

# Escape from Mers el Kebir

July 4, 1940

## Background

After the fall of France in 1940, the British feared that the Germans would push the Vichy government into handing over powerful French naval units, despite French Admiral Darlan's sworn assurances to the contrary. Admiral Somerville was ordered to take Force H from Gibraltar to Algeria and issue the following ultimatum to the French "Force de Raid" in Mers el Kebir:

- A) Proceed immediately to sea and join the British navy in the fight against Germany
- B) Surrender immediately and be escorted to the UK or a neutral port in the Caribbean for internment and demilitarization
- C) Sink at anchor

Admiral Gensoul, the French commander of Mers el Kebir, was openly outraged by this treachery, and demanded time to consult his own chain of command. Admiral Somerville attempted to honor this request, but was directly ordered to quit stalling and get the business concluded before dark. He reluctantly ordered the attack, and the tragedy unfolded. The British battleships shelled the French fleet in harbor and sank or heavily damaged most of it with great loss of life; only a few ships escaped to Toulon, where the French crews honorably scuttled them in 1942, choosing to face reprisals by the occupying Nazis rather than allow their ships to fight against their former British allies under German crews.

To make this a good wargame, this scenario assumes a different tragedy, and a British nightmare: Somerville vacillates too long, and Gensoul uses the delay to slip out of Mers el Kebir at night. Dawn breaks with the French fleet at sea en route to Toulon, and the British fleet on an interception course.

## British Briefing

Yesterday mines were laid across the entrance of Mers el Kebir and the ultimatum issued. The night passed in negotiations, but as dawn approached it became obvious that the local French admiral was not going to surrender, scuttle or intern his fleet. Just before dawn a large explosion was observed at the entrance of the harbor, and as the sun broke the horizon the French fleet was observed at sea by one of the destroyers in the picket line. It is steaming NE toward Toulon as the scenario opens.

The Ark Royal, about 60 miles to the NW, has launched torpedo bombers to conduct an aerial attack.

### British Forces

*Vice-Adm. Sir James Somerville*

#### **Force H**

BC Hood (flagship)  
BB Resolution  
BB Valiant  
CL Arethusa  
DD Faulknor (*F class leader*)  
DD Foxhound (*F class*)  
DD Fearless (*F class*)  
DD Forester (*F class*)  
DD Foresight (*F class*)  
DD Escort (*E class*)  
DD Wrestler (*W class*)  
DD Vidette (*V class*)  
DD Vortigern (*V class*)



### Additional Forces

The following additional forces in the area can be used for variations on the basic battleship duel.

CV Ark Royal (Capt. C. S. Holland)  
CL Enterprise  
DD Keppel (*Shakespeare class (Thornycroft) flotilla leader*)  
DD Active (*A class*)

*Note 1: The aircraft carrier Ark Royal was attached to Force H and it's aircraft conducted minelaying, bombing and torpedo missions throughout the proceedings. If you wish to add air operations, this is an approximation of the Ark Royal's aircraft complement:*

800 Squadron	12 Blackburn Skuas
803 Squadron	12 Blackburn Skuas
810 Squadron	12 Fairey Swordfish
818 Squadron	9 Fairey Swordfish
820 Squadron	9 Fairey Swordfish

*Note 2: Skuas were often used as fighter escorts in this stage of the war, and as one might expect, they didn't perform that role very well.*

## Victory Conditions

Adjust the tally of victory points at the end of the Damage Control Phase of each turn.

### British

+ full VP of each French vessel sunk or captured  
- 1/2 VP of each British vessel sunk

### French

+ full VP of each French vessel which escapes to Toulon  
- 1/2 VP of each French vessel which turns back to N. Africa  
- full VP of each French vessel sunk

# Escape from Mers el Kebir

July 4, 1940

## Background

After the fall of France in 1940, the British feared that the Germans would push the Vichy government into handing over powerful French naval units, despite French Admiral Darlan's sworn assurances to the contrary. Admiral Somerville was ordered to take Force H from Gibraltar to Algeria and issue the following ultimatum to the French "Force de Raid" in Mers el Kebir:

- A) Proceed immediately to sea and join the British navy in the fight against Germany
- B) Surrender immediately and be escorted to the UK or a neutral port in the Caribbean for internment and demilitarization
- C) Sink at anchor

Admiral Gensoul, the French commander of Mers el Kebir, was openly outraged by this treachery, and demanded time to consult his own chain of command. Admiral Somerville attempted to honor this request, but was directly ordered to quit stalling and get the business concluded before dark. He reluctantly ordered the attack, and the tragedy unfolded. The British battleships shelled the French fleet in harbor and sank or heavily damaged most of it with great loss of life; only a few ships escaped to Toulon, where the French crews honorably scuttled them in 1942, choosing to face reprisals by the occupying Nazis rather than allow their ships to fight against their former British allies under German crews.

To make this a good wargame, this scenario assumes a different tragedy, and a British nightmare: Somerville vacillates too long, and Gensoul uses the delay to slip out of Mers el Kebir at night. Dawn breaks with the French fleet at sea en route to Toulon, and the British fleet on an interception course.

## French Briefing

The British fleet arrived off Mers el Kebir yesterday, treacherously mined the entrance to the harbor and issued a most outrageous ultimatum. Negotiations ate up most of the day, but as night fell, the admiral ordered the fleet to raise steam for immediate departure. The preparations took much longer than expected, as it was very difficult to sweep the mines in the dark - and in fact, one minesweeper was lost during the sweep. Departure as a fleet was not managed until just before dawn.

### French Forces

*Amiral Marcel-Bruno Gensoul*

#### **1st Battleship Division**

BC Strasbourg (Capitaine Barrois)

BC Dunkerque (Capitaine Louis Collinet)

#### **2nd Battleship Division**

*Contre-Amiral Bouxin (Amiral d'escadre)*

BB Provence (Capitaine Gabriel Barois)

BB Bretagne\* (Capitaine Le Pivain)

#### **Auxiliaries**

SD Mogador (*Mogador class*)

SD Volta (*Mogador class*)

SD Tigre (*Chacal class*)

SD Lynx (*Chacal class*)

SD Kersaint (*Vaquelin class*)

SD Le Terrible (*Terrible class*)



### Additional Forces

The following additional forces in the area can be used for variations on the basic battleship duel.

#### **Auxiliaries**

*This ship actually escaped to Toulon, but had no useful combat role in an armed confrontation, so was left out of the sortie force. It could be added as an extra target and/or source of VP.*

Seaplane Tender Commandant Teste (Captain Lemaire)

#### **Nearby Forces**

*Also known to be located in the Port of Oran (just to the east of Mers-el-Kebir) the French had the following:*

10 light DD's (600-tonners)

3 submarines (+3 more laid up in port)

13 auxiliaries (small surface warships)

#### **French Air Force**

*The airbase at Oran flew CAP and fought the Royal Navy bombers.*

24 Curtiss H-75 fighters (estimated)

#### **French Shore Batteries in the Area:**

1. Fort Santoni - three 194mm guns
2. Gambetta Battery - four 120mm guns
3. Espagnole Battery - two 75mm guns
4. Canastel Battery - three 240mm guns

## Victory Conditions

Adjust the tally of victory points at the end of the Damage Control Phase of each turn.

### British

+ full VP of each French vessel sunk or captured

- 1/2 VP of each British vessel sunk

### French

+ full VP of each French vessel which escapes to Toulon

- 1/2 VP for each French vessel which turns back to N. Africa

- full VP of each French vessel sunk