TORCH: North Africa and the Allied Path to Victory, by Vincent P. O' Hara

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PLUS ÇA CHANGE, PLUS C’EST LA MÊME CHOSE


In the literary mountain of scholarship, research, and writing devoted to World War II, the story of Operation TORCH, the Allied landings in North Africa in November of 1942, is presented often as something of an overture to the massive amphibious symphonies that followed. Accounts may include some discussion of Eisenhower’s growing facility for strategic leadership, the byzantine nature of Vichy and Free French politics, and the gradual emergence of Charles de Gaulle as the leader of Free France. The landings themselves all too often have been presented as hinting of a Kabuki production, if not of opéra bouffe, with a few desultory shots fired to assuage Gallic honor, followed by capitulation. Then, it seems, the real war begins, moving down dusty roads to Kasserine, the initial blooding of the U.S. Army, the rise of Patton and Bradley, and the inexorable sweep of operations to Sicily, the Italian mainland, and eventually the beaches and hedgerows of Normandy.

Vincent O’Hara has done much to correct this impression and to give TORCH the attention it deserves. Readers will come away with a much better understanding of the difficulties faced by both the French defenders and the Allied invaders and the political currents that swirled about the operation from the very beginning—and with an appreciation for how the results could have been very different.

As O’Hara points out, 1942 was a parlous time for the Allies. Axis armies were cutting deep into the Soviet Union, and fear that it would drop out of the war was palpable. U.S. leaders, particularly George Marshall, eschewed what might be considered military sideshows and argued for a rapid buildup of force in Great Britain, followed by a cross-channel invasion at the earliest opportunity. The British, led by Churchill and scarred by their experience in World War I, preferred less direct approaches, avoiding the U.S.-favored direct attack until victory was assured. TORCH represented a victory for British planners and a setback for Marshall. This is among the better-known elements of the North African campaign, and O’Hara does it justice without dwelling overlong on the topic.
In contrast, French politics usually are, for the most part, underexamined, and O'Hara provides a valuable understanding of French actors and motives. His examination of Marshal Pétain’s efforts to end the German occupation and restore France to something approaching its former status is both convincing and useful. So too is O'Hara’s meticulous description of French forces, plans, and readiness in North Africa on the eve of invasion.

O’Hara’s discussion of invasion planning and preparation and the movement to the various landing beaches is excellent. Although dwarfed by later invasions, TORCH required a major effort at a time when Allied amphibious resources were extremely limited. Scheduling convoys, arranging for carrier-based air support, and coping with potentially lethal surf conditions all foreshadowed difficulties that would have to be overcome in later amphibious operations. The plan was audacious. Allied forces were to carry out five simultaneous and geographically separated landings on the Atlantic and Mediterranean shores of North Africa, then race to Tunis to trap German forces in Africa and deny those forces additional support from Europe. Accomplishing this would bring the Mediterranean under much greater Allied control, and the Axis might have to take some pressure off the Soviet Union to deal with the new threat to the south.

As O’Hara makes clear, French resistance, while affected by conflicting orders on whether to take Allied troops under fire, was not a token effort, although the loss of only 1,700 Allied wounded and killed may have contributed to this impression. Although ill equipped and often outnumbered, French forces, including colonial auxiliaries and units of the Foreign Legion, fought well. While some French units offered no resistance, they did so in obedience to orders from their commanders. O’Hara details the action on each of the five invasion beaches in detail.

The naval battle of Casablanca was, as O’Hara describes it, “the largest surface, air, and subsurface naval action fought in the Atlantic Ocean during World War II.” The battle, which lasted six hours, featured naval gunfire duels between USS Massachusetts and the disabled French battleship Jean Bart. French shore batteries engaged U.S. warships and French combatants shelled Allied landing craft en route to the invasion beaches. French officers handled their ships with courage and daring, and they came close to engaging the Allied troop transports. Maps are provided, greatly aiding the reader’s understanding of how the battle was conducted. There was also a naval engagement off Oran, and Italian and German aircraft and submarines conducted significant antishipping actions as the campaign wore on. O’Hara illustrates that, far from being an Allied walkover, the possibility of TORCH resulting in a disaster at sea was much more likely than is normally acknowledged.

A greater appreciation of TORCH by students of amphibious warfare is warranted. Many of the problems associated with projecting power from the sea were identified during this campaign. The role of beachmasters, the timing and coordination of shore bombardment, and the logistical difficulties associated with landing supplies on an open beach in high surf all were factors. At
times the lessons learned were small, such as the discovery that landing net rungs spaced too far apart posed a significant danger to debarking troops. Some elements of the TORCH landings touch on current questions. For example, although the Saint-Nazaire and Dieppe raids had demonstrated previously the inherent difficulty in conducting an amphibious assault on built-up areas, TORCH would feature several efforts along these lines. The most dramatic of these was an attempt to land U.S. troops from HMS Walney and HMS Hartland (the former U.S. Coast Guard cutters Sebago and Pontchartrain, respectively) directly onto the moles of Oran Harbor. Both vessels quickly were identified as hostile and ran an intense gauntlet of French fire until sunk. In contrast, an attempt was made to sail USS Dallas, a vintage destroyer carrying seventy-five specially trained assault troops, six miles up Port Lyautey’s Wadi Sebou waterway to carry out an attack on a critically important all-weather airfield. The effort, despite experiencing significant delays, succeeded. In an ever-urbanizing world, the viability of direct amphibious assaults may be open to debate once again.

O’Hara rightfully points out that TORCH, in the main, failed to deliver hoped-for results. It would take five months to achieve victory in North Africa, not the three weeks anticipated. The operation did nothing to ease the plight of the Soviet Union and the Mediterranean remained contested waters. The African campaign drew men, matériel, and shipping away from efforts to support a direct invasion of Europe. TORCH resulted in the total occupation of France by Germany and the intentional scuttling of the French fleet at Toulon. None of these results, according to O’Hara, inflicted real loss on Italy and Germany. However, in the opportunity to identify and resolve amphibious challenges and as a beginning to the development of a truly combined strategic command, TORCH was of value. If, as O’Hara claims, TORCH also ensured that France would not become a true ally of Germany, the strategic benefit may have been significant.

TORCH sheds some welcome light on a campaign that too often is passed over. Scholars and lay readers alike will find the book useful. While O’Hara has performed yeoman service in providing this detailed account of the amphibious portion of the campaign, perhaps his greatest contribution is to restore the reputation of naval forces that, far from offering token resistance, fought with courage and tenacity, often against superior odds.

RICHARD J. NORTON


This book provides a detailed reexamination of the main contributory factors leading to Allied victory in World War II. In many ways the book’s argument is not so much new as it is a revision of the revisionists. During the Cold War the narrative was largely that the Western Allies had triumphed over Germany and Japan with some help from the Soviet Union. That narrative was challenged at the time, and with more success after the end of the Cold