

Chapter 1 : Scuttling of the French fleet at Toulon - Wikipedia

*'Sink The French!': At War with an Ally, [David Wragg] on www.nxgvision.com *FREE* shipping on qualifying offers. The victorious German Blitzkrieg assault on Holland, Belgium and Northern France placed Anglo-French relations under huge strain.*

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. That the armistice terms at article eight paragraph two stated that the German government "solemnly and firmly declared that it had no intention of making demands regarding the French fleet during the peace negotiations" and that similar terms existed in the armistice with Italy, were considered to be no guarantee of the neutralisation of the French fleet. On 24 June, Darlan assured Winston Churchill against such a possibility. 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. Although Churchill feared the fleet would be put into action, the Axis leaders did not intend to employ a combined Franco-Italian-German force. The German Navy and Benito Mussolini made overtures but Adolf Hitler feared that the French fleet would defect to the British and be used against German submarines in the Atlantic if he tried to take it over. Churchill and Hitler viewed the fleet as a potential threat; the Vichy 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 the Zone libre and French North Africa. The Admiralty was against an attack on the French fleet, since if not enough damage were done to the ships, Vichy France would be provoked into declaring war and the French colonial empire as a result become more hostile to the Free French Forces. Given the need to keep the Atlantic approaches open, and given that the Royal Navy lacked the ships to provide a permanent blockade on the Vichy naval bases in North Africa, the risk of having the Germans or the Italians seize the French capital ships was deemed too great. Because the fleet in Toulon was well guarded by shore artillery, the Royal Navy decided to attack that based in North Africa. Operation Catapult was an attempt to take these ships under British control or destroy them, and the French ships in Plymouth and Portsmouth were boarded without warning on the night of 3 July. Admiral James Somerville of Force H, based in Gibraltar, was ordered to deliver an ultimatum to the French but the British terms were contrary to the German-French armistice terms. Gensoul was affronted that negotiations were not being conducted by a senior officer and sent his lieutenant, Bernard Dufay, which led to much delay and confusion. As negotiations dragged on, it became clear that neither side was likely to give way. Darlan was at home on 3 July and could not be contacted; Gensoul told the French government that the alternatives were internment or battle but omitted the option of sailing to the French West Indies. The British had the advantage of being able to manoeuvre, while the French fleet was anchored in a narrow harbour and its crews did not expect an attack. The main armament of Dunkerque and Strasbourg was grouped on their bows and could not immediately be brought to bear. On 3 July, before negotiations were formally terminated, British Fairey Swordfish planes escorted by Blackburn Skuas from Ark Royal dropped magnetic mines in the harbour exit. The force was intercepted by French Curtiss H fighters and a Skua was shot down into the sea with the loss of its two crew, the only British fatalities in the action. After thirty salvos, the French ships stopped firing; the British force altered course to avoid return fire from the French coastal forts but Provence, Dunkerque and the destroyer Mogador were damaged and run aground by their crews. As the bombing had little effect, at 6: Somerville called off the pursuit, feeling that his ships were ill deployed for a night engagement. After another ineffective Swordfish attack at 8: A torpedo hit the patrol boat Terre-Neuve, which was full of depth charges and moored alongside Dunkerque. Terre-Neuve quickly sank and the depth charges went off, causing serious damage to Dunkerque. Churchill wrote "This was the most hateful decision, the most unnatural and painful in which I have ever been concerned". Somerville said that it was "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. After delicate negotiations, conducted on the part of the British by Admiral Andrew Cunningham, Godfroy agreed on 7 July to disarm his fleet and

stay in port until the end of the war. The British attacks on French vessels in port sowed anger among the French towards the British and 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. On 4 July, Roosevelt told the French ambassador that he would have done the same. Lacouture accepted that there was a danger that the French ships might have been captured by German or more likely Italian ground forces, 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

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After convincing the French not to sign a separate armistice with Germany just two months prior, Churchill was now being begged to release them from the obligation. That left Churchill with a loose-end on his mind: Churchill later remarked of Admiral Darlan that he had "but to sail in any one of his ships to any port outside France to become the master of all French interests beyond German control. But that was not to happen. Although Admiral Darlan was strong in his commitment to prevent the Germans from seizing a single French ship, Churchill was not convinced. The concern was not over the French using their fleet to assist their new conqueror. The real concern was that Germany would train their own sailors to command those ships. They were convinced that the commanders were dedicated to the cause of not surrendering to the Germans. On June 17, France pressed for peace with Germany. The War Cabinet refused. There were several concerns on the table. For one, the attack would surely result in the loss of British troops and ships. Second, although getting beaten by Germany and showing eagerness to throw in the towel, France was still an ally. On June 24, France and Germany signed an armistice. Part of that agreement was the French could keep their ships, but Germany would gain control over items such as passports and tickets. Hitler treaded lightly concerning the ships and did not push for full ownership. He feared such aggression would inspire the French to keep fighting. However, on July 1, Churchill was finally able to get the backing of the War Cabinet to sink the ships if they would not be surrendered. At first, the French refused to speak to negotiators. Two hours later, the French showed the British an order they had received from Admiral Darlan instructing them to sail the ships to the USA if the Germans broke the armistice and demanded the ships. Meanwhile, the British intercepted a message from the Vichy Government ordering French reinforcements to move urgently to Oran. Churchill was done playing games and ordered the attack to his commanders, "Settle everything before dark or you will have reinforcements to deal with. In less than ten minutes, 1, French soldiers were dead, and 3 capital ships along with 1 destroyer were damaged or destroyed. British Response While the French were furious over the events, the reaction in the UK was the exact opposite. The day after attacking the French, Churchill went to the House of Commons to explain why he ordered the attack on the former ally. Churchill declared, "However painful, the action we have already taken should be, in itself, sufficient to dispose once and for all of the lies and Fifth Column activities that we have the slightest intention of entering into negotiations. We shall prosecute the war with the utmost vigour by all the means that are open to us. Churchill had a message for the British, for Hitler, and for the world. The message was heard loud and clear. The UK would not make peace with Hitler and they were in this war for the long haul.

Chapter 3 : Churchill's Sinking of the French Fleet (July 3,)

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Context[edit] After the Fall of France and the Armistice of , France was divided in two zones, one occupied by the Germans, and the " Free Zone ". Officially, both zones were administered by the Vichy regime. The armistice stipulated that the French fleet would be largely disarmed and confined to its harbours, under French control. The Allies were concerned that the fleet, which included some of the most advanced warships of the time, might fall into enemy hands and so the British attacked the French Fleet at Mers-el-Kebir on 3 July and at the Battle of Dakar on 23 September An alternative view is that Darlan was an opportunist and simply switched sides for self-advancement, thus becoming titular controller of French North Africa. Political aspect[edit] From 11 November negotiations took place between Germany and Vichy France. The settlement was that Toulon should remain a "stronghold" under Vichy control and defended against the Allies and "French enemies of the government of the Marechal". Raeder was led to believe that the German aim was to use anti-British sentiment amongst the French sailors to have them side with the Italians, while Hitler was in fact preparing a forcible seizure of the fleet. Orders to implement the plan were given on 19 November. Oppose, without spilling of blood, the entry of foreign troops in any of the establishments, airbases and buildings of the Navy; Similarly oppose entry of foreign troops aboard ships of the Fleet; find settlements by means of local negotiation; and If the former proved impossible, to scuttle the ships. Initial orders were to scuttle the ships by capsizing them, but engineers, thinking of recovering the ships after the war, managed to have the orders changed to sinking on an even keel. In private, Auphan tried to persuade Laborde to set sail and join with the Allies; Laborde refused to obey anything short of a formal order of the government. Auphan resigned shortly after. Technical and tactical aspect[edit] On the French side, as a token of goodwill towards the Germans, coastal defences were strengthened to safeguard Toulon from an attack from the sea by the Allies. These preparations included setups for scuttling the fleet, in case of a successful landing by the Allies. Under armistice provisions, the French ships were supposed to have their fuel tanks almost empty; in fact, through falsification of reports and tampering with gauges, the crews had managed to store enough fuel to reach North Africa. One of the cruisers , Jean de Vienne , was in drydock , helpless. After the remnants of the French Army were required by the Germans to disband, French sailors had to man coastal defense artillery and anti-aircraft guns themselves, which made it impossible to swiftly gather the crews and have the ships quickly under way. In the afternoon of 12 November, Admiral Darlan further escalated the tension by calling for the fleet to defect and join the Allies. Vichy military authorities lived in fear of a coup de main organised by the British or by the Free French. The population of Toulon was in the main favourable to the Allies; the soldiers and officers were hostile to the Italians, seen as "illegitimate victors" and duplicitous, and defiant of the Germans. The fate of the fleet, in particular, was seen to be doubtful. Between the 11th and the 26th, numerous arrests and expulsions took place. The French admirals, Laborde and Marquis, ordered their subordinates to take a pledge of allegiance to the regime two of the senior officers, Humbertand and capitaine de vaisseau Pothuau, refused. Operation Lila[edit] The objective of Operation Lila was to capture the units of the French fleet at Toulon intact, and was carried out by the 7th Panzer Division , augmented with units from other divisions. Four combat groups including two armoured groups and a motorcycle battalion from 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich were entrusted with the mission. To prevent the French naval units scuttling themselves, Marinedetachment Gumprich was assigned to one of the groups. German forces were to enter Toulon from the east, capturing Fort Lamalgue, headquarters of Admiral Marquis and Mourillon arsenal; and from the west, capturing the main arsenal and the coastal defenses. German naval forces were cruising off the harbor to engage any ships attempting to flee, and laid naval mines. The combat groups entered Toulon at The attack came as a complete surprise to the Vichy officers, but Dornon transmitted the order to scuttle the fleet to Admiral Laborde aboard the flagship Strasbourg. Laborde was taken aback by the German operation, but

transmitted orders to prepare for scuttling, and to fire on any unauthorised personnel approaching the ships. Twenty minutes later, German troops entered the arsenal and started machine-gunning the French submarines. Some of the submarines set sail to scuttle in deeper water. Casabianca left her moorings, sneaked out of the harbour and dived at 5: The German main force got lost in the arsenal and was behind schedule by one hour; when they reached the main gates of the base, the sentries pretended to need paperwork so as to delay the Germans without engaging in an open fight. French crews evacuated, and scuttling parties started preparing demolition charges and opening sea valves on the ships. When naval guns started engaging the German tanks, the Germans attempted to negotiate; a German officer demanded that Laborde surrender his ship, to which the admiral answered that the ship was already sunk. As Strasbourg settled on the bottom, her captain ordered the ignition of the demolition charges, which destroyed the armament and vital machinery, as well as igniting her fuel stores. Strasbourg was a total loss. A few minutes later the cruiser Colbert exploded. However, the demolition charges were detonated, and the ship burned for twenty days. The stern of the cruiser Marseillaise. Meanwhile, the captain of the cruiser Marseillaise ordered his ship capsized and demolition charges set. German troops requested permission to come aboard; when this was denied, they did not attempt to board. The ship sank and exploded, burning for seven days. German troops forcibly boarded the cruiser Dupleix, put her crew out of the way, and closed her open sea valves. French and Germans alike fled the vessel. German Panzertruppen watch a burning French warship, probably the cruiser Colbert. The cruiser Jean de Vienne, in drydock, was boarded by German troops, who disarmed the demolition charges, but the open sea valves flooded the ship. She sank, blocking the drydock. The crew opened the holes caused by British torpedo attacks to sink the ship, and demolition charges destroyed her vital machinery. Officers of the battleship Provence and the seaplane carrier Commandant Teste managed to delay German officers with small talk until their ships were completely sunk. Similar scenes occurred with the destroyers and submarines. Aftermath[edit] Operation Lila was a failure. The French destroyed 77 vessels, including three battleships, seven cruisers, 15 destroyers, 13 torpedo boats, six sloops, 12 submarines, nine patrol boats, 19 auxiliary ships, one school ship, 28 tugs and four cranes. Thirty-nine small ships were captured, most of them sabotaged and disarmed. Some of the major ships were ablaze for several days, and oil polluted the harbour so badly that it would not be possible to swim there for two years. Several submarines ignored orders to scuttle and chose to defect to French North Africa: Casabianca and Marsouin reached Algiers, Glorieux reached Oran. One surface ship, Leonor Fresnel, managed to escape and reach Algiers. General Charles de Gaulle heavily criticised the Vichy admirals for not ordering the fleet to flee to Algiers. The Vichy regime lost its last token of power, as well as its credibility with the Germans, with the fleet. Most of the cruisers were salvaged by the Italians, either to restore them as fighting ships or for scrap. The main guns from the scuttled battleship Provence were later removed and used in a former French turret battery at Saint-Mandrier-sur-Mer, guarding the approaches to Toulon, to replace original fortress guns, sabotaged by their French crews.

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