



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— WORLD WAR II —

Operation Flagpole

Preparation for Operation Torch

by Robert Girod JD PhD

America has employed spies dating back to before the War of Independence. As the war clouds gathered over the Far East and Europe in the 1930s, the United States had departments within the Navy, Army, and State Department that gathered intelligence, but there was no coordination and very little sharing among them. These departments were even in competition, as well as with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Each focused on their own needs and sent individual reports to the president.

Realizing the need for intelligence and for the coordination of intelligence gathering, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed General William “Wild Bill” Donovan, a Medal of Honor recipient in World War I, a Columbia Law School graduate, and successful lawyer, to head the new Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI) in July 1941. In June 1942, COI was renamed the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The military services and the FBI opposed the OSS, and it was excluded from operating in several theaters during World War II.

General Dwight Eisenhower, however, recognized OSS’s value and embraced it. However, the OSS was not the only player in clandestine intelligence collection for this campaign: select military officers played another role in covert preparation for the invasion.

OPERATION TORCH

In June 1940, when France fell to the Nazi blitzkrieg, the US ambassador and staff were still in the Embassy in Paris. Most departed for the United States;

some transferred to Vichy, France, to remain with Marshal Pétain and his government. Two of the senior members of the US Embassy in Vichy were Robert D. Murphy, the Chargé d’Affaires, and the naval attaché, Commander Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter.¹ These men and their information about Vichy France helped develop the first military plan against Nazi Germany.

On November 8, 1942 US, UK, Free French, Canadian, Dutch and Australian forces conducted the first allied amphibious invasion in the European Theater of War during World War II against France’s North African colonies. The invasion – Operation Torch – was the culmination of planning, which had begun nearly two years earlier by a few men, led by Robert Murphy, by collecting intelligence. The organization of an American spy network in North Africa was manifested by the organization of “vice-consuls,” which were twelve military reserve officers acting under the State Department. (After the creation of OSS these vice consuls came under the direction of the OSS). These vice consuls, established in May 1941, resulted from the Murphy-Weygand economic agreement of 10 March 1941 that allowed certain American goods to be imported into French Northwest Africa, circumventing the British blockade of the area, if Vichy Authorities allowed American observers to ensure the goods did not fall into the hands of the Germans or Italians. (Général Maxime Weygand was the senior ranking official of Vichy France in Africa at that time.) This role allowed the vice consuls to collect intelligence on all aspects of Northwest African affairs, including Axis penetration.² The twelve vice consuls arrived in Algiers, Tunis, and Casablanca in mid-summer of 1941, before the U.S. had entered the war.³

If the Germany could be driven from North Africa, Allied bases in Tunisia would threaten the Axis from the air and provide a staging area for operations. Control of the Moroccan city of Casablanca, a major railroad terminal in North Africa, could facilitate the necessary movement of troops and supplies throughout the region. Serious planning for Operation Torch, did not begin until early August 1942. Then Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower had been sent to England by Army Chief of Staff, General George Marshall and given over-all command of the expedition.⁴

1. Hillenkoetter became the first Director of Central Intelligence serving from 1947 to 1950.

2. Walker, David A. *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Oct., 1987, pp. 667-679.

3. Beam, John C. “The Intelligence Background of Operation Torch,” *Parameters* 13, no. 1 (1983), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol13/iss1/1>.

4. Sulzberger, C.L. *World War II*; New York, NY: American Heritage

He directed Donovan's OSS to organize guerilla fighters to assist the upcoming invasion forces. Guerillas were recruited and armed by OSS agents and stationed throughout Vichy French North Africa for espionage and intelligence operations.^{5,6}

Probably the most critical intelligence requirement related to the loyalties of French military commanders in North Africa. Allied planning was complicated by the fact that France itself was partially occupied by the Nazis and partially under Petain's pro-Berlin Vichy regime. This left France's overseas colonies in limbo. Some French officers in North Africa were loyal to Général de Gaulle's movement in England. Others conspired to back Général Henri Honore Giraud, who had escaped from a German prison camp. Still others pledged allegiance to Petain's Vichy commanders. And there were those who merely waited to see how the war would go.⁷ This situation required intelligence to know who would support the invasion and who would oppose it.

OPERATION FLAGPOLE

The invasion of North Africa was nearly compromised when a secret letter, detailing the entire operation, fell into Spanish hands. The courier had been on board a ship that was torpedoed by the Germans and his body, along with the letter, was recovered by the Spanish. Fortunately, the plan was never leaked to the Germans.⁸

On 17 October, Robert Murphy reported that Major Général Charles Mast, chief of staff of the French Nineteenth Corps, was willing to talk to allied military representatives about cooperation. On 21 October 1942, Eisenhower secretly sent his deputy, Major General Mark W. Clark, with a handful of "specialists," by submarine to visit Algeria and confer with Murphy, who had proliferated an intelligence network

throughout North Africa on direct orders from President Roosevelt.⁹

Clark, dressed in a lieutenant colonel's uniform. The other officers left England and flew to Gibraltar,¹⁰ and boarded the British submarine HMS Seraph, commanded by Lieutenant Norman Limbury Auchinleck Jewell. Three commandos of the Royal Marines — Captain C.P. Courtney, Captain R.T. Livingstone, and Lieutenant J.P. Foote — served as bodyguards and would land with Clark. Clark told LT Jewell that they were looking for a house "with white walls and a red-tiled roof," 12 miles west of Cherchell on the Algerian coast.¹¹

Despite rain and rough seas the group arrived at 0400 hours on October 21st. As they left the submarine a pair of Algerian boats began to fish within 200 feet. Jewell had no choice but to submerge and attempt to land later. By 2200 hours, the fishing boats were gone, but by then there was no longer a signal light from the villa indicating that it was safe to come ashore.

Clark discussed various scenarios with Jewell. If Clark and his group did not return, the submarine was to crawl across the bottom of the sea near the shore and wait until October 25th before departing for safer waters. Clark's group suggested that they land in civilian clothes, but Clark thought this a bad idea, because they would be executed as spies if they were caught, and it might send the wrong message to the French. "Hell no! We'll go ashore as American officers and nothing else," Clark announced. "It will help the people we are dealing with to remember who we are and whom we represent. We mustn't allow them to forget for a moment that we are American and that there are millions more Americans behind us."¹²

A little after midnight on October 22nd, the signal light appeared and the group made their way to shore through the heavy surf, emerging soaking wet. Clark was carrying \$2,000 in gold for use in an emergency. Robert Murphy was waiting for them on the beach and welcomed them to North Africa.

Press, 1970. p. 134.

5. Walker.

6. Much useful intelligence on North Africa was also provided by the Polish intelligence network in Algiers, call "Agency Africa," under Mieczystaw Zygfryd Slowikowski. (See Halik Kochanski. *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp 234-6. Also, Tessa Stirling, Daria Nalicz, Tadeusz Dubicki, Tony Blair & Marek Belka (eds.). *Intelligence Co-Operation Between Poland and Great Britain During World War II*. Elstree, UK: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005.

7. Sulzberger, p. 135.

8. Mikolashik, Jon. "General Mark Clark's Secret Mission to North Africa." *Warfare History Network*. September 7, 2016. <https://warfare-historynetwork.com/2016/09/07/general-mark-clarks-secret-mission-to-north-africa/>.

9. Sulzberger, p. 135. (President Roosevelt directed Robert Murphy to bypass the State Department, which opposed the mission as "undiplomatic")

10. The airplane, named Red Gremlin, was piloted by Paul Tibbetts, who later piloted the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945.

11. Mikolashik.

12. Ibid.

WHICH SIDE?

The Americans realized that Vichy France's government was hostile toward the British. Many in Vichy France held to the terms of the armistice, but only as long as Hitler remained the master of Europe. At the slightest diminishing of Hitler's power, they were ready to change allegiance. The North African landings could force such a change of allegiance. A significant problem involved Général De Gaulle, who was disliked in Washington and suspected in London of indiscretion and a lack of caution in his conversations. As a result, he was excluded from planning decisions. This was an insult he never forgot or forgave.

NEGOTIATION AND COORDINATION

Around 0600 hours, Clark and his men met with Général Mast and his aide, Emile Jousse. Clark was impressed with Mast and remarked later that he was "a man who can be relied on." Mast asked if the invasion could be expanded to southern France. Clark told Mast that this was logistically impossible. Mast wanted more specifics on the invasion of North Africa. Clark was trying to gain the trust of the French, but he could not tell them exact details.¹³

"I tried to keep a poker face while saying that half a million Allied troops could come in, and I said that we could put 2,000 planes in the air as well as plenty of US Navy," Clark said. (In reality, only 112,000 troops would land in North Africa on November 8th.) Once Mast was satisfied, Clark asked him what he could do for the Allies. Mast requested 2,000 rifles, ammunition, and grenades to use in the seizure of key areas. The French were to take control of communications centers, seize troop barracks, arrest pro-Vichy commanders, occupy public buildings, and try to prevent the French Navy from firing on the Allied landing force.¹⁴ This last task was the most important. Mast and his followers were taking an extreme risk. Few Frenchmen in North Africa supported Free French leader, Charles de Gaulle, and if found out, Mast and the others would likely be executed for treason. And if the French refused to fight the Americans, German

forces would likely occupy the rest of France and seize the French fleet at Toulon.¹⁵

Finally, Clark and Mast discussed who would command the French forces. President Roosevelt had designated Général Henri Giraud as the overall commander of the French in North Africa, and Mast agreed. However, when Giraud arrived in North Africa, he demanded to be supreme Allied commander of the entire operation.¹⁶

On Tuesday afternoon, October 23rd, once the covert negotiations were nearly concluded, Clark changed into a French officer's uniform and went out to stretch his legs along the North African coast. After Clark returned and changed back into his own uniform, the French reported that the police were on their way to the house. The Arab servants were instructed to stay away from the house for the day, but this made them suspicious and when they spotted several sets of footprints on the sandy beach heading toward the house, they reported their suspicions to the police. Clark and his group retreated to the wine cellar beneath the house. French police stomped back and forth across the rug that covered the trapdoor. The police were so close that the Americans could hear them questioning the owner of the house, Henri Tessier, and Murphy, about their presence. Murphy and Tessier pretended to be drunk. Murphy told the investigating officers that they had been having a party and there were women in the bedrooms upstairs. He asked them not to embarrass a "senior American diplomat," who was only having a little fun, by letting the matter go.¹⁷

While in the wine cellar, Captain Courtney was fighting back a cough and told Clark, "General, I'm afraid I'll choke." Clark quietly responded, "I'm afraid you won't." He handed the struggling commando some gum. Later, Courtney asked why American chewing gum was so tasteless. Clark laughed and said that the gum had come right out of his own mouth and had been chewed on for hours. After a few minutes, the police left. Apparently, they were not looking for American officers, but black market merchants and illegal trading. With the police gone for now, Clark decided the mission had been completed. After evading capture, they tried to return to the Seraph. Unfortunately, the rough seas prevented the group from reaching the submarine. Clark considered alternatives if they could not reach the submarine, but by 0400 hours on October 23rd and decided to try one more time. And

13. Mikolashek.

14. The loyalties of the French Navy were in question, especially after the British Royal Navy attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir, near Oran, Algeria, on July 3, 1940, which killed almost 1,300 French sailors. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_on_Mers-el-Kébir)

15. Mikolashek.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

on October 24th, the Seraph surfaced and Clark wired Eisenhower of the success of the mission.¹⁸ Back in London, Clark met with King George VI, who told the American, “I know all about you. You’re the one who took that fabulous trip...”¹⁹

THE DARLAN DEAL

A few days before the invasion, all of Clark’s hard work was nearly undone by the arrival of French Amiral Jean François Xavier Darlan, who was making a visit to North Africa. Darlan, was the Vichy deputy prime minister and outranked Mast and Giraud. He had the respect of the Vichy troops in North Africa, and his arrival would significantly impact the plans Clark and Mast had negotiated. But, while Robert Murphy was serving as counselor to the Vichy government, he came to believe that Darlan would work with the United States. He had secretly told the American diplomat, “When you have 3,000 tanks, 6,000 planes and 500,000 men to bring to Marseilles, let me know. Then we shall welcome you.”²⁰

A deal with Darlan was necessary and, thus, negotiated. The so-called “Darlan Deal” would become one of the most controversial events of the war, but Eisenhower knew of the importance of dealing with Darlan. Eisenhower said, “The military advantages of an immediate cease fire are so overwhelming that I’ll go promptly to join Clark in Algiers and if the proposals of the French are as definite as I understand, I shall immediately recognize Darlan as the highest French authority in the region. He can act as the interim head of such civil government as exists, on condition that he carries out any orders I may issue.” Invasion preparations had already been made, based upon covert negotiations, and the invasion was set to take place.²¹

CONCLUSION

On November 8, 1942, the Torch landings took place, the Allied invasion force safely reached the coast of North Africa, and Allied troops stormed the beaches.

The operation was hampered by weather, navigational and communication problems. Patton’s Western task force landed without naval bombardment because it was hoped that the French wouldn’t resist. The green American troops were pinned down by a surprisingly light number of French troops. At Safi, the southernmost landing in Morocco, unloading the tanks was a slow process, the American 2nd Armored didn’t finish unloading until the 10th. At Port-Lyautey, north of Casablanca, the landing troops were delayed, giving the French defenders time to organize resistance, and the landings were conducted under artillery bombardment. After the landings at Fedala, the port of Casablanca was surrounded. At Oran, Algeria, in the Central Task Force, the opposition was much tougher but was quickly brought under control. The amphibious landings didn’t go well, but the green Americans would learn the hard lessons that would serve them well before they finally invaded the French coast on June 6, 1944. The Eastern Task Force (the 34 Infantry Division and a brigade from the British 78th Division and British 1 and 6 Commando units) totaled 20,000 troops and landed around Algiers. The experience of Torch and the enhanced cooperation with the naval forces would make the largest invasion force in history less than two years later.²²

The OSS agents stationed in Vichy French North Africa engaged in and contributed to a new dimension of warfare, conducting guerilla activities before and during the invasion, which included espionage and intelligence activities, assessing enemy motivation, and conducting secret negotiations to establish pro-Allied factions.²³

On November 10, after negotiations with Robert Murphy, Darlan ordered all French commanders to cease resistance. Seeking to establish order, General Eisenhower made Darlan the French political chief for all of North Africa and Giraud the French military chief.²³

On Christmas Eve, Amiral Darlan was assassinated by Bonnier de la Chappelle, a young de Gaulle supporter, who believed he would go unpunished. Chappelle was quickly arrested, tried and executed. Giraud took Darlan’s place, and the outcry over the agreement died with Darlan. But the covert negotiations and plans conducted by Murphy and General Clark paved the way for Torch’s ultimate success.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Balestrieri, Steve. *Operation Torch, The Allies Invade North Africa in Morocco, Algeria*, SOFREP, November 7, 2017. <https://sofrep.com/specialoperations/operation-torch-allies-invade-north-africa-morocco-algeria/>.

23. Walker.

24 Sulzberger, p. 136.

Without the intelligence “spy” network established by Robert Murphy and the collaborating guerrilla forces, necessary intelligence for Torch would have been lacking. Locations of French ships, forces, supplies, communications and other infrastructure, tide levels, etc. would have been seriously lacking. More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that the efforts of Murphy, the twelve vice consuls, the spy network, and General Clark to negotiate the cooperation of the Vichy French forces was essential to the success of this invasion.

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