



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

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Vincent O'Hara's account of the Operation Torch landings in Morocco and Algeria in November 1942 reveals the inherent chanciness of military operations and the slender margins of success even in seemingly one-sided actions. Most general histories of the war in the Mediterranean concentrate on the arguments between the Allies prior to the decision for Torch and on the controversial deal they eventually struck with Adm. François Darlan. In contrast, O'Hara focuses intently on the beaches themselves, where more or less everything that could go wrong for the Allies did so: inexperienced boat crews badly missed their designated landing areas, French land, air, and naval forces offered unexpectedly stiff resistance, and the Axis reinforcements that poured into Tunisia were subdued only after five long months of bitter fighting, not the mere three weeks Allied planners predicted (387). The Allies nonetheless prevailed and learned lessons about amphibious operations that later proved invaluable elsewhere in the Mediterranean and on D-Day in Normandy.

O'Hara, an independent scholar and prolific author of books on modern, mostly Second World War, naval history,¹ has now written a well researched, detailed operational history of the Torch landings based squarely on action reports and war diaries. The volume's short introduction sketches the military and political contexts of Torch, but the author's main interest is in the dramatic events that unfolded between the first landings (8 Nov. 1942) and the ceasefire agreement hammered out with Darlan (10–13 Nov.). The sometimes overwhelming details gathered here yield a generalized picture highlighting the geographical and numerical magnitude of the operation and showing how things might well have turned out very differently. While many histories emphasize the relatively modest casualties—ca. five hundred Allied killed, as against fifteen hundred French and French-led colonial troops—O'Hara's focus is on the fierce resistance that caused these losses.

The author begins by discussing the development of what he terms the “art of amphibious warfare.” He notes that the Allies had little experience to guide them: the only major opposed landing in modern warfare had been the debacle at Gallipoli in 1915, not something anyone wished to repeat. Some military theorists, like the British historian Basil Liddell Hart, even concluded that large-scale landings were now “almost impossible” (20). Earlier in the war, the British, in conjunction with Charles De Gaulle's Free French, had attempted amphibious operations at Dakar (Sept. 1940) and launched small commando raids on the Aegean island of Castelorizzo (Feb. 1941), the Libyan port of Bardia (Apr. 1941), Vichy French forces at the mouth of the Litani River in Syria (June 1941), and the port of St. Nazaire (Mar. 1942). All ended in failure, plagued by “poor intelligence and faulty navigation” and inadequate training and equipment (22). Commando raids on Norwegian islands in 1941 were more successful, as was the major assault on Vichy-ruled Madagascar (May 1942), where nighttime landings minimized opposition on the beaches as the navy put fourteen thousand men ashore on the first day (24).

1. E.g., *Struggle for the Middle Sea: The Great Navies at War in the Mediterranean Theater, 1940-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2009), and *In Passage Perilous: Malta and the Convoy Battles of June 1942* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2012).

United States forces had developed doctrine for amphibious landings in the 1930s, but in 1942 they had even less practical experience than the British: the first American landings in the Pacific, at Guadalcanal (Aug. 1942), were successful but too recent to have much effect on Torch. Moreover, landings made shortly before Torch during the well known raids on Dieppe in August and on Tobruk in September were disasters. At Tobruk, bad navigation, intelligence, and equipment led to the loss of 740 men (25). In short, at the time of Torch, the Allies were sorely deficient in nearly every aspect of amphibious warfare, including such basics as choosing the kind of vessels best suited to carry men from ship to shore; in the end, they used at least six types of landing craft (28–29). Such shortcomings of doctrine, training, and matériel underscore the risks involved in Operation Torch and the daring of the men who planned and executed it. But in war the best way to learn is by doing.

In the event, the landings were, O'Hara writes, an “orgy of disorder” (87). Submarines and guideboats intended to lead the landing craft ashore were often out of place, and ill-trained crews struggling with darkness, tides, and currents landed troops in the wrong places at the wrong times. On Morocco's Atlantic coast, the author notes laconically, “high surf did not help” (219). The widespread confusion was most effectively overcome by junior leaders who rose to the challenge by pushing quickly inland. Elsewhere, as at Port Lyautey, “men wandered about aimlessly, hopelessly lost” (159). The landing craft themselves were battered by the sea. At Casablanca, a stunning 242 of 378 boats were soon out of action, and similar losses occurred elsewhere (219). Though Allied troops were supported by naval guns, imperfect fire control often inflicted “friendly fire” casualties.

Fortunately for the Allies, the stout but uneven French resistance ended when Allied leaders hammered out a deal with Admiral Darlan on 11 November. But it had, at its height, posed a serious threat to the landings, particularly at Casablanca, where Adm. François Michelier and Rear Adm. Raymond Gervais de Lafond led destroyers, light cruisers, and submarines in a series of determined sorties against Allied shipping. These were, O'Hara observes, the only warships that fired on American landing craft in World War II. With better luck (or better aimed torpedoes), they “could have materially affected the outcome of the landings” (218). By contrast, blasts from the USS *Massachusetts*' mighty sixteen-inch main battery disabled the ship's own gunnery radar, forcing it to shoot “from the hip” (201–2)!

In the naval actions at Casablanca, as at all the landings from Safi to Algiers, O'Hara demonstrates that the margin of victory was far narrower than is often thought. While it was unlikely that the French could have repelled the entire invasion, a major Allied setback at even one landing area would have had substantial military and political consequences. As it was, US opposition to organizing landings in eastern Algeria or Tunisia gave Axis forces time to feed reinforcements into Tunis. The result—“Torch's worst failure”—was to delay the capture of Tunis by several months, forcing the Allies to devote another year to major operations in the Mediterranean (286). Allied planners used this time to “sharpen” the doctrine of amphibious warfare and apply the lessons of Torch in the Husky landings in Sicily the next summer (289). The succeeding operations at Salerno, Anzio, Normandy, and the French Riviera were critical to the Allied victory in Europe: the “experience gained in North Africa was fundamental to this record of success” (289).

O'Hara's gripping operational narrative is the great strength of his book; he is less sure-footed on the political issues that bookend it. But these matters have been well rehearsed elsewhere and lie outside O'Hara's central concern.² Moreover, even if it does not explore the broader political aspects of

2. It is, nonetheless, striking that he cites neither Arthur Funk's classic *The Politics of Torch: The Allied Landings and the Algiers Putsch, 1942* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1974), nor Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

North Africa's place in the "Allied Path to Victory," this book's corrective to the widespread assumptions of easy success makes an important contribution to the historiography of the war in the Mediterranean and North Africa.