

Toulon – The End of the French Fleet

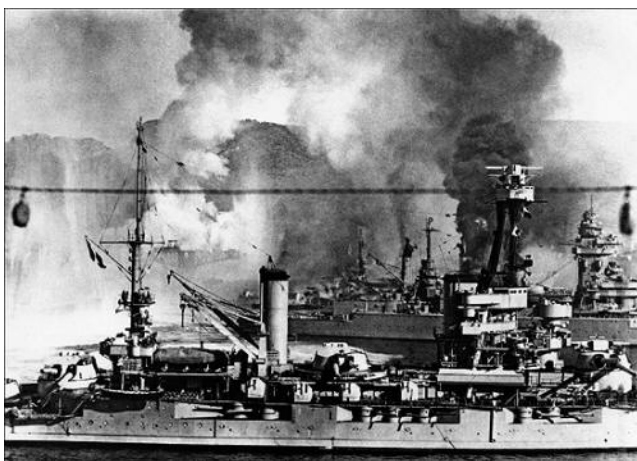
The "sinking of the French Fleet at Toulon" was the scuttling of the French Fleet by its own sailors on November 27, 1942, to prevent it from being captured by Nazi German forces. After the Allies invaded North Africa, Germany invaded the "Free Zone" of France, and the French naval command, anticipating that Germany aimed to seize the ships in Toulon, ordered the fleet to be destroyed. French crews successfully scuttled 77 vessels, including three battleships and numerous other warships and submarines, while the Germans captured only a few damaged and small vessels.

Context and cause

- **German invasion:** The scuttling was a direct response to Germany's "Case Anton" operation to invade the Vichy French "Free Zone," prompted by the Allied invasion of North Africa.
- **Fear of capture:** French naval officers, realizing the fleet's fate would be similar to the ships previously surrendered in North Africa, decided it was better to destroy the fleet than to have it fall into German hands.

Execution and outcome

- **Delaying tactics:** French crews used deception tactics to delay the German advance, giving them time to carry out the scuttling.
- **Scuttling method:** Sailors sank the ships by opening seacocks, setting ships ablaze, and detonating explosives.
- **Losses and gains:**
 - **French:** 77 vessels were destroyed, including 3 battleships, 7 cruisers, and 15 destroyers.
 - **German:** The Germans were largely unsuccessful in capturing the fleet, only taking 3 disarmed destroyers, 4 damaged submarines, and 39 smaller ships.
- **Symbolic significance:** The act was a defiant and devastating blow to France's naval power but is also seen as a moment of final resistance against German occupation.



Actions previously taken against the French Fleet by the Allies

British attack on Mers-el-Kébir (July 1940): The British, fearing the powerful French Fleet would be used by Germany, had previously attacked the French naval base at Mers-el-Kébir, near Oran. The French Fleet refused to surrender, so the British opened fire (left). The attack resulted in the sinking of the battleship *Bretagne* and damage to several other ships, with heavy French casualties.

Operation Menace was the code name for the **Battle of Dakar** (September 23–25, 1940), an unsuccessful Allied attempt to capture the strategic port of Dakar in French West Africa (modern-day Senegal) from the pro-German Vichy French administration.

The goal was to replace the Vichy government with a pro-Allied Free French administration under General Charles de Gaulle, secure an important naval base, and gain control of vital gold reserves from the Bank of France stored there.

Key Details of the Operation

- **Forces Involved:** The Allied force included British Royal Navy battleships (*HMS Resolution*, *HMS Barham*), an aircraft carrier (*HMS Ark Royal*), cruisers (*HMAS Australia*, *HMS Cumberland*, *HMS Devonshire*), and a contingent of 4,000 Royal Marines and 2,700 Free French troops led by General de Gaulle.
- **The Plan:** The operation was intended to be largely peaceful. De Gaulle believed the Vichy French forces would switch allegiance once he arrived. Unarmed emissaries were sent to negotiate, and propaganda leaflets were dropped from aircraft.
- **The Resistance:** The Vichy forces, led by Governor-General Pierre Boisson and reinforced by a squadron of cruisers from Toulon, offered determined resistance from powerful coastal batteries and naval assets, including the unfinished battleship *Richelieu*.
- **The Battle:** When negotiations failed, Allied naval forces began a bombardment. Vichy shore batteries and aircraft returned fire effectively, damaging several British ships. *HMS Resolution* was severely damaged by a torpedo from the Vichy submarine *Bévésiers*, while *HMS Barham* and *HMAS Australia* also sustained hits. Two Vichy submarines were sunk.
- **The Outcome:** After three days of fighting and heavy fog hindering operations, the Allied commanders decided the resistance was too strong. Operation Menace was called off, and the Allied fleet withdrew. Dakar remained under Vichy control until the Allies successfully occupied French North Africa during Operation Torch in November 1942.

Consequences

The failure was primarily a political blow for the Allies and specifically damaged Charles de Gaulle's standing among the British and Americans. It gave the Vichy government a propaganda victory, showing they could and would defend their empire.

Operation Lila - Why and how the French Fleet was Scuttled at Toulon

On 19 Nov 1942, German leaders in Berlin set *Operation Lila* in motion, with the objective of capturing the French port city of Toulon, along with the French Fleet in its harbour. German forces were to attack from both east and west. From the east, the plan was to capture Fort Lamalgue, headquarters of Admiral André Marquis, and the Mourillon arsenal; from the west, the plan called for the capture of the main arsenal and the coastal defences. German naval forces were cruising off the harbour to engage any ships attempting to flee, and naval mines were laid.



Bundesarchiv Bild 1011627-145-10
Foto: Wehrmacht, Vorstoß 1.27. November 1942

At dawn on 27 Nov, the execution of the operation began. At 0425 hours, German tanks arrived at Fort Lamalgue on the east side of the port (*left*), capturing Marquis by surprise, but failing to prevent his chief of staff Rear Admiral Robin from contacting Rear Admiral Dornon at the arsenal, who sent the recommendation to scuttle the fleet to Admiral Jean de Laborde aboard flagship Strasbourg. At 0520 hours, the Germans broke through the Mourillon gate (Porte Nord); five minutes after, Castigneau gate to the northwest was penetrated. While the Germans took the following 20 to 30 minutes to advance to the moorings, French sailors worked diligently in deploying explosives, smashing machinery, and opening valves.

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At about 0550 hours, the Germans finally reached the moorings; it was around this time that Admiral Laborde officially ordered the scuttling to begin via radio, visual signals, and dispatch boat. Shortly after, fighting broke out near battleship Strasbourg and cruiser Foch. A German tank fired on battleship Strasbourg (*left*), hitting a secondary turret, killing an officer and wounding six men, while various machine guns fired on submarines. At 0620 hours,

the demolition charges went off aboard Strasbourg, destroying her armament, machinery, and fuel stores. A few minutes later, cruisers Colbert, Algérie (*below*), and Marseillaise were destroyed in similar manners. Cruiser Duplex was boarded by force by German troops, but they failed to prevent Captain



Moreau from setting the demolition charges, which detonated the magazine at 0830 hours, destroying the ship. In the port's drydock, demolitions set up aboard cruiser Jean de Vienne were disarmed in time by German troops, but the open sea valves sent her to the bottom, blocking the drydock. Shortly after, in another drydock, battleship Dunkerque was destroyed by demolition charges, then cruiser La Galissonnière was scuttled to block that drydock.

Against orders, several submarine captains refused to scuttle their boats, and chose to defect to the Free French instead. Submarines Casabianca and Marsouin reached Algiers, Le Glorieux reached Oran, and Iris reached Barcelona to reach that end. Submarine Vénus failed to leave the harbour, and was scuttled at the entrance to Toulon harbour instead.



Destroyers Vauquelin and Kersaint

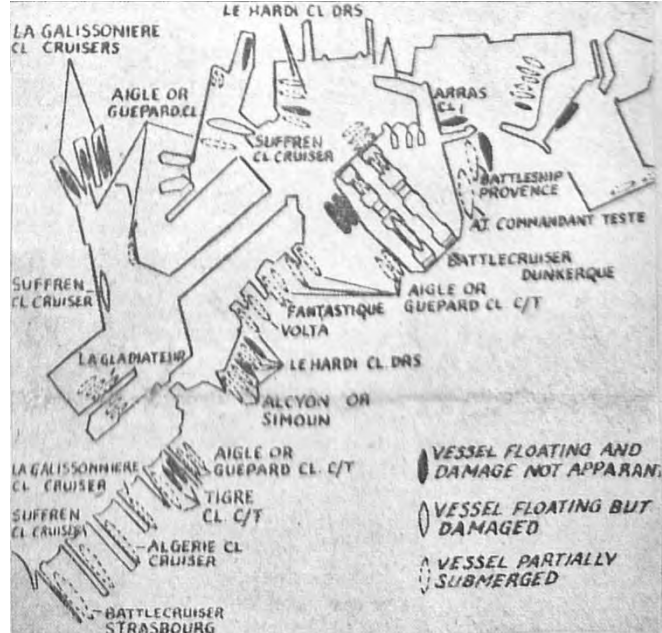
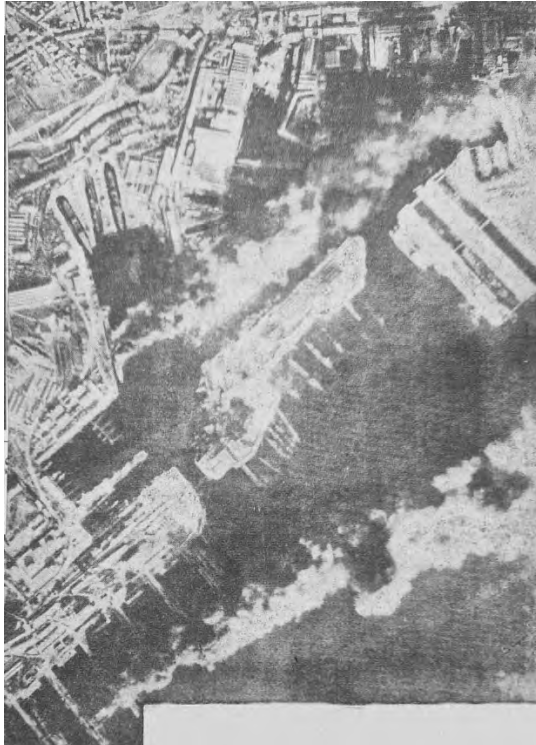
One surface ship, Leonor Fresnel, managed to escape and reach Algiers. Destroyers Panthère, Tigre, and Trombe survived as they were under maintenance; they would later be pressed into Italian service.

During the scuttling operation, the French destroyed 3 battleships, 7 cruisers, 15 destroyers, 13 torpedo boats, 6 sloops, 12 submarines, 9 patrol boats, 19 auxiliary ships, 1 school ship, 28 tugs, and 4 cranes. 12 French naval personnel were killed and 78,888 were captured (although they would

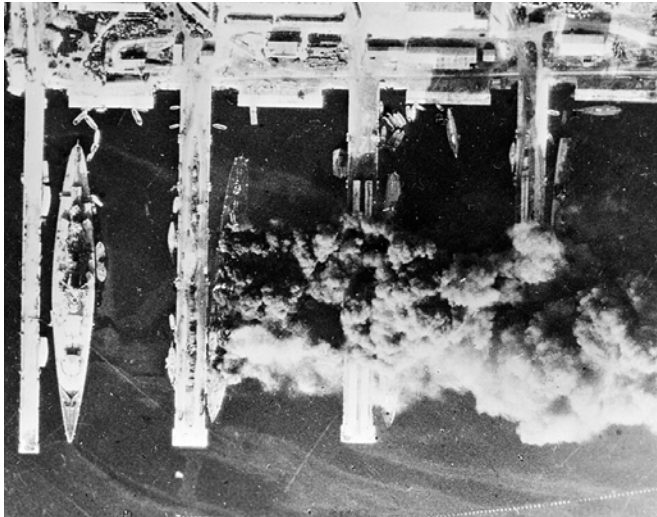
be speedily freed after the French pledged full cooperation in the salvage efforts). In the end, the Germans were only able to capture three disarmed destroyers, four damaged submarines, three civilian ships, two obsolete battleships of little military value, and 27 other small vessels, some of which were damaged. The only prize of value was the 40,000 tons of fuel oil found in storage tanks. Toulon harbour burned for several days, and oil pollution was so bad that it took two years before the harbour water cleared.

British Newspaper Report #1

'First Picture of Scuttled French Fleet at Toulon.



This is the first picture (*left*), of the scene in Toulon Harbour the day after the scuttling and firing of warships of the French Fleet. It was taken in daylight by the R.A.F. Accompanying it is a key plan (*right*). The photograph shows two ships seriously on fire. These are two heavy cruisers of the Suffren class, 9,938 tons, one in the pens next door to the battlecruiser Strasbourg, 26,500 tons, and the other in the tidal basin. The extent of the fire is such that the vessels must be accounted total losses.



Alongside the westerly mole of the pens the Strasbourg lies deep in the water and apparently grounded (*left*). In the pens east of the Strasbourg and the burning Suffren class cruiser lie a cruiser of the Algerie class 10,000 tons, one of the La Galissoniere class, 9,120 tons, and five contre-torpilleurs (oversize destroyers approximating to light cruisers). The smoke of the burning Suffren class cruiser partially obscures these ships, but only two contre-torpilleurs remain afloat.

Farther eastward, moored with their sterns to the part of the dockyard forming the southern boundary of the tidal basin, there were 13 contre-torpilleurs and large destroyers. All except two are resting on the bottom, partly submerged.

In one of the big dry docks lies the battle-cruiser Dunkerque, 26,500 tons. This ship has not been fully repaired after being seriously damaged by the Royal Navy at Oran in 1940. In and around this part of the dockyard the seaplane tender Commandant Teste, 10,000 tons, the old battleship Provence, 22,189 tons, a heavy cruiser, two contre-torpilleurs and at least a dozen other vessels lie damaged, many of them partly submerged.'

Daily Mail, November 28th 1942.

The Glory of Toulon

The honour and greatness of France blaze into new glory in the harbour of Toulon. The fine French Fleet of more than sixty ships has been snatched from the German aggressor in the moment that his hand was stretched out to seize it. History as never witnessed such a deed. Whatever balancing of interests, whatever division of loyalties, whatever undercurrent of intrigue may have sapped the purpose of the French navy in the dismal days since June 1940, they have all been redeemed in this one magnificent act.



All who read it must thrill to the epic of Toulon. Even as the German columns were racing along the quays, explosive charges were fired in the French warships. Vessel after vessel – battleships, cruisers, destroyers – were torn asunder and sank, to litter the harbour with their wreckage. Every captain, without exception, was on his bridge, and most of them went down with their ships. Many of the crews also sacrificed their lives. It was a supreme example of devotion and heroism.

The cruiser Marseillaise

Superb Gesture

Twenty-three years ago, another great fleet was scuttled, under the German flag. But that was a surrendered fleet. For months it had lain, idle and rusting in Scapa Flow, as a prize of war. The French sacrifice at Toulon soars far above the German scuttling at Scapa both in drama and gallantry. These squadrons went down still free and independent. Frenchmen died in their blazing ships rather than that an alien enemy should set foot upon their decks.

Grief and pity will be mingled with our admiration not only for the loss of brave men but also for the loss of a great opportunity. What could not have been accomplished if the courage and resource of these seamen had been directed not to self-destruction, now, at this hour, but to joint action against the common enemy from the moment that France fell.

But their gesture of superb defiance cannot fail to inspire Frenchmen everywhere with pride. It is a grand example which may well be heeded by French sailors now on the Allied side who have the chance to strike with greater effect at the same foe.'