

Title: Meeting the Fox: The Allied Invasion of Africa, from  
Operation Torch to Kasserine Pass to Victory in Tunisia  
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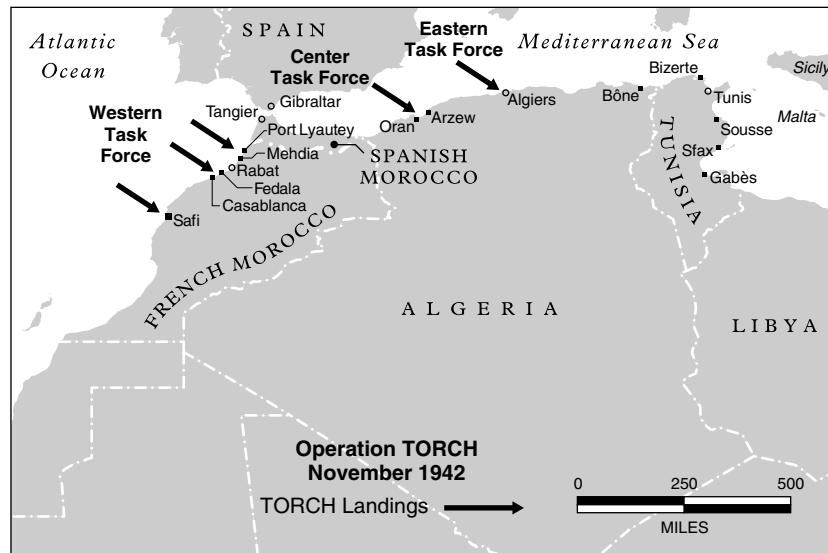
# I

## The Longest Reach

If modern visitors to the North Africa American Cemetery should ask why the United States, which had been at war with Nazi Germany for nearly a year, chose to make its first move against the enemy more than 1,400 miles from Berlin, in a part of Africa where, except for a few diplomatic personnel, there weren't any Germans, they would be echoing the very question America's Joint Chiefs of Staff had at the time.

The military leaders had a clear-cut and logical plan: They would use the British Isles as a gigantic staging base for a direct assault on Germany, with large-scale daylight bombing raids and preparations for a thrust across the English Channel into France in 1943. Meanwhile, support in the form of bombers and fighters would be sent to help the British in their fight against Rommel's Afrika Korps. U.S. troops would not otherwise be involved in Africa.

As part of that plan, the 34th Infantry Division, the last of the National Guard units to be called to federal service, was the first sent to Northern Ireland, in the late winter and early spring of 1942, to spend at least a year training for the cross-Channel attack. The 1st Armored Division and the 1st Infantry Division followed soon after. About the same time, the B-17 Flying Fortresses of the Eighth Air Force began what were billed as precision bombing attacks on German



The Allies landed along the Atlantic coast near Casablanca and at Oran and Algiers, inside the Mediterranean Sea, on November 8, 1942. The action quickly moved far to the east as both sides built up forces in a battle for control of Tunisia.

military installations and factories. The 33rd Fighter Group, with its new P-40 Tomahawks, had been sent to the West Coast immediately after Pearl Harbor to defend against a Japanese attack, but was called back to the East Coast and given orders to join the British, where they were trying to hold the line against Rommel in western Egypt.

Earlier in 1942, serious thought was given to the possibility of a landing in North Africa, but the idea was soon set aside. There simply weren't enough ships available to put more than a few thousand men ashore in an initial landing, and it would take months to build up a force big enough to be significant.

Two powerful and strong-willed men favored a landing in North Africa, however, each for his own reasons.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, elected to his third term as president in 1940 when the United States was still at peace but much of the world was already at war, was determined to get American ground forces into combat with the Germans as soon as possible, certainly in 1942. Americans had been fight-

ing the Japanese in the Pacific from December 7, 1941, but ground troops had not engaged in a single exchange of shots with Hitler's armies.

Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, had long favored attacking the Germans through Europe's "soft underbelly" instead of confronting them directly by crossing the Channel. He had, in fact, favored such an approach in World War I, when he served as chief lord of the admiralty.

While the British and American Combined Chiefs of Staff engaged in a transatlantic debate over the best way to pursue the war, Roosevelt and Churchill simply made up their minds. Historians have pinpointed the period of July 25 to 30, 1942, as the one when a firm decision was made to land in North Africa and, unavoidably, delay an attack across the Channel until 1944. The decision seems to have come as a surprise to at least some of the American Joint Chiefs, who thought the possibility of an early cross-Channel attack was still on the table.

Even a quick glance at the map of the world as it stood in mid-1942 is enough to demonstrate why the military leaders were able to keep their enthusiasm for a landing in North Africa so well under control.

In 1940, within months after World War II began, France fell and a French government under German domination was set up in the spa town of Vichy in southern France. The French colonies in North Africa—French Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia—remained under the control of the Vichy government. Another large chunk of North Africa—Spanish Morocco—was controlled by Spain. And Spain was governed by Generalissimo Francisco Franco, who was friendly toward the Axis.

Aside from their uncertain position in Egypt, the only bits of dry land anywhere near North Africa controlled by the Allies were Gibraltar, at the entrance to the Mediterranean, and the island of Malta, in the middle of the Mediterranean between Italy and Africa. But Gibraltar was too small to serve as a staging area for a major invasion, and besides, it was under both observation and potential attack from Spain, just across the border. Malta, under constant aerial bombardment, was barely able to survive the war, supported

only by heroic convoys fighting their way through a gauntlet of bombers and submarines.

Samuel Elliot Morison, the preeminent naval historian of World War II, thumbed back through his books to find a parallel for such an operation. He considered the landing in Turkey's Dardanelles by British, Australian, and New Zealand forces in World War I; the Japanese landing at Port Arthur in 1904; the American landing at Santiago de Cuba during the Spanish-American War in 1898; and the Japanese landings on Pacific islands earlier in World War II. The first was a dismal failure. The others were successful, but all were launched from bases reasonably close to the target. None of them involved moving an army across 4,000 miles of open ocean for a night landing that, the planners had to assume, would be vigorously resisted.

Morison finally found a naval operation whose audacity matched the invasion of North Africa: the Athenian attack on Syracuse, in Sicily, in 415 B.C.E. He uncovered as well an ominous quotation from one Nicias. Although bitterly opposed to the expedition, he was charged with leading it. Before departing, he warned:

We must not disguise from ourselves that we go to found a city among strangers and enemies, and that he who undertakes such an enterprise should be prepared to become master of the country the first day he lands, or failing in this to find everything hostile to him.

Nicias did not become master of the country the first day he landed and, indeed, did find everything hostile to him. After two years of warfare, his fleet was sunk and his army destroyed while trying to flee from the outskirts of Syracuse. He surrendered and was executed.

Thucydides, the historian of the Peloponnesian War, ended his account of the Syracuse adventure with this dismal summary:

They were beaten at all points and altogether; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army—everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home.

One did not have to be a born pessimist to realize such a fate could befall those attempting a North African landing. The hazards were formidable.

If Roosevelt's demand that Americans confront Germans in 1942 was to be satisfied, ships would have to be assembled, soldiers equipped and trained, Army pilots taught how to be catapulted from ships, and preparations made to support a large army by ships traveling through seas thick with German submarines—and all of this in less than five months.

The forces slated to land inside the Mediterranean at Oran and Algiers would have to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar and confront the same hazards of attack from the air and under the sea faced by the Malta convoys.

Nature also seemed to be in opposition. The surf along the Atlantic coast near Casablanca was notoriously rough—so rough, in fact, that a landing might prove impossible.

Even successful landings would be no guarantee of ultimate victory. The real prize in North Africa was Tunisia, which offered bomber bases within reach of Italy and portions of Germany, and a staging area for landings in Sicily, the Italian Peninsula, or southern France. But Tunisia was nearly 500 miles from the closest landing point in Algiers. Planners concluded reluctantly that an attempt to land farther east, even in Bizerte or Tunis itself, would rule out a landing in Casablanca: There simply weren't enough ships to do both.

While Allied planners focused on preparing for the landings, they could not avoid looking over their shoulders. If Franco permitted German forces to use Spanish bases, Germany could, within hours, fly in enough aircraft to overwhelm the relatively small number of planes that would accompany the invasion fleet. Or the Spanish themselves could decide to join the war, taking Gibraltar and launching attacks against the Allies from their colony in Morocco.

The Allies faced more remote dangers as well. One big worry was what might happen in the east. German armies were deep in the Soviet Union. If Josef Stalin, the Soviet leader, sought peace, Hitler could turn his entire strength toward crushing the Allied beachhead in North Africa. Gathering the forces for the North African operation would also

endanger Allied operations in other parts of the world, crippling the American bombing offensive against Germany, just getting under way from bases in England, and drawing ships away from the fight against Japan in the Pacific.

Each of these was a major problem, but all paled in comparison to that of the Vichy French presence in North Africa, with its colonies and protectorates stretching a thousand miles along the southern shore of the Mediterranean. The Americans wanted very much to avoid having to fight the French, not only for practical reasons but because of the emotional ties between the two countries. Those ties had been strong for more than a century and a half, since the Marquis de Lafayette came to help the colonies throw off British rule in the Revolutionary War. In 1917, when Americans landed in France to fight the Germans, an American officer proudly proclaimed: "Lafayette, we are here!" After World War I, many Americans studied at French military academies and became friends with their French counterparts.

Like it or not, though, the Americans were forced to think of the French in North Africa as *the* enemy, at least until the French proved themselves otherwise. The French had been humbled by the German blitzkrieg in 1940 and forced to surrender. The northern part of the country was occupied by the Germans while the southern portion and French possessions in Africa remained under the control of the puppet government set up in Vichy under Marshal Henri Pétain, the great French hero of World War I. Under the terms of the surrender, France retained its army and navy, including troops, ships, and aircraft in North Africa.

The Germans deliberately kept the French armed forces weak, denying them the opportunity to replace equipment lost in 1940 or buy modern arms. But the French forces in North Africa were still strong enough to cause sleepless nights for Allied planners. They had World War I-era tanks, a serious threat, if an obsolete one, until the Allies managed to get their own more modern ones ashore. French fighter planes would actually outnumber Allied aircraft until the Allies seized airfields ashore and flew in fighters from Gibraltar. And French ships would be encountered at each of the major landing points—Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers—in-

cluding two powerful battleships: the *Jean Bart* at Casablanca and the *Richelieu* further south on the Atlantic coast at Dakar, Senegal.

Even beating the French militarily carried its own risks. The French gendarmes and soldiers maintained tight control over the native peoples all across North Africa. As much as many of the American officers might dislike the French colonial system, they still did not want to fight their way ashore and then find themselves dealing with a series of native rebellions. They needed the French to keep order while they got on with the war against the Germans.

In the frantic months of the late summer and early autumn of 1942, Allied preparations for the North African campaign moved swiftly along two tracks. While the military prepared for the landings on the assumption that they would have to fight the French, diplomats worked just as hard to try to avoid French resistance and, instead, secure French cooperation.

The United States had maintained diplomatic relations with the Vichy regime even after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war had brought America into the conflict. Robert D. Murphy, counselor at the American Embassy in Vichy, worked hard to convince Pétain to cooperate with the Germans only as much as the French were required to by the agreement that ended the fighting in 1940. He succeeded in convincing the French not to turn their fleet over to the Germans and not to permit the Germans to station their forces in French territories in Africa. He also tried to set the groundwork so that at the appropriate time, the French military would join the Allies in fighting the Germans.

All this diplomatic effort came to a head in the latter half of 1942 as the time for the North African operation approached. At that time, most of the French in North Africa were loyal to Pétain and felt he was doing the best he could for France under difficult circumstances. General Charles de Gaulle, who had set up a Free French government based in Britain, was neither liked nor trusted by most of the French in North Africa. The Allied goal thus became to win over those loyal to Pétain and convince them that aiding the

Allies was what the old marshal—although he could not come out and say so—wanted them to do.

Murphy shifted his efforts from Vichy to Algiers. He got invaluable assistance from a small group of Americans who were dispatched to North Africa to monitor food and other supplies being sent to the Algerian people and prevent it being siphoned off by the Germans. This monitoring activity, giving the Americans daily access to the North African ports, was an important source of intelligence for the invasion planners.

On October 23, 1942, a team headed by Maj. Gen. Mark Clark came ashore from a British submarine about seventy-five miles west of Algiers and met Murphy and French Gen. René Mast, chief of staff of the French Colonial Army. Mast agreed to give orders to the forces under his control not to resist the invasion. But he was not told when or exactly where the landings would be made. Similar contact was made with two officers in Morocco, who also agreed not to resist, but all they were told was the approximate date of the landings.

The discussions went beyond efforts to minimize French resistance to the invasion to the question of how much help the French could provide against the Germans if they actively joined with the Allies. Everyone agreed the French would require a massive infusion of new equipment. But Mast estimated they could quickly put into the field eight infantry divisions, two armored divisions, and a number of separate units—a significant contribution to the Allied war effort.

As another part of their strategy to gain French cooperation, the Allies arranged for Gen. Henri Giraud to be spirited out of France in the hope the French forces in Africa would rally behind him. Giraud was highly respected by the French armed forces. He had fought the Germans—and had been captured and escaped—in both wars. After his escape from the Germans earlier in 1942, he had been permitted to retire near Lyon, in southern France.

Unfortunately, these diplomatic preparations all fell short of guaranteeing a peaceful landing for the invasion force. Much as most French officers might admire Giraud, he was not part of the Vichy government and could not even pretend to speak for Pétain. If they had had their choice, the



Allies would have preferred the help of an officer actually part of the puppet regime. But attempting to enlist the help of such an officer was deemed too risky. Giraud was a second-best choice.

Many, but not all, of the French officers in North Africa probably would have preferred to join with the Allies in fighting the Germans. But this was not an easy decision. Most felt their oath compelled them to obey orders from the French government in Vichy. A few were actually anti-Jewish and pro-German.

The French were also deeply concerned for the welfare of friends and relatives back home. If they aided the Allies, or if they even failed to resist vigorously, they knew German troops would sweep south, completing the jackbooted military occupation of their homeland. Such a move would put the Germans in position to seize the French fleet in the harbor at Toulon.

Even those fully prepared to welcome the Allies harbored the fear of what would happen if the “invasion” turned out to be a hit-and-run commando raid like the ill-fated attack on the northern French port of Dieppe in August 1942. They didn’t want to back a loser.

Thus, as troops began moving to staging areas in the United States, Canada, and the British Isles and ships took on loads of ammunition, tanks, trucks, artillery pieces, and aircraft, the Allied generals had to conclude they would have to fight their way ashore, and no one—including the French themselves—knew whether and how much resistance they would face. If the French made a brief show of resistance and then joined the Allied cause, the landing had a good chance of success. If they put up a vigorous defense, the whole enterprise could collapse.

Success in this ambitious undertaking depended heavily on surprise. If the Germans learned of the plans for the invasion in time to oppose it, the landings would almost certainly fail. To preserve secrecy, the soldiers weren’t told where they were going, nor were they given any special clothing or equipment they might need for fighting in North Africa. If they knew they were heading for Africa, most of the troops would have imagined a land of sand, palm trees, and hot

weather. Their imaginations did not prepare them for reality: high mountains, snow, cold, torrential rains, and mud so thick it would swallow trucks, jeeps, airplanes, even tanks.

Although British units and British commanders would be heavily involved in the operation, a major effort was made to give the landings an all-American look. One reason for this was to let both friend and foe know that the Americans were at last fully involved in the war against Germany. Another reason was the hope that the French in North Africa, who would be inclined to resist the British, might welcome Americans. Although the British and the French had been allies at the time of the German invasion of France, their relationship had turned sour after the French capitulation and especially after the British attacked units of the French fleet at the port of Oran.

As part of this policy, an American, Maj. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, was chosen as overall commander even though neither he nor any of his American subordinates had ever commanded a unit as large as a division in combat. Among his staff, however, were a number of British officers who had been involved in the fighting for several years.

The American units chosen to spearhead the invasion and then to carry the battle to the Germans were not the best trained or the best equipped. They were simply the most readily available. The 1st and 34th Infantry Divisions and the 1st Armored Division were already in the British Isles, training for the invasion of France. They were designated to land at Oran and Algiers. Along with them would come the newly created 1st Ranger Battalion, made up largely of men from the 34th Division. The 3rd and the 9th Infantry Divisions and the 2nd Armored Division, training in the United States, were chosen for the landing at Casablanca. The 33rd Fighter Group's orders to join the British forces in Egypt were abruptly changed, and they were slated to fly ashore as soon as landing fields in the Casablanca area were secured.

The fleet quickly assembled to carry the invading force was one of the strangest ever to put to sea. There was only one real American aircraft carrier, supplemented by a motley collection of escort carriers—tanker ships with aircraft decks

hastily welded in place. There were small tankers from a Venezuelan lake that had been converted for landing tanks across beaches—and were to serve as the model for the thousands of tank landing ships to be produced during the war. There were even ferryboats snatched from their routes within the British Isles. They were ordered to fly large American flags as part of the effort to project the image of an all-American operation.

In late October, less than three months after the decision was made to land in North Africa, the ships involved in what was then the largest amphibious operation in history set sail from ports in the United States, Bermuda, and the British Isles. Altogether, there were about 220 ships carrying 107,305 men making their way across the Atlantic, all seeking to arrive off the shores of North Africa at the same moment, prepared to make landings at three points in the Casablanca area, seven—including the first American paratroop drop of the war—in the Oran area, and three at Algiers.

Maj. Gen. George S. Patton commanded the army forces slated to take Casablanca. He was well known within the army for his flamboyant ways and his mystical belief that he was destined to lead vast armies to victory on the battlefield. His picture had appeared on the cover of *Time* and he was becoming familiar to the American public as a dashing armor commander, even though his combat experience was limited to a brief period on the front lines during World War I.

Patton had his doubts, however, about the chances for success in the landings. At a meeting in Norfolk, Virginia, just before the convoys sailed, he gave one of his familiar colorful pep talks: “Never in history has the Navy landed an army at the planned time and place. If you land us anywhere within fifty miles of Fedala [near Casablanca] and within one week of D-Day, I’ll go ahead and win . . . ”