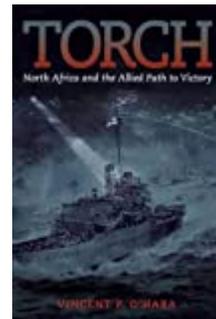




Vincent P. O'Hara. *Torch: North Africa and the Allied Path to Victory.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2015. Maps. ix + 373 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61251-823-7.



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The title *Torch: North Africa and the Allied Path to Victory* suggests a work focused broadly on the diplomatic aspects of the Operation Torch campaign and, militarily, on the British and American efforts in air, on land, and at sea, perhaps even engaging with Douglas Porchâs seminal 2004 work, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II*, on the theater whose title is echoed in Vincent P. OâHaraâs subtitle. But OâHaraâs background, as one of the preeminent authors of operational naval history in the United States, and the bookâs publisher, the Naval Institute Press, say far more about the workâs true focus on military rather than political developments, emphasizing the US Navyâs role over that of the ground and air forces, and a preference for ship-to-ship over amphibious engagements, although the latter receives excellent coverage. The work does not interact significantly with Porchâs earlier work, although OâHaraâs conclusion seems to reinforce Porchâs, even if the two authors disagree on whether the operation could be considered a success or not. As a result, the work, while an excellent and highly detailed operational history narrowly focused on the US Navyâs and Royal Navyâs initial role in the eventual conquest of North Africa, falls well short of Porchâs broader study, which, along with Rick Atkinsonâs work (*An Army at Dawn: The*

War in North Africa, 1942-1943 [2002]), shifted interpretations of the theater from a strategic backwater to the decisive proving ground for Western Alliesâ eventual victory in World War II.

OâHaraâs highly readable work opens with a broad overview of the strategic and diplomatic situation that led the United States and Great Britain to launch a massive amphibious assault on Vichy Franceâs North African holdings in November 1942. By exploiting French sources, OâHara does justice to the political arena befitting the sea serviceâs long prominence as a diplomatic tool and reinforces the fallacy of simply âwishing awayâ political considerations when they intrude on military operations. George C. Marshall, the US Armyâs chief of staff, opposed the operation throughout its various iterations, believing it to be a diversion from the buildup of forces in both the United Kingdom and the Pacific theater, which placed increasing demands on US resources as the Solomons campaign opened in August 1942. But the British, with their backs to the wall at El Alamein, prevailed upon President Franklin D. Roosevelt to reconsider a Mediterranean option first broached immediately after Pearl Harbor but later tabled as the reality of building up for fighting a global war settled on Washington. In late July 1942, at Winston Churchillâs

insistence, Roosevelt approved the project, recognizing the need to provide some concrete assistance to the Soviets then retreating before their fortress of Stalingrad, and to involve American forces in ground combat somewhere with the European Axis, preferably before the mid-term elections held the first week of November. Though the operation narrowly missed this latter goal, it largely achieved the others, adhering the United States to (or ensnaring it in) the Mediterranean for the duration of the war and diverting air, if not ground strength, from the German campaign against the Soviets. OâHara covers this quickly but in excellent detail in the workâs opening chapters.

He then moves on to a discussion of the rudimentary nature of amphibious doctrine at this stage of the war, preparing the ground for his thesis. Though not explicitly stated, the argument that emerges is that the Western Allies were in no way prepared for a major amphibious operation, as was contemplated to relieve pressure on the Soviets, at this stage of the war. In the landings at Oran, Algiers, and especially Casablanca, OâHara conclusively demonstrates, amphibious operations were still too hastily conceived and poorly conducted to have had any chance of success against the European continent, even if the coastal defenses were still in a rudimentary stage. Time and again, small French garrisons with limited resources and of questionable motivation inflicted disproportionate losses against Allied landing forces. At Casablanca, the US Navy lost 242 of 378 landing craft in the assault phase, crippling follow-on operations (p. 219). In addition, Axis aircraft and submarines sank over a dozen transports and several warships in the operation (a detailed accounting of which helpfully appears in appendix 4), calling into question the wisdom of executing either Operation Sledgehammer, an emergency landing on the Cotentin Peninsula in 1942, or Operation Roundup, the larger invasion planned for 1943. Forces were still too green, too poorly trained, too short of critical supplies, and facing a far stronger enemy than they would in Normandy in 1944. OâHara concludes: âa delayed invasion of northwestern Europe was indeed a good thing. The British appreciated better than the Americans how difficult it would be to land an amphibious forceânot to mention an Armyâagainst a strong and determined foe. They were probably right that a major landing against France in 1942 had little chance of success and that Roundup in spring 1943 was only marginally more likely to succeedâ (p. 288).

But, though Operation Torch saved the Allies from embarking on a disastrously early return to the conti-

nent and gave them time to develop the doctrine and build the leaders necessary, OâHara is still highly critical of âTorchâs failure to achieve its original goal,â the capture of Tunisia and the reopening of the Mediterranean to Allied shipping (p. 285). OâHara laments that the slow advance into Tunisia stalled a quick Allied victory and lengthened the war, discounting Porchâs view that this might ultimately have worked in the Alliesâ favor. By encouraging the Axis to dump forces and supplies into Tunisia, the British and Americans forced them to fight at the end of a logistical shoestring, inflicting a far worse defeat in May 1943 than they could have had the previous December. Porch notes, âby committing to the southern shore of the Mediterranean at the end of a precarious supply line between two advancing Allied pincers, Hitler had, in effect, stuck his head âin a bag,â offering the Allies the opportunity to achieve a stunning strategic coup.â[1] In addition, the highly attritional battle for Tunisia actually hastened the conquest of Sicily, invaded just two months after the capture of Tunis, because Axis forces were too weak in the air and at sea to mount an effective defense. OâHara spends just one brief chapter discussing the campaignâs results, and most of that focuses on French political intrigue in Tunis and British follow-on landings on the Tunisian coast. And not landing further east than Algiers, which would have been required for an early coup in Tunisia, seems justified by the much-stronger Axis response by aircraft and submarines as the Allies approached bases in Sicily and Sardinia, a fact OâHara acknowledges as a âsharp lesson, if one was indeed needed, of the danger of risking ships beyond the range of effective fighter coverâ (p. 274).

OâHara is most in his element when relating naval combat. He dubiously describes the engagement between French and American ships off Casablanca, as âthe largest surface, air and subsurface naval action fought in the Atlantic Ocean during World War IIâ (p. 195). This pronouncement diminishes the greater strategic significance of many of the convoy actions in the Atlantic, as well as the Anglo-Italian naval battles (which, technically, took place in the Mediterranean, not the Atlantic), not to mention Operation Neptune, the naval component of D-Day. Still, OâHara recreates the duel between the American battleship *Massachusetts* and the French shore batteries and the incomplete French battleship *Jean Bart*, moored in Casablancaâs harbor, in stunning detail. One can almost smell the cordite as he narrates, almost shot by shot, the naval engagement that wrecked a sortie by French *contre-torpilleurs* and largely protected the vital transports from air and subsurface threats. The discuss-

sion of this engagement, recreated from ship logs and successfully exploiting French and American sources, forms the centerpiece of the book and is expertly aided by O'Hara's own maps illustrating ship movements at different stages of the battle.

In the end, O'Hara has created an enduring work of military history or, at least, what military history used to be. The program for the 2016 annual meeting of the Society for Military History (SMH), issued shortly after publication of this book, heralded a presidential panel titled "The New Military History: Intersections with the History of the Environment, Gender and Race."^[2] O'Hara has little to say on these topics (though he does, without calling attention to it, spend a great deal of time on the weather and hydrography and their effects on the landings) and the work seems almost blissfully unaware of the recent turn in the field. That such works can continue to be written, published, and, presumably, devoured by an adoring public speaks to the growing rift between popular and academic history. The book is unlikely to ever be assigned in an academic setting, outside, perhaps, of a seminar offered in a Professional Military Education (PME) program on naval combat in World War II, but that does not seem to deter the author, or the publisher, in the least. They boldly steam, like the audacious

troop-laden destroyers at Oran and Safi, directly into the teeth of the defenses and, just as surprisingly, continue to achieve some success. But it does lead to several larger questions: Could *TORCH* have been a richer work had it engaged with the broader themes of the "new military history," or is it better the way it is, an unapologetic "guns and bugles" history that will undoubtedly excite fans of that genre? Should historians who aspire to follow in O'Hara's wake rightfully expect to be shunned by the academy? And, in a discipline that seems committed to "Crossing Borders (and) Crossing Boundaries" (the theme of the 2016 SMH annual meeting), can these two camps continue to peacefully and successfully coexist under the same broad banner?

Notes

[1]. Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 369.

[2]. Society for Military History, "Preliminary Program," December 9, 2015, <http://imgsvr.eventrebels.com/ERImg/01/38/67/PreliminaryProgram9.12.2015.pdf>, accessed January 15, 2016.

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