

Torch: North Africa and the Allied Path to Victory

by Vincent P. O'Hara

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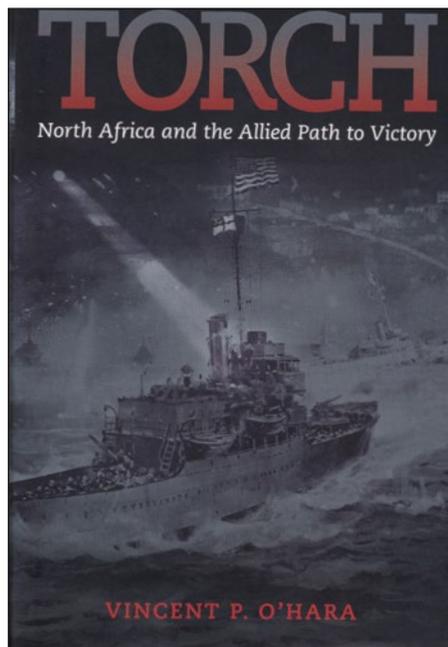
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Reviewed by Bernd Horn

When one reflects upon Allied operations in the Second World War, almost by default, one normally thinks of the D-Day invasion and the Normandy Campaign, the bitter slog up the Italian 'boot,' and the brutal clash of survival on the Eastern Front. Rarely, does Operation *Torch*, the first Allied combined offensive operation designed to seize French North Africa in November 1942, come to the fore. Yet, this operation represented at the time the largest amphibious assault in military history. Moreover, it was a complex operation that entailed five amphibious assault landings supported by simultaneous daring commando and airborne attacks executed across over three thousand kilometres of coastline. Furthermore, the operation's genesis and execution involved extensive civil-military interaction and coalition



growing pains. Quite simply, it was a precursor to Allied success against the Axis powers.

This failure to fully recognize the importance, impact and value of Operation *Torch* is effusively addressed by the renowned naval researcher, Vincent O'Hara. He masterfully describes and explains the controversial and complex operation, placing it both within the context of the evolution of amphibious warfare, as well as its station within the larger war. Importantly, O'Hara integrates the French perspective into his narrative, providing excellent insight and understanding from all participants.

The book begins with an examination of the political / strategic discourse between the Allies, specifically, the British and Americans with regard to the political requirement to mount a large scale operation against Germany to assist the Soviets, who were under extreme pressure from the German offensive. The philosophical difference between the American preference for striking directly at Occupied Europe in France, and the more cautious periphery assault option of the British, created great tensions between the two camps. The author does an outstanding job in detailing the debate and eventual compromise. In addition, he adds valuable insight into the complexity of the French involvement in the political intrigue surrounding Operation *Torch*.

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The author next moves on to the operation itself, and examines the five separate landings individually. O'Hara meticulously describes how the ships arrived, how the troops got ashore, and how they were supplied. Additionally, he describes in exacting detail the naval battles that accompanied the landings (complete with maps detailing individual vessel movements over time). However, he deals with the subsequent land battles in a more cursory manner.

In short, O'Hara tells the fascinating story of how the Allies evolved their system of coalition and amphibious operations and applied it to Operation *Torch*, which, in essence, was then applied and honed on subsequent operations. As such, it's the story of how the Allies won the Second World War in Europe.

The book's comprehensive narrative and detail are supported by outstanding graphic support. For instance, the volume includes 21 detailed maps that allow the reader to clearly follow the operation, as well as the naval battles that accompanied it. Moreover,

there are 28 black-and-white photographs that provide a clear picture of personalities, terrain, and equipment. In addition, there are four tables that outline the order of battle of participants, a glossary of abbreviations, and a detailed list of ships sunk. Finally, the book possesses comprehensive endnotes, and an excellent select bibliography for further study.

In sum, the book is simply impressive. Well written and researched, the volume is an excellent source book/reference for Operation *Torch*. O'Hara once again substantiates his reputation as a leading scholar of the Mediterranean theatre of the Second World War. I strongly recommend the book for anyone who is interested in that particular war, military history, coalition operations, as well as civil military affairs and strategic planning.

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