stay in port until the end of the war. Some sailors joined the Free French while others were repatriated to France; *Surcouf* and the ships at Alexandria went on to be used by the Free French after May 1943. The British attacks on French vessels in

port increased tension between Churchill and Charles de Gaulle, who was recognised by the British as the leader of the Free French Forces on 28 June 1940.

According to his principal private secretary Eric Seal, "[Churchill] was convinced that the Americans were impressed by ruthlessness in dealing with a ruthless foe; and in his mind the American reaction to our attack on the French fleet in Oran was of the first importance". On 4 July, Roosevelt told the French ambassador that he would have done the same. De Gaulle's biographer Jean Lacouture blamed the tragedy mainly on miscommunication; had Darlan been in contact on the day or had Somerville possessed a more diplomatic character, a deal might have been done. Lacouture accepted that there was a danger that the French ships might have been captured by German or more likely Italian troops, as proven by the ease with which the British seized French ships in British ports or the German seizure of French ships in Bizerte in Tunisia in November 1942.

## Casualties

### Subsequent events

#### British–Vichy hostilities

Following the 3 July operation, Darlan ordered the French fleet to attack Royal Navy ships wherever possible;



**Memorial on the coast path at Toulon to the 1,297 French seamen killed at Mers el Kebir**

Pétain and his foreign minister Paul Baudouin over-ruled the order the next day. Military retaliation was conducted through ineffective air raids on Gibraltar but Baudouin noted that "the attack on our fleet is one thing, war is another". As sceptics had warned, there were also complications with the French empire; when French colonial forces defeated de Gaulle's Free French Forces at the Battle of Dakar in September 1940, Germany responded by permitting Vichy France to maintain its remaining ships armed, rather than demobilised. On 24 September Gibraltar was bombed by sixty Vichy French aircraft which dropped 45 long tons (46 t) of bombs and that night, 81 bombers dropped 60 long tons (61 t) of bombs. The French 2nd Destroyer Division comprising *Fougueux*, *Frondeur*, *Épée* and *Fleuret* had sailed from Casablanca on 24 September and in the early hours of 25 September encountered the destroyer HMS *Hotspur* patrolling off Gibraltar. *Épée* opened fire but its 5.1 in (130 mm) guns broke down after firing fourteen shells, *Fleuret* did not open fire because it could not get on target and the other French destroyers fired six shots

between them. *Hotspur* returned fire but this was not reported by the French ships.

On 27 September Force H stayed at sea after receiving "a charming message [that] the whole of the Toulon fleet was coming out to have a scrap with us" but the two navies adhered to a tacit understanding that the British did not attack more powerful French forces at sea or ships in port but intercepted other French ships,

Though British commanders had precise instructions regarding the interception of French shipping, discretion might prove the better part of valour if Vichy escorts were liable to inflict serious loss.

In the autumn, the French sent a convoy through the Straights of Gibraltar untroubled, a state of affairs which rarely changed during the Mediterranean Campaign.

#### **Postscript to the attack on Mers el Kebir**

##### **Gibraltarian civilians**

*In early June 1940, about 13,500 civilians had been evacuated from Gibraltar to Casablanca in French Morocco. Following the capitulation of the French to the Germans and the attack on Mers-el-Kébir, the Vichy government found their presence an embarrassment. Later in June, 15 British cargo vessels arrived in Casablanca under Commodore Crichton, repatriating 15,000 French servicemen who had been rescued from Dunkirk. Once the French troops had disembarked, the ships were interned until the Commodore agreed to take away the evacuees, who, reflecting tensions generated after the attack on Mers-el-Kébir, were escorted to the ships at bayonet point, minus many of their possessions.*

### **Case Anton the German occupation of Vichy France**

*On 19 November 1942, the Germans tried to capture the French fleet based at Toulon, against the armistice terms, as part of Case Anton, the military occupation of Vichy France by Germany. All ships of any military value were scuttled by the French before the arrival of German troops, notably Dunkerque, Strasbourg and seven (four heavy and three light) modern cruisers. For many in the French Navy this was a final proof that there had never been a question of their ships ending up in German hands and that the British action at Mers-el-Kébir had been unnecessary. Darlan was true to his promise in 1940, that French ships would not be allowed to fall into German hands. Godfroy, still in command of the French ships neutralised at Alexandria, remained aloof for a while longer but on 17 May 1943 joined the Allies.*

**Edited from Wikipedia**