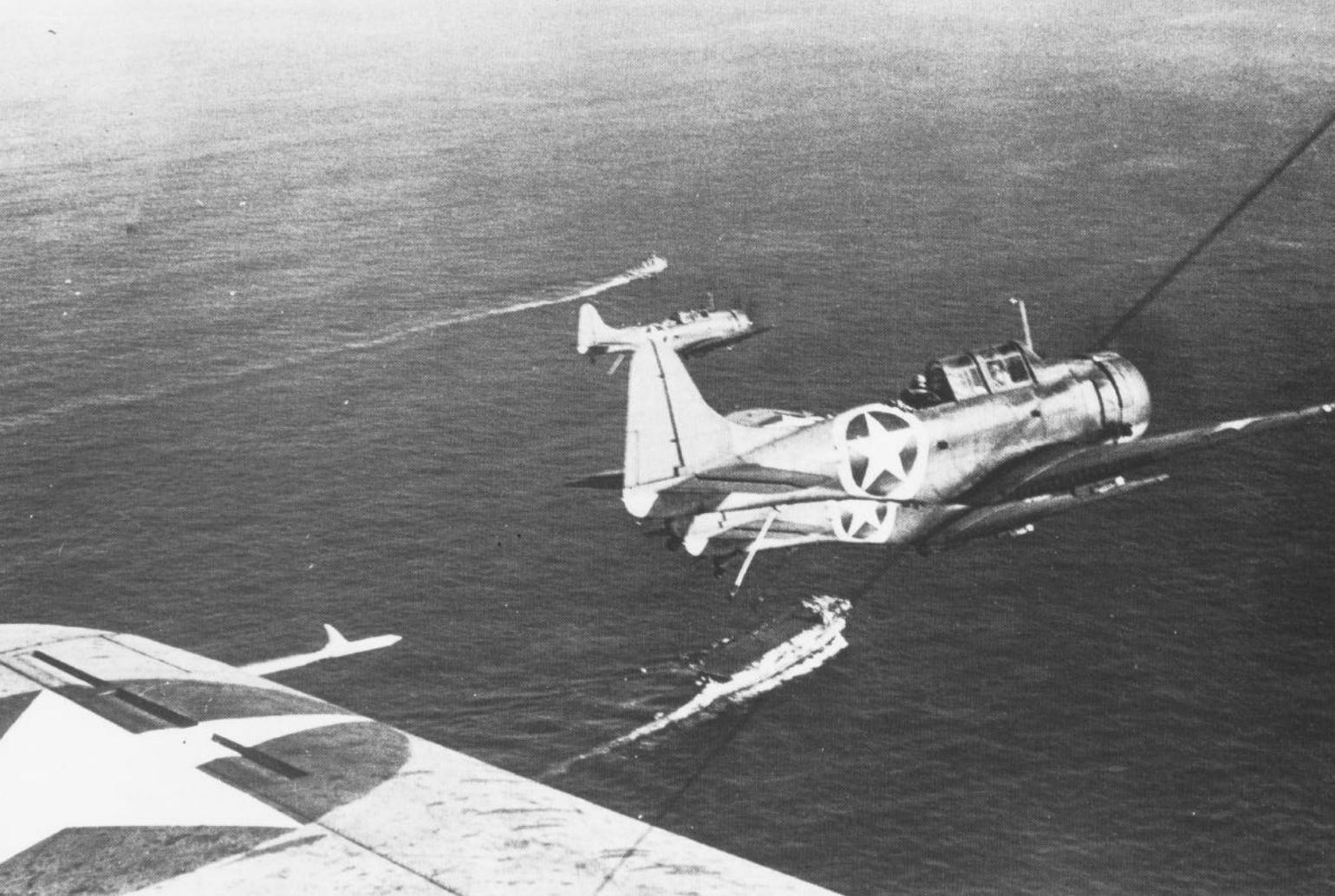


# Naval Aviation in



McDonnell Douglas via Harry Gann

SBD Dauntlesses fly upwind of their carrier after a Torch mission.

## The First Joint Operation of WW II

England was relieved when America entered WW II in December 1941. The British hoped that the U.S. would soon collaborate with them in operations against the Nazis. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, under pressure at home and from the Soviet Union's dictator Josef Stalin to open a second front, pleaded with President Franklin Roosevelt to join British forces in an invasion of the North African coast.

The Vichy French, and the Free French, under General Charles De Gaulle, were furious that British aircraft had bombed French ships in

1940, even though the attacks were to prevent the ships from falling into German hands. (Vichy is a city in southern France where a puppet government was set up when the Nazis conquered France in June 1940.) The British knew that to invade by themselves would probably mean intense French resistance. Only a joint operation with American forces leading the way stood any chance of acceptance.

With the Japanese advance halted in the Pacific, America turned some of its attention to other theaters. Roosevelt agreed to join Churchill in Operation *Torch*, the invasion of North

Africa. American and British naval air played major supporting roles in neutralizing any French opposition to the amphibious landings. It was one of the few times that American naval air power fought in a major campaign outside the Pacific.

## The Vichy French Air Force: A Mixed Bag

On paper, the French forces were formidable and included surface ships, submarines, numerous antiaircraft artillery emplacements, and some 500 aircraft of various types and

# Operation Torch

By Cdr. Peter Mersky, USNR

capabilities.

Before the war, the French bought several U.S. Army Air Force aircraft, and Vichy squadrons now flew the Curtiss Hawk 75A (an export version of the P-36 single-seat fighter), the Martin Maryland twin-engine light bomber and reconnaissance aircraft, and the Douglas DB-7, the export version of the A-20 light twin-engine bomber. If

American crews encountered aerial resistance, it would be one of the few times that American-built aircraft would engage each other in actual combat in the history of aerial warfare.

## The Allied Lineup

The British fleet included seven carriers in three task forces to cover two landing areas along the North African coast. Five American flattops made up the Western Naval Task Force, led by *Ranger* (CV-4). The American force landed at Casablanca, while two British forces landed at Oran (Center) and Algiers (Eastern). The third British task force (Task Force H) covered operations in the Mediterranean, mainly to defend against any opposition from the Italians.

*Suwannee* (ACV-27) had a mixed air group of four squadrons: VGFs 27 and 28 and VGSs 27 and 30. *Sangamon* (ACV-26) had VGF-26 and VGS-26, while *Santee* (ACV-29) included VGF-29 and VGS-29. Another escort carrier, *Chenango* (ACV-28) ferried 76 U.S. Army Air Force P-40 *Warhawks* across the Atlantic for use once a beachhead had been established and the first enemy airfields secured.

(The designation ACV (auxiliary aircraft carrier) preceded CVE (escort carrier). VGF (fighter) and VGS (scouting) squadrons embarked in ACVs.)

For most of the crews, this was their first combat operation, and apprehension and discussion went through all the ready rooms. Ashore, the French crews felt the same way. Many Frenchmen harbored resentment against the British, especially after "l'affaire de Mers-el-Kebir," where Royal Navy dive-bombers struck French ships in African ports in July 1940 to keep them from falling into German hands. However, there was no such feeling toward the Americans. Indeed, many Frenchmen hoped that they could soon join the U.S. forces against their German oppressors.

"How can the Americans think of fighting us?" the Vichy aircrews asked. "After all, we've been waiting for them for two years, and don't we fly many American aircraft? And are we not the descendants of the Escadrille Lafayette?"

Ironically, one of the Americans' potential opponents would be French fighter squadron GC II/5 at Casablanca. This squadron's insignia was the familiar American Indian's head first used by the Lafayette Escadrille in WW I, a squadron made up largely of American aviators and expatriates, who couldn't wait for their country to enter the war. It was going to be hard for everyone when the battle was joined.

Intelligence was not as complete as it should have been as far as the flight crews were concerned. Much of the information for aircrews came from travel brochures and *National Geographic*.

Vichy squadrons were spread along the coast, with Casablanca hosting a strong fighter force of Hawk 75As and Dewoitine 520s, considered the best French fighter. (A few had seen action against the Germans in 1940 and had acquitted themselves favorably against the vaunted Messerschmitt Bf 109.)

*Torch* represented the largest assembly of Allied ships and aircraft in



Lt. Mac Wordell, VF-41 XO (right), leads the squadron in song in the squadron ready room onboard *Ranger* before the start of Torch.

National Archives



A plane captain relaxes on the wing of 9-F-12, a Wildcat of VF-9. Note the strap from the pilot's harness spread over the cockpit sill.

National Archives

## Naval Aviation in WW II

the war up to that time; however, the huge fleet was never intercepted by German patrols. The Germans believed that the Allied ships were headed for the beleaguered Mediterranean island of Malta.

The British carriers had a wide assortment of aircraft, ranging from biplane Fairey *Swordfish* and *Albacore* torpedo bombers to Grumman *Martlet* (the British name for the Grumman *Wildcat*), Hawker *Sea Hurricane*, and newly arrived Supermarine *Seafire* fighters. The Hawker and Supermarine aircraft were "navalized" variants of the highly successful land-based versions that had made such a name for themselves in the Battle of Britain. *Torch* would be the *Seafire's* first combat operation.

### The Battle Is Joined

As the British fleet sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean on November 6 (the Americans stayed in the Atlantic), the carriers sent out fighter patrols to scout for any enemy aircraft. Aside from one or two French scouts, the British and American combat air patrols found the skies quiet as they approached the North African coast.

On Sunday, November 8, the first waves of American and British Army troops hit the beach at dawn. At first, French resistance was relatively light. Vichy shore batteries opened fire and were answered by the guns of the assembled surface ships. The French battleship *Jean Bart*, immobilized in Casablanca harbor, turned its 15-inch guns on the American landing force. The battleship *Massachusetts* sent a 16-inch shell into *Jean Bart*, jamming its one working turret.

As the battle progressed, French

resolve strengthened and several Vichy destroyers and submarines sortied against the Allied forces outside the harbor. *Ranger's* *Wildcats* and *Dauntlesses* bombed and strafed the French ships and targets ashore. They also engaged in unexpectedly intense aerial encounters with their French opponents. In the first battles, 16 Vichy fighters were shot down for the loss of four *Wildcats*. Even biplane Curtiss SOC liaison floatplanes contributed by breaking up a French tank column with depth charges using impact fuses. The SOCs flew from cruisers and battleships and usually carried messages and spotted for artillery.

On November 9, *Ranger* launched its three Army L-4 Piper *Cubs*, which would be used as observation platforms. The three little single-engine planes were led by Captain Ford E. Allcorn, who took off into a 35-knot headwind, 60 miles from shore, running into anti-aircraft artillery from U.S. ships, which were obviously unaware of the identity of the three aircraft.

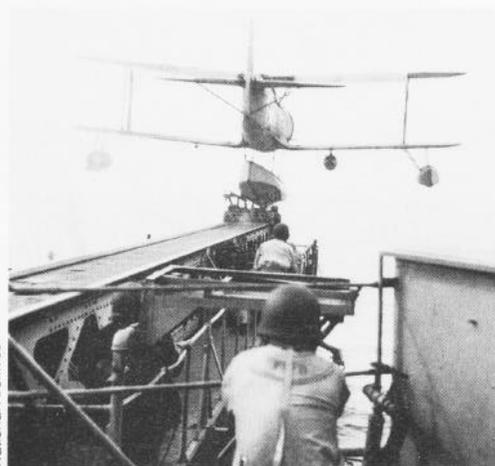
French shore batteries also fired at the Pipers as they went over the beach. Capt. Allcorn was wounded and his aircraft set on fire. He was barely able to sideslip his stricken plane to the ground, then drag himself from it before it exploded. He thus had the unique, and somewhat dubious, distinction of flying the first *Cub* from an aircraft carrier, becoming the first Army aviator to be wounded in the campaign, and the first to be shot down in the campaign.

*Chenango* began launching its load of Army P-40s, most of which made it ashore. However, damage from the American and British air attacks was so great that the airfield at Port Lyautey had to be repaired. The remainder of the *Warhawks* flew



National Archives

Army Capt. Allcorn takes off from *Ranger* in his L-4.



National Archives

A Curtiss SOC is catapulted from a cruiser during Operation *Torch*.

Several American Navy aircraft stand on a Vichy airfield, perhaps Cazes, after the ceasefire. The SBD on the left is minus its vertical tail. Note the various ruts in the grass made by the aircraft

ashore later.

The British Central Naval Task Force landed its assault troops at Oran on November 8, encountering little resistance except from French shore batteries. Royal Navy carriers *Furious*, *Biter*, and *Dasher* launched strikes against the airfield and dropped leaflets. *Sea Hurricanes* from *Biter* and *Dasher* shot down five French fighters.

The Eastern Naval Task Force attacked Algiers, also finding little or no resistance except for shore batteries. A quickly arranged ceasefire brought most of the fighting to an end in this area late on the 8th. By November 10 and 11, all the French forces had capitulated.

### Aerial Engagements

As the first waves of Americans hit the beach at Fedala (15 miles north of Casablanca), Mehdia (70 miles to the

### North African Landings



north), and Safi (140 miles south of Casablanca), *Ranger's* VFs 9 and 41 orbited Cazes airfield. The French threat had to be clear before American aircraft went into action. However, as the *Wildcat* pilots saw several aircraft on the roll, Lieutenant Commander Tommy Booth, CO of VF-41, called, "Batter up!" In response to the prearranged signal, *Ranger* radioed, "Play ball!" The fight was on.

Although Cazes was a base for bombers and transports, there were several fighter squadrons on the field with Curtiss *Hawk* 75As and Dewoitine 520s. Most of the French aircraft sported one of the most colorful schemes ever applied to a large number of combat aircraft. There were variations but the basic markings were bright yellow-and-red striped cowlings and tails. The eye-catching colors contrasted dramatically with the dun-colored American *Wildcats* and SBDs

that now ranged over the enemy airfields.

The dogfights over the Moroccan coast were fierce at any rate, and American Naval Aviators found themselves up against an experienced, wily foe. Many French pilots had seen combat against the Luftwaffe during the Battle of France; some were even aces. Their American opponents, while some had a relatively high number of flight hours, were all untested in combat. To an extent, this difference in operational experience offset the disparity between the *Wildcat* and the elderly *Hawk* 75A, although less so the D.520.

Two D.520s surprised Lieutenant (jg) Charles Shields of VF-41. However, the young pilot turned into the threat and dropped the lead French fighter. Hardly catching his breath, Shields spotted three more aircraft directly over the field. When he dove toward the trio, Shields found two *Hawks* pursuing a lone *Wildcat*, piloted by Lieutenant Chuck August. The two Americans turned the tables on the Vichy pilots, shooting both Curtiss fighters down.

After strafing the airfield with the last of his ammunition, Shields was bounced by four more *Hawks* and had to abandon his aircraft. As he hung from his chute, he was surprised then angry to see the *Hawks* lining up on him. They intended to shoot him while he hung helplessly in midair.

Desperate, Shields shot it out with his .45 pistol as the *Hawks* buzzed him, occasionally firing at the lone American. Neither side scored and Shields descended to the ground and capture. He was not alone. Several other Navy *Wildcat* pilots spent a few days as prisoners of war.

VF-9 also saw action. Lieutenant Commander Jack Raby led his

squadron to Port Lyautey where they shot down a twin-engine Potez 63 – one of the many light-bomber/observation twins that the French produced in the late 1930s.

VGFs 26 and 27 had been in the same area and encountered several French fighters and bombers, shooting down several. Unfortunately, VGF-27 *Wildcats* attacked a Royal Air Force *Hudson* from Gibraltar, which they had wrongly identified as a French aircraft. The Lockheed twin crashed, with only one survivor of the four-man crew.

Lieutenant Commander Tom Blackburn of VGF-29 ditched his *Wildcat* after running out of gas trying to recover onboard *Santee*. It was an ignominious beginning to what would become an amazing combat career, albeit in the Pacific, with another type of fighter, the Vought F4U *Corsair*. Blackburn spent 60 hours in his life raft until a destroyer plucked him from the water. When he returned to his squadron, Blackburn, who had sent his junior pilots ashore before ditching, learned that four of his squadronmates had crash-landed and were captured.

As Lieutenant Malcolm Wordell, XO of VF-41, strafed an airfield, anti-aircraft artillery hit his aircraft, wounding him. He crashed in a cow pasture and made his way to a "neighborhood" wineshop. The shop owner and wife ministered to the wounded American, plying him with rum.

Local infantry troops soon arrived to collect their prisoner. The corporal demanded Wordell's pistol, which the lieutenant reluctantly handed him, after requesting a receipt.

It had been a rough initiation for the untried fighter squadrons. The *Wildcats* had lost seven F4Fs to enemy action – fighters and flak – and 16 to operational causes.

## The Dauntless in Action

SBDs from *Sangamon*, under Lieutenant Commander J. S. Tracy, flew over Fedala, while *Santee's* *Dauntlesses* covered the landings at Safi, southwest of Casablanca. Several SBDs dive-bombed *Jean Bart* in Casablanca harbor, while others attacked the French destroyers that had managed to sortie from the harbor at 0800, intent on hitting the Allied troop ships offshore.

Accompanied by *Wildcats*, which did their best to strafe and disrupt the destroyers' defenses, the SBDs struck the Vichy ships. One SBD was shot down, the crew lost. It took several hours, and additional attacks by SBDs and the few TBF *Avengers* with the



National Archives

Not too much room as P-40Fs launch from Chenango. Besides the yellow-ringed national insignia, the Army fighters also carry American flags forward of the usual insignia.



National Archives

29-GF-10 ran into trouble during a recovery onboard *Santee*. Note the control cables protruding from the fuselage, and the overlapping of the squadron numbers into the national insignia.



National Archives

## Naval Aviation in WW II

American task force, to halt the determined enemy attack.

With all the landing forces ashore, aerial action on November 9 centered around supporting the Allied troops and ending whatever French resistance remained. VF-9's *Wildcats* found 16 *Hawks* and shot down five of the Curtiss fighters for the loss of one Grumman aircraft, whose pilot was rescued. VF-9 also lost three more fighters in the course of the day during strafing missions to Port Lyautey.

By the time an armistice was

reached with the French authorities on November 11 – an appropriate date since it was also the date that an armistice ending WW I went into effect 24 years earlier – American *Wildcat* pilots had claimed 22 French aircraft, for the loss of five F4Fs in aerial combat. (The claim included one or two misidentified British aircraft, and the French actually admitted to losing 25 aircraft.) Fourteen *Wildcats* had been lost to operational causes. In total, 23 percent of all F4Fs in the American carrier force had been lost, a significant attrition rate. Captain C. T. Durgin, *Ranger's* CO, visited Cazes on November 12. After meeting with the pilots from his air wing who had been captured, he remarked on the stout defense by the French: "If this battle had continued at the pace of the first day, I would have had to return to the U.S. for replacements."

The SBDs and TBFs of the Western Task Force had been in action throughout the operation, bombing enemy airfields and gun positions ashore. They also attacked whatever French ships ventured out of their harbors. However, the *Dauntless* and *Avenger* squadrons suffered relatively high loss rates. *Santee's* squadrons lost four SBDs and seven TBFs in the four-day operation. Some of the losses were due to fuel starvation and piloting errors rather than direct enemy action.

On November 10, *Ranger's* *Daunt-*

*lesses* made the final attack against the determined, but battered battleship *Jean Bart*, whose crew had returned one turret to operation. The SBDs scored two hits with 1,000-pound bombs and the French BB was out of the war for good. Nine *Dauntlesses* had been lost during *Torch*, most to operational causes.

Operation *Torch* began the final stages of expelling the Germans from North Africa. It also let the French know that they were not forgotten. *Torch* was also the first time the Allies used joint planning to forge a major operation, setting the pattern for future invasions, particularly the June 1944 invasion of Europe and amphibious operations in the Pacific. *Torch* also firmly established the aircraft carrier and its planes and crews in the close air support role, ready on arrival, and close to the action. ■

Cdr. Mersky is a naval reservist and assistant editor of *Approach* magazine.

### Aircraft Carriers and Squadrons of Operation Torch

#### United States

##### Ranger (CV-4)

VF-9	27 F4F-4 Wildcats
VF-41	27 F4F-4 Wildcats
VS-41	18 SBD-3 Dauntlesses
	1 TBF-1 Avenger

##### Sangamon (ACV-26)

VGF-26	12 F4F-4 Wildcats
VGS-26	9 SBD-3 Dauntlesses
	9 TBF-1 Avengers

##### Suwanee (ACV-27)

VGF-27	11 F4F-4 Wildcats
VGF-28	12 F4F-4 Wildcats
VGS-27	9 TBF-1 Avengers
VGS-30	6 F4F-4 Wildcats

##### Santee (ACV-29)

VGF-29	14 F4F-4 Wildcats
VGS-29	9 SBD-3 Dauntlesses
	8 TBF-1 Avengers

##### Chenango (ACV-28)

76 USAAF P-40F Warhawks (launched)

#### Britain

##### HMS Victorious

No. 809 Squadron	6 Fulmar IIPs
No. 882 Squadron	18 Martlet IVs
No. 884 Squadron	6 Seafire IIBs
No. 817 Squadron	8 Albacores
No. 832 Squadron	8 Albacores

##### HMS Formidable

No. 885 Squadron	6 Seafire IIBs
No. 888 Squadron	12 Martlet IVs
No. 893 Squadron	12 Martlet IVs
No. 820 Squadron	12 Albacores

##### HMS Avenger

No. 802 Squadron	6 Sea Hurricane IIs
No. 883 Squadron	8 Sea Hurricane IIs

##### HMS Argus

No. 880 Squadron	18 Seafire IIBs
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##### HMS Furious

No. 801 Squadron	12 Seafire ICs
No. 807 Squadron	12 Seafire IIBs
No. 822 Squadron	8 Albacores

##### HMS Dasher

No. 804 Squadron	6 Sea Hurricane IIs
No. 891 Squadron	6 Sea Hurricane IIs

##### HMS Biter

No. 800 Squadron	15 Sea Hurricane IIs
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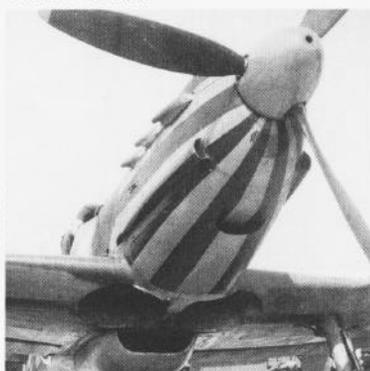
Musee de l'Air et de l'Espace



Martin Maryland 167s. These fast reconnaissance bombers flew with both Armee de l'Air and Aeronavale squadrons.

A pilot of GC III/3 by his Dewoitine 520.

An unusual view of two Dewoitine 520s of GC I/2.



Armee de l'Air



Vichy forces had a lot of Maryland 167s in 1941.



Sud-Est Leo 451 four-place bombers equipped several squadrons of the Armee de l'Air and Aeronavale.



Hawk 75As of GC I/5 over Rabat, Morocco, 1942.



This Douglas DB-7 crashed at Mar-rakech in March 1941. Musee de l'Air et de l'Espace



Armee de l'Air

Musee de l'Air et de l'Espace

Musee de l'Air et de l'Espace

# The Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm in Operation Torch

By Cdr. Peter Mersky, USNR

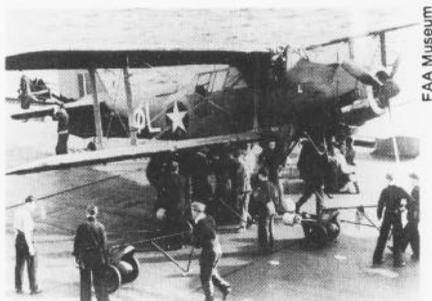
While the Americans saw considerable action in the west, the British task forces were covering their own landings. Although these landings were relatively simple, the French mounted an active anti-air campaign – at least for a few days.

Incongruously marked with pseudo-American markings – a white star on a blue circle, surrounded by a yellow ring – in a vain attempt to fool the defenders into thinking they were American, British aircraft made bombing attacks and fought several aerial engagements. The first British carrier strikes came at dawn when 42 aircraft launched against Vichy airfields at La Senia, Maison Blanche, and Tafaroui near Oran. *Albacores* struck La Senia and destroyed several hangars and 47 aircraft. The biplanes were intercepted by nine D.520s, which were engaged by *Sea Hurricanes* from HMSs *Biter* and *Dasher*. The escort claimed five French fighters destroyed, but the Vichy fighters had taken out three of the *Albacores* and flak hit another as the attackers began their dive. Half the force was gone.

One *Martlet* pilot landed to accept the surrender of a French garrison at Blida, after receiving permission from his superiors on the ship. The station commander promptly wrote out a surrender on a piece of note paper. American Army Rangers soon arrived to relieve the Royal Navy officer.

On November 8, six *Seafire* IICs of No. 885 Squadron from HMS *Formidable* found a Vichy *Maryland* bomber over Mers-el-Kebir and shot it down. *Seafires* from No. 807 Squadron (HMS *Furious*) engaged several D.520s and shot down three. Soon after this encounter, 807 Squadron was attacked by more

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A Fairey Albacore of 820 Squadron during North African landings in 1942.

Dewoitines. The Royal Navy fighters climbed to meet the threat, and although low on ammunition, shot down another D.520 and damaged several others. It had been an auspicious opening for the *Seafires*.

*Seafires* flew armed escort and reconnaissance missions throughout the day. Two British pilots landed their *Seafires* near American columns. Sub-Lieutenant Peter Twiss – who would become a famous postwar test pilot – offered to fly short reconnaissance missions for a U.S. Army tank column, even though his aircraft had only about 50 gallons of fuel left.

Sub-Lieutenant P. J. Hutton crash-landed alongside another armored column and made his way to the U.S. Army Air Force's 31st Fighter Group, which had flown its *Spitfire* VCs into Oran at the end of the day. The next day, November 9, Hutton borrowed an American *Spitfire* and flew a mission before being ferried back to Gibraltar

by a Royal Air Force *Hudson*. (American *Spitfires* were ferried, along with British aircraft, aboard British carriers to Gibraltar.)

The Royal Navy also tried to finish things up in Algeria. The task was made harder by the not-unexpected appearance of German and Italian bombers, which attacked the task forces offshore. *Martlets* and *Seafires* flew combat air patrol against these raiders who could do little to alter the outcome of the successful invasion.

At dusk on November 10, 15 German Ju.88s mounted an attack off Algiers but were intercepted by *Seafires* from HMS *Argus* and anti-aircraft artillery from the task force ships. One small bomb managed to hit the carrier's after flight deck. While the hit did little damage to the deck itself, four valuable fighters were destroyed. The three *Seafires* in the air had to recover ashore.

Like the Americans, the Royal Navy suffered a high percentage of losses to operational causes rather than to direct enemy action. Indeed, 21 *Seafires* – 40 percent of those types available at the beginning of Operation *Torch* – were destroyed, only three to enemy action.

To add to the count, HMS *Avenger*, one of the escort carriers, was sunk by a torpedo from U-155, a German submarine that caught the carrier on the night of November 15 near Gibraltar. *Avenger* exploded; only 17 of her crew survived. ■

## 50 Years Ago – WW II

**Nov 1:** Patrol Wings were redesignated Fleet Air Wings, and to permit the organization of patrol aviation on the task force principle, the practice of assigning a standard number of squadrons to each wing was changed to provide for the assignment of all types of aircraft required by the wing to perform its mission in its particular area.

**Nov 2:** Naval Air Station, Patuxent River, Md., was established to serve as a facility for testing experimental airplanes, equipment, and material, and as a Naval Air Transport Service base.

**Nov 16:** Naval Aviation's first night-fighter squadron, VMF(N)-531, was ac-

tivated at MCAS Cherry Point, N.C., with Lt. Col. Frank H. Schwable in command. Initially training with SNJs and SB2A-4s, the squadron was assigned twin-engined PV-1s equipped with British Mark IV-type radar.

**Dec 27:** *Santee* (ACV-29), first of 11 escort carriers assigned to hunter-killer duty, sortied from Norfolk, Va., with Air Group 29 onboard for free-roving antisubmarine warfare and anti-raider operations in the south Atlantic.

**Dec 31:** *Essex* (CV-9), Capt. D. B. Duncan commanding, was commissioned at Norfolk, Va. – the first of 17 ships of her class commissioned during WW II.