

Great Britain to France, 03-07-1940

France had been invaded by Germany. Following the French defeat an armistice was signed and a new government allied with Germany was installed. This new government, based in the city of Vichy, ruled France from mid June 1940 onwards. The change of France's allegiance marked a radical rupture in the relationship between France and Great Britain when the former allies suddenly found themselves in opposite camps. The government of Great Britain feared that the French naval fleet would fall in German hands. This it intended to prevent at all costs.¹ It first attempted to convince the French government as well as its Vichy successor to order the French fleet to set sail to Great Britain. After the armistice – which included a provision ordering the French fleet to return to French ports – the British government intensified its efforts. When its attempts at persuasion failed, it decided to present the commanders of the fleet, a substantial portion of which was located at the French naval base of Mers-el-Khebir and Oran in Algeria, with an ultimatum.² In the early hours of 3 July naval squadron "H" led by Vice-Admiral Somerville was dispatched to anchor off Mers-el-Khebir and present the French Admiral Gensoul with the following ultimatum:³

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 unless 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 six hours. Finally failing the above I have the orders of H.M Government to use whatever force maybe necessary to prevent your ships from falling into German or Italian hands.⁴

¹ Antony Beevor, *Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Ambo/Anthos B.V., 2012), 146–47.

² fn.2504, Bussemaker, *Paradise in Peril*, 2001, 532.

³ Beevor, *Tweede Wereldoorlog*, 147.

⁴ Government of Great Britain, 'CAB/65/8/3 - July 1940 - Events - UK War Cabinet', 1940, 36–37, <http://www.ukwarcabinet.org.uk/time/1940-07>.

The squadron arrived early in the morning and Vice-Admiral Somerville ordered a young captain called Holland who was fluent-in-French to deliver the ultimatum. Admiral Gensoul took the low rank of the captain as an insult and refused to receive Holland instead dispatching one of his lieutenants. The admiral received the ultimatum and while negotiations ensued telegraphed for assistance.⁵ Shortly before 10.00 a.m. he replied to Vice-Admiral Somerville that in case of a British attack he would respond with force.⁶ Over the next few hours, negotiations continued. During the negotiations there was communication between Admiral Gensoul and the overall commander of the French fleet Darlan as well as between Admiral Somerville and the British war cabinet.⁷ The ultimatum was subsequently pushed back to 17.30.⁸ At 17:15 Admiral Gensoul agreed to see Hollande. While negotiations were underway British naval forces had mined the harbor, while the French too had been making military preparations.⁹ With dawn nearing, and news that French naval vessels in the Western mediterranean had been ordered to sail for Mers-el-Khebir, Somerville telegraphed to Gensoul that he would have to comply within fifteen minutes or French ships would be sunk.¹⁰ This ended the negotiations. After Hollande left the ship, the British squadron opened fire. Although some French vessels – but only one battle cruiser – managed to escape the harbor and reach Toulon, 1,297 French sailors lost their lives in the carnage (and not a single British sailor did).¹¹ The Mers-el-Khebir incident dealt a significant blow to the French naval capabilities and solicited widespread condemnation in France.

⁵ David Brown, *The Road to Oran: Anglo-French Naval Relations, September 1939-July 1940* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 185 & 188.

⁶ Brown, 182–85. Robert J. Brown, ‘Operation Catapult: Naval Destruction at Mers-El-Kebir’, *History Net: Where History Comes Alive - World & US History Online* (blog), accessed 16 June 2014, <http://www.historynet.com/operation-catapult-naval-destruction-at-mers-el-kebir.htm>. ‘Military History Online - Battle of Mers-El-Kebir’, accessed 16 June 2014, <http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/wwii/articles/merselkebir.aspx>.

⁷ Brown, *The Road to Oran*, 187–89.

⁸ Brown, ‘Operation Catapult’.

⁹ Brown, *The Road to Oran*, 185 & 188–89.

¹⁰ Beevor, *Tweede Wereldoorlog*, 148.

¹¹ Brown, *The Road to Oran*, xxv. Beevor, *Tweede Wereldoorlog*, 149. Clodfelter, *Warfare And Armed Conflicts*, 797.