

## French Morocco – Operation TORCH

*In order to forestall an invasion of Africa by Germany and Italy, which, if successful, would constitute a direct threat to America across the comparatively narrow sea from western Africa, a powerful American force equipped with adequate weapons of modern warfare and under American command is today landing on the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts of the French colonies in Africa.*

*The landing of this American army is being assisted by the British Navy and Air Force, and it will in the immediate future be reinforced by a considerable number of divisions of the British Army.*

*This combined Allied force, under American command, in conjunction with the British campaign in Egypt, is designed to prevent an occupation by the Axis armies of any part of northern or western Africa and to deny to the aggressor nations a starting point from which to launch an attack against the Atlantic coast of the Americas.*

*In addition, it provides an effective second front assistance to our heroic allies in Russia.*

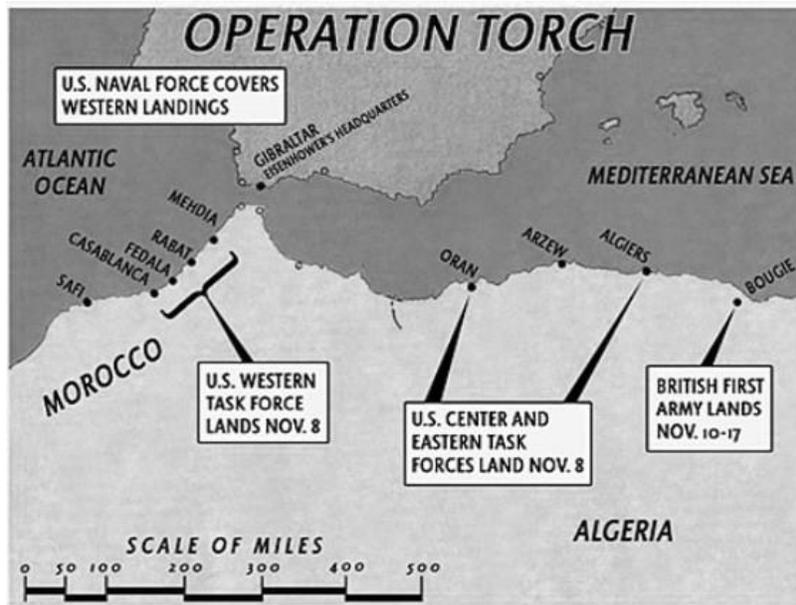
—With these words,  
President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced the  
landing of American troops on African soil on  
Sunday, 8 November 1942<sup>1</sup>

Following a meeting between the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Franklin D. Roosevelt in Washington, D.C. in June 1942, a press release was issued stating that the American president agreed on the “urgent task of creating a second front” that year. Inaction by the Allies in Europe had enabled Germany to concentrate her army on the eastern front, and it was questionable whether Russia could hold out unless something was done, and quickly, to divert German forces

elsewhere, via an operation in Europe or Africa. On the heels of this announcement came news of the fall of Tobruk—a port city on Libya’s eastern Mediterranean coast, near the border with Egypt—and the advance of German general Erwin Rommel’s panzer division into Egypt. The Desert Fox was poised to take Alexandria, gain control of the Suez Canal, and push the British out of Egypt. The Allies were thus threatened with both the defeat of Russia and the cutting of the Suez Canal lifeline. Discussions by the British about opening a front in Africa, which had preceded the entry of the United States into the war, had envisioned a landing of about 55,000 men in the vicinity of Casablanca, a large port city in western French Morocco on the Atlantic. After America’s entry, the plan was enlarged to include landings not only near Casablanca but also in the Mehdia-Port Lyautey area—a beach village and port on the Sebou River (known today as Kenitra) to the north of Casablanca—and the port city of Safi to the south. Planners thereafter expanded the operation to include occupation of the entire North African coast as far east as Tripolitania, the coastal region of what is today Libya. Occupation by Allied forces of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia would help safeguard Mediterranean convoys, thus dramatically shortening the route to the Middle East around the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>2</sup>

The United States was to have responsibility for the military and naval operations on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. Oran and Algiers, cities on the Mediterranean on the northern coast of Algeria, were to be captured by two joint British and American forces. The British were to supply all the naval service except for a few transports and the landing forces were to be partly American and partly British. Allied occupation of French North Africa was to be achieved through simultaneous assaults by three attacking forces on Casablanca, Oran and Algiers. Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower would exercise command over the forces, with the exception of the British naval units permanently assigned to the Mediterranean, which would remain under the control of the British Admiralty.<sup>3</sup>

Map 1-1



As part of Operation TORCH, assault troops of the U.S. Western Task Force landed on the west coast of French Morocco on 8 November 1942.

## THE MOROCCAN EXPEDITION

The naval component of the Moroccan expedition was designated the Western Naval Task Force and was under the command of Rear Adm. Henry K. Hewitt, U.S. Navy. The Army component under Maj. Gen. George S. Patton, U.S. Army, was titled the Western Task Force. The mission assigned to the Naval Task Force was:

To establish the Western Task Force on beachheads near Mehdia, Fedala and Safi, and support the subsequent coastal military operations in order to capture Casablanca as a base for further military and naval operations.

The objective of the landings at Fedala and Safi was to enable the capture of Casablanca from the land side. Mehdia was to be occupied as a prelude to taking the adjoining airfield at Port Lyautey. At a conference of about 150 naval and army officers convened by Admiral Hewitt at Norfolk, Virginia on 23 October 1942, the day before the task force sailed, General Patton predicted that all the elaborate landing plans would break down in five minutes, after which the Army would take over and win through. He stated in part:

Never in history has the Navy landed an army at the planned time and place. If you land us anywhere within fifty miles of Fedala and within one week of D-day, I'll go ahead and win.... We shall attack for sixty days, and then, if we have to, for sixty more.<sup>4</sup>

### **ATTACK ON MEHDIA-PORT LYAUTEY**

Within the task force was Sub-Task Force Goalpost, under the command of Maj. Gen. Lucian K. Truscott Jr., which was charged with securing Port Lyautey through the capture of the beach village of Mehdiya, the Kasbah fortress at the Sebou River mouth, and the airfield. Although Truscott's overall mission was to attack Port Lyautey, the main purpose of his force was to seize the airfield outside the town, preferably by the end of the first day ashore, in order for aircraft staged aboard the carrier *Chenango* (ACV-28) to use it to support the attack on Casablanca. The operation was expected to be a tough slough. It was unlikely the Vichy French government in Morocco would allow the allied troops to land unopposed. Additionally, the destroyer *Dallas* (DD-199)—which was charged with landing a party of Army raiders up the river to capture the airfield—would have to overcome natural and man-made barriers proceeding up the shallow and winding Sebou River to reach its objective.<sup>5</sup>

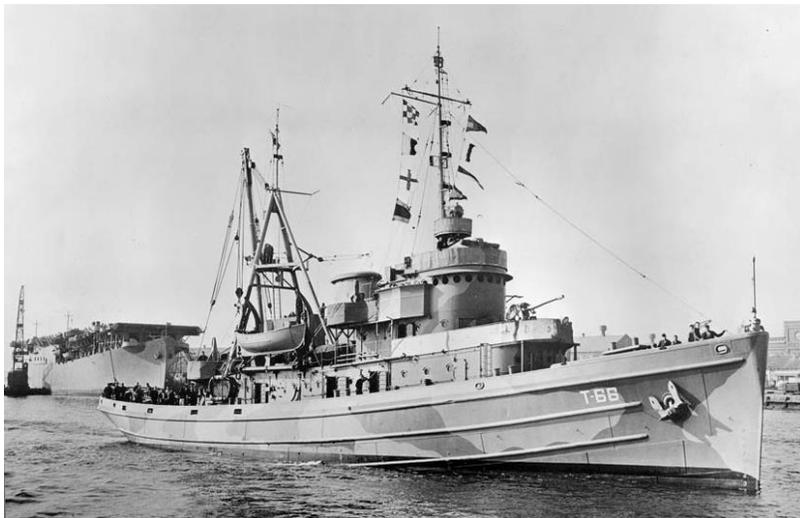
To carry out her mission, *Dallas* had to pass through jetties extending into the Atlantic and negotiate the narrow river mouth on an ebb tide before encountering a steel cable anti-ship boom stretched across the Sebou. Protected by shore guns at Fort Kasbah on the heights above, this boom, unless breached, would prevent further movement upriver to the airfield adjacent to Port Lyautey which was itself guarded by a number of anti-aircraft guns. In order for the *Dallas* to land the raiders upriver, the boom had to be cut. This chore would fall to a demolition party formed from one officer and ten men from the fleet tug *Cherokee* (AT-66) and a second officer and five men from the salvage ship *Brant* (ARS-32). In preparation, the group had attended a one-week concentrated course on demolitions, explosive cable cutting, and commando raiding techniques at Amphibious Training Base, Little Creek, Virginia prior to *Cherokee*'s departure from Norfolk. The seventeen men detailed from *Cherokee* and *Brant* would make the Atlantic crossing aboard the transport *George Clymer* (AP-57), depart her for the special operation, and return to her immediately following its completion before their eventual return to their own ships. While these men were thus engaged, *Cherokee* would support the landings at Safi. *Brant* did not sail with the Western Task Force to take part in the assault phase of Operation TORCH. She and another

salvage ship, *Redwing* (ARS-4), arrived later at French Morocco on 25 November 1942 for harbor clearance duties.<sup>6</sup>

### **FLEET TUG *CHEROKEE* AND DESTROYER *DALLAS***

The 205-foot *Cherokee*, a *Navajo*-class fleet tug built by Bethlehem Shipbuilding, Staten Island, New York, had been commissioned less than eighteen months earlier on 26 April 1940.

Photo 1-1



Fleet tug *Cherokee* under way in March 1942.

U.S. Navy Bureau of Ships photo # 19-N-29463, now in the collections of the U.S. National Archives

The *Cherokee's* complement was eight officers and eighty enlisted men. To enable optimal ship control, naval architects had specified diesel-electric propulsion for the *Navajo*-class fleet tugs. Four General Motors 12-278A diesels driving four General Electric generators coupled to a single propeller via a Fairbanks Morse main reduction gear produced 3,600 shaft horsepower, sufficient for a top speed of 16.5 knots. The ship's armament was one single 3-inch/.50-caliber dual-purpose gun mount, two twin 40mm anti-aircraft gun mounts, and two single 20mm AA gun mounts.<sup>7</sup>

Preparations by the *Cherokee*, under the command of Lt. Jacob F. Lawson, USN, for Operation TORCH had included her loading aboard four tons of TNT at Naval Operating Base, Norfolk, Virginia on 8 October. While moored at the base, crewmembers attended

firefighting school, gunnery school, and amphibious training camp. The fleet tug put to sea on 19 October to participate in local operations, anchoring that night in the upper Chesapeake Bay off Cove Point, Maryland. The *Cherokee* transferred one officer and ten men to the *George Clymer* on 21 October for temporary duty. These men had received special training and, with the officer and five men from *Brant*, would be charged with breaching the boom.<sup>8</sup>

*Cherokee* left Cove Point at 0340 on 23 October and took station astern of the transport and aircraft ferry *Lakehurst* (APV-3) as part of a convoy being formed by Task Group 34.3. The task group—comprised of units assigned the landings at Mehdiya and at Safi—initially steered a southeasterly course as if headed for the West Indies. Task Group 34.14, made up primarily of the ships assigned the landing at Fedala, put to sea from Hampton Roads the following day and set a northeasterly course as if bound for England. The entire task force was too large to depart from any one port without attracting undesired attention. It assembled well out to sea after a series of departures at various times and places for seemingly different destinations. The Cover Group—a battleship, two cruisers, four destroyers, and an oiler—sailed from Casco Bay, Maine, while the aircraft carriers of the Air Group and three old destroyers sortied from Bermuda. Task Force 34, once formed of these task groups, followed a route that passed south of Newfoundland to give the impression of a regular troop convoy to the United Kingdom, before changing course for North Africa.<sup>9</sup>

On 28 October, five days after the group of which *Cherokee* was a part had sailed from Cove Point, Task Group 34.2—carriers *Ranger* (CV-4), *Santee* (ACV-29), *Savannee* (AVG-27) and *Sangamon* (ACV-26), light cruiser *Cleveland* (CL-55), destroyers *Bernadou* (DD-153), *Cole* (DD-155), and *Dallas* (DD-199), and oiler *Housatonic* (AO-35)—rendezvoused with the North Africa-bound Task Force 34 and took their stations in the formation. The carriers and destroyers had departed Murray's anchorage off Fort St. Catherine, Bermuda, three days earlier. *Dallas*, an old "four-piper" commissioned on 29 October 1920, and the slightly more elderly *Bernadou* and *Cole*, had entered HMD (His Majesty's Dockyard) Bermuda for modifications and to "strip ship" in preparation for particularly dangerous tasks they were to perform during the invasion of North Africa. The dockyard at Grassy Bay, Bermuda, was the Royal Navy's principal base in the Western Atlantic. Aboard the *Dallas*:

All inflammables and non-essentials were landed. Both boats and boat skids were removed. The loading machine [a tool used to train sailors how to quickly and safely feed ammunition and fire the guns], water cooler, spare depth charges and arbors, as well as 3" illuminating ammunition, were also landed. All confidential publications...except those required for the forthcoming operation were sent to NOB [Naval Operating Base] Bermuda for storage. Splinter mats were installed around all gun and fire control stations and portions of the main deck. Additional splinter protection consisting of steel plates about 3/16" were installed around the wings of the bridge. All hands were issued the U.S. Army fighting suit which is the khaki coverall. New Type steel [battle] helmets had previously been obtained in Norfolk.<sup>10</sup>

The above measures were designed to minimize crew casualties aboard *Dallas* during anticipated combat with enemy forces. To augment the arms she carried aboard, she received from the destroyer *Bernadou* at Murray's anchorage:

- Fifty Springfield rifles
- Fifty Browning automatic rifles
- Fifty .45-caliber pistols
- Eighty Thompson Submachine guns
- 24,000 rounds of .30-caliber ammunition, and
- 36,000 rounds of .45-caliber ammunition

Web belts and canteens sufficient for all hands were also obtained.<sup>11</sup>

## **ASSAULT ON PORT LYAUTEY**

*We are about to embark on a difficult and historical task—the opening of a second front. In America our people back home and the entire United Nations will watch us with consuming interest. Don't let them down. To successfully carry out our task we must live up to the glorious traditions of the Navy which will require the utmost from all and duty beyond the usual call. This call is your opportunity to strike a blow for America and her allies. Let us be ready to give the enemy hell when and where he shows himself. Make every shot count.*

—Rear Adm. Monroe Kelly, commander Battleships, Atlantic Fleet and commander Task Group 34.8—the Northern Assault Group—embarked in the battleship *Texas* (BB-35)<sup>12</sup>

The Western Task Force was to land troops on the Atlantic coast of French Morocco: at Safi just south of Casablanca; at Fedala, just north of Casablanca; and at Port Lyautey, further to the north of Casablanca. To support these operations—code named BLACKSTONE, BRUSHWOOD, and GOALPOST—the Western Task Force was divided into three task groups. The troops of the Northern Assault Group (Sub-Task Force Goalpost embarked in Task Group 34.8) were under General Truscott. Nearing French Moroccan waters at the end of the Atlantic crossing, the Northern Assault Group parted company with the Western Assault Force in mid-afternoon on 7 November and proceeded for the assault of Port Lyautey.<sup>13</sup>

Embarked aboard the attack transport *George Clymer* (AP-57) were the 2nd Battalion (reinforced) of the Ninth Infantry Division, U.S. Army, and a 17-man detail comprised of one officer and ten men from *Cherokee* and one officer and five men from *Brant*. The latter ship was a former *Bird*-class minesweeper (AM-24) commissioned in 1918, which in 1942 had first been reclassified a fleet tug and subsequently a salvage ship. *Brant's* commanding officer, Lt. Harvey Melvin Anderson, USN, had received orders on 10 October 1942 to detail five men and one officer for special instruction under the Army Chief Scout. The salvage officer and men completed the special training duty six days later and prior to boarding *George Clymer*, obtained from *Brant* a ten-man rubber boat, six extra Tommy guns, and a Velocity Power cable cutter for the “special job.”<sup>14</sup>

Off North Africa, on the eve of the assault scheduled for 8 November, the final day in transit was spent in making last minute preparations. All hands and the troops aboard *George Clymer* bathed and put on clean clothes—a standard practice followed to minimize infection if wounded in battle. Crewmen checked the boats for proper equipment, ran their engines, tested lowering booms and winches, and then swung the boats out ready for lowering.<sup>15</sup>

Condition 1A (Man Stations for Troop Landing) was set at 2300, and troop combat teams positioned themselves at their boarding nets ready to disembark when ordered. Shortly thereafter two boats were lowered to the waterline in preparation for embarkation by the scout party, and a river-boom cutting detail under Lt. Col. Hanney, USA, and Lt. Mark Starkweather, USNR. Additional boats were lowered as *George Clymer* proceeded on to the transport area in preparation for her part in the assault landings.<sup>16</sup>

The 9,000 troops of the 9th Infantry Division carried aboard Northern Assault Group transports were to simultaneous land on five beaches on either side of the village of Mehdiá—where the Sebou

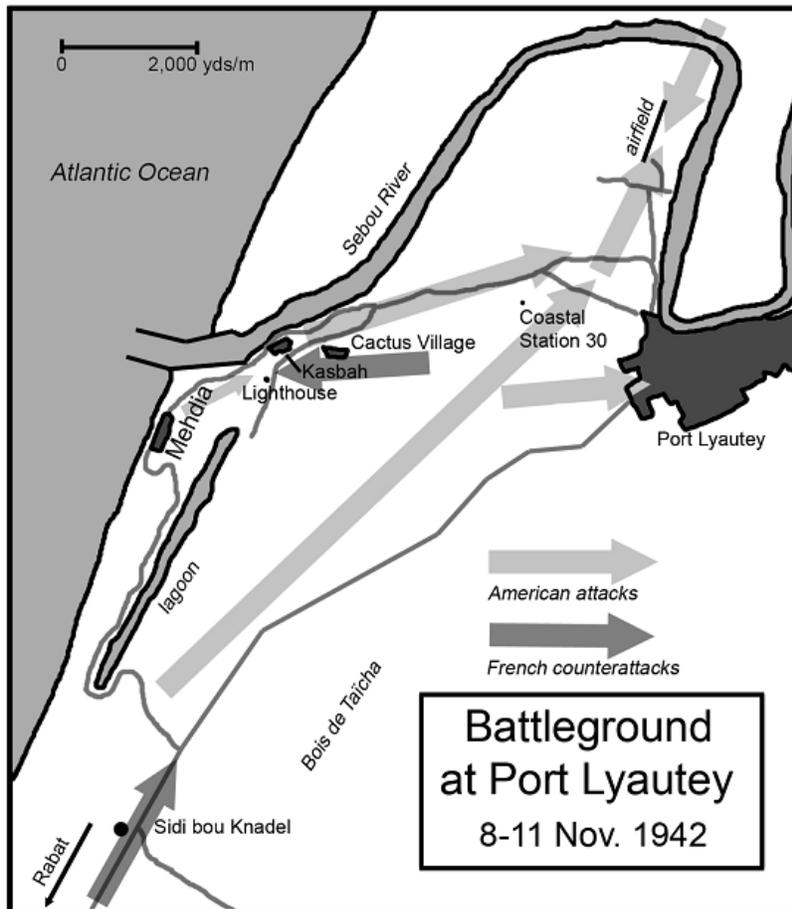
River emptied into the Atlantic—in order to capture Port Lyautey and its airfield, which lay ten miles up the river, for the use of Army and Navy aircraft. A follow-on objective after gaining control of the Sebou was to seize Rabat-Sale Airfield, southwest of Port Lyautey on the coast. Allied air power for the assault group was to be supplied primarily by fighter and bomber squadrons aboard the auxiliary carrier *Sangamon* (ACV-26), a converted oil tanker. A second former oiler, *Chenango* (ACV-28), was ferrying Army P-40 Warhawk planes readied to fly off and land at Port Lyautey Airfield as soon as it was captured. The field was of great value because it boasted the only all concrete, all-weather strip in Northwest Africa.<sup>17</sup>

On 8 November, the first wave of landing craft beached at 0515 as dawn broke. Vichy French shore batteries opened fire at 0600—and were answered six minutes later by counterbattery fire from gunfire support vessels. However, a new threat soon developed as Vichy fighters and two-engine bombers from the airfield at Rabat-Sale began to strafe and bomb landing craft. Moreover, assault troops making the beach were met ashore with bullets, bayonets, and 75mm fire from the 1st and 7th Regiments Moroccan Tirailleurs (French Army designation for infantry recruited in colonial territories), the Foreign Legion, and naval ground units.<sup>18</sup>

### **NAVAL DEMOLITION UNIT CUTS ANTI-SHIP BOOM**

The obstruction across the mouth of the Sebou was not breached as planned before dawn on 8 November due to heavy gun fire from the shore. When *Dallas* later tried to approach the river, she too was driven off by shore batteries. In the early evening on 9 November, a message was received from Lt. Col. Hanney conveying that he would be at the Fish Cannery about three-quarters mile up the Sebou and wait for the demolition party to join him and his engineers. It was an exceptionally dark night and raining, and a heavy surf was breaking over the jetties. Lieutenants Starkweather and Darroch, in charge of the demolition party, were doubtful at first that they could navigate through the dirty sea. (Earlier that day, surf on the beaches had been from 15 to 20 feet high, resulting in swamped or stranded landing craft and discontinuation of operations for a lengthy period.) Preparations were made, however, and by 2130 they were en route in a ship's landing boat. After much difficulty, the boat passed through the jetties about 0100 and entered the river.<sup>19</sup>

Map 1-2



The breaching of a formidable steel cable boom guarding the mouth of the Sebou River was necessary for the destroyer *Dallas* to make a perilous passage up the river and land Army raiders to take the Port Lyautey airfield.

Upon arriving at the Canning Factory, the Navy crew was unable to locate Hanney and his party. Undaunted, the boat continued alone up the river and found a net above water supported by a 1 1/2-inch metal cable between buoys, two large barges, and two French Navy whaleboats strung across the river. (Hereafter the term buoy refers to one or all of the above.) Running parallel to the cable was a half-inch wire with an electric warning wire attached. The team cut the stout cable with a velocity power cable cutter, and it gave away upon parting. A member then entered the water to be sure there were no problems

below. Following the diver's return aboard and before the boat could get clear, enemy on the south bank opened fire with rifles and machine guns. The boat was hit and withdrew downriver under heavy fire until reaching the jetties, firing all the way at gun flashes. The team returned to *George Chymer* about 0430, seven hours after departing her side, with eight wounded members.<sup>20</sup>

### **DESTROYER DALLAS LANDS RAIDING PARTY**

*Dallas* was informed at 0130 on 10 November that the obstruction across the river had been cut, and received orders to proceed upriver three hours thereafter. She headed toward the river mouth at 0400 but, due to the extremely low visibility was not able to locate the jetties off the entrance until 0600. Rene Malavergne then immediately took the wheel. A former river pilot on the *Sebou*, he had embarked two days earlier along with a 75-man Raider Detachment, 3rd Battalion, U.S. Army, from the transport *Susan B. Anthony* (AP-72). The Free Frenchman had been imprisoned for De Gaullist sympathies, but was later helped by the OSS to escape to England for just such an occasion as this enterprise. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was a United States intelligence agency formed during the war and a predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency. Elimination of the time delay, associated with the helmsman hearing and executing rapidly changing rudder commands, was critical. Malavergne brought the destroyer safely through the narrow jetty passage despite seas breaking astern and ship yawing, with shallow water off the north bank of the channel and the remaining narrow safe portion of the channel very near the south jetty. The *Dallas's* commanding officer described the Frenchman's superlative ship handling in the face of both adverse weather conditions and enemy fire:

As the seas were breaking astern the ship yawed violently, heading alternately for the south jetty and the patch of shoal water between the jetties. The channel was narrow and immediately adjacent to the south jetty. The pilot handled the ship masterfully, however, and kept to the channel. Shortly after entering between the jetties a shell splash was noted dead ahead of the ship and about 30 yards from us. It was estimated to be about 37 millimeter. Another was heard to pass by close aboard to starboard but the splash was not observed.... There was much small arms fire heard from the direction of the Kasbah [the fortress that guarded the river mouth], both rifle and machine gun, and the occasional report of a larger caliber gun was also heard.<sup>21</sup>

As the destroyer crossed the bar at the river entrance, she touched bottom and—as her propellers churned the mud and heavy vibrations ensued—her speed dropped appreciably. The commanding officer ordered flank speed, and the engine room, after opening the guarding valve wide to send as much steam as possible to the turbine, proudly announced “answering turns for twenty-five knots.” *Dallas* was in fact proceeding at less than five knots, but continued making way and slowly ploughed free of the bottom silt.<sup>22</sup>

A report had been received the boom had been cut at the northern side of the second buoy near the middle of the river, but as the destroyer approached the obstruction three buoys supporting the steel cable came into view. The pilot informed the commanding officer that there was a shoal beneath the point where the cable had been cut, which the ship could not possibly get past. The buoys supporting the cable were apparently each anchored individually as they maintained their positions despite a strong ebb tide. The only alternative appeared to be to break through at the deepest part of the channel, midway between the first and second buoys from the south bank. Picking up speed, the destroyer struck the cable which, still affixed to the south bank but severed mid-river and no longer under tension, was easily swept aside and *Dallas* continued onward toward the airfield.<sup>23</sup>

Twenty minutes' journey farther upriver from the breached boom, a machine gun on the ridges behind the airport opened fire at 0650, which the *Dallas* answered with 3-inch and 20mm fire. After several bursts the machine gun fell silent without having scored any hits. Two rounds believed fired from enemy 3-inch or 75mm guns produced large splashes in a swamp about 150 yards distant on the ship's beam. The river was becoming even more perilous and the destroyer was touching bottom from time to time, but there appeared to be no danger of becoming stuck hard and fast. Two steamers that had been scuttled in an attempt to block the river came into view as the *Dallas* made a turn around the bend just north of the airport. Malavergne brought the ship neatly between the vessels without touching either, despite one being on its side and almost completely submerged. After rounding the next bend, *Dallas* struck bottom, but her commanding officer Lieutenant Commander Brodie pushed forward anyway until the destroyer reached the seaplane base ramp on the eastern border of the airfield two miles away. During this stretch the engines were making turns for twenty knots, while the destroyer actually made good about ten knots over or through the ground.<sup>24</sup>

Upon arrival alongside the ramp at 0737, the ship anchored and the raider detachment disembarked during which an enemy battery of

75mm guns opened rapid fire. The rounds were hitting very close aboard, some within ten yards of the *Dallas*, and she immediately began counterbattery with 3-inch gunfire. As the gunners aboard the destroyer directed their fire over low lying buildings near a railroad bridge beyond which they believed the battery was located, a plane from the cruiser *Savannah* bombed the enemy position—permanently silencing the guns. Upon reaching the riverbank the raiders encountered machine gun fire, but were able to occupy the airport immediately, and by the late morning the Army P-40s from the *Chenango* were using the airport. *Dallas* remained at anchor until the mid-afternoon on 12 November when she stood downriver, passed through the jetties, and anchored off Mehdiya Beach.<sup>25</sup>

## **TWENTY-ONE NAVY CROSS MEDALS**

The commanding officer, executive officer/engineer officer, and another engineering officer of the *Dallas* all received the Navy Cross for heroism, as did the Free Frenchman who so adroitly took the destroyer up the Sebou River. (The medal, the second highest American decoration for valor, is awarded for extraordinary heroism not justifying the Medal of Honor.) The citation for the ship's captain reads:

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Lieutenant Commander Robert J. Brodie Jr., United States Navy, for extraordinary heroism and distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commanding Officer of the Destroyer U.S.S. *DALLAS* (DD-199), in action against hostile forces during the occupation of Port Lyautey, French Morocco, on 10 November 1942. Before daylight on 10 November 1942, Lieutenant Commander Brodie in the *DALLAS* with a detachment of raider troops embarked entered the mouth of the Sebou River leading to Port Lyautey. With gallantry and intrepidity in the face of determined artillery and machine gun fire and the fire of snipers, at the risk of his own life, the lives of his crew and the embarked troops, he broke the steel cable boom with the bow of his ship and forced his way ten miles up the Sebou River. Upon arrival at the Port Lyautey Airfield he landed the raider troops, who successfully captured the airfield. This exceptional feat, which was accomplished without material damage or personnel loss, is a testimonial to the valor, intelligence and seamanship of this gallant officer, and reflects great credit upon himself and upholds the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.<sup>26</sup>

Seizure of the Port Lyautey airfield was critical to the capture of French Morocco, and the intrepid *Dallas* could not have carried out her mission but for the demolition team. The efforts of its members to breach the otherwise impassable boom enabled the destroyer to sweep aside the steel cable remnant then supported only at one end. There was no realistic way to take the field except by passage up the Sebou River, which was protected by a seemingly impregnable barrier and machine guns and artillery sited to sweep the river waters adjacent to the boom. On the heights above the Sebou, the walled Kasbah dominated the channel. A ship attempting to proceed past these defenses in daylight would be at too severe a disadvantage, while in the darkness of night its chances of running aground were greater.<sup>27</sup>

Captain Arthur T. Moen, USN, the commanding officer of *George Clymer*, recommended in his After Battle Report that Lieutenants Starkweather and Darroch receive the Navy Cross Medal and that the fifteen enlisted members of the demolition team be advanced in rank. In consideration of the heroic actions of the entire team, higher authority awarded all seventeen members the Navy Cross. It was their actions in the face of very adverse weather and enemy opposition which made the landing of Army raiders possible.

#### ***Cherokee (AT-66) Personnel***

- Lieutenant Mark Warren Starkweather, USNR
- Boatswain's Mate First Class Roy Benjamin Dowling, USNR
- Gunner's Mate Second Class William Reynolds Freeman, USNR
- Machinist's Mate First Class Ernest John Gentile, USNR
- Shipfitter Third Class Raymond Edward Johnson, USNR
- Shipfitter First Class Richard Wood Joyce, USNR
- Electrician's Mate Third Class William A. Music Jr., USN
- Boatswain's Mate Second Class Edwin Sperry, USNR
- Chief Boatswain's Mate Arthur Wagner, USNR
- Seaman First Class Edward Leo Wisniewski, USNR
- Machinist's Mate Second Class Czeslaw Zymroz, USN

#### ***Brant (ARS-32) Personnel***

- Lieutenant James W. Darroch, USNR
- Shipfitter Second Class Frederick Lawrence Arsenault, USNR
- Machinist's Mate First Class Joseph Greely, USNR
- Coxswain Andrew Jackson House, USN

- Gunner's Mate Second Class Lucas John Perry, USN
- Boatswain's Mate Second Class Richard Graham Shelley, USNR

The medal citation for Lieutenant Starkweather is representative of those of the other men with some variation in the wording:

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Lieutenant Mark Warren Starkweather, United States Naval Reserve, for extraordinary heroism and distinguished service in the line of his profession as commander of a demolition party attached to the Fleet Tug U.S.S. *CHEROKEE* (AT-66), during the assault on and occupation of French Morocco from 8 to 11 November 1942. Assigned the extremely dangerous task of cutting through an enemy obstruction in order that the U.S.S. *DALLAS* could navigate up the Sebou River in order to land raiders near a strategic airport, Lieutenant Starkweather and his crew, on the night of 9 November, proceeded with grim determination toward their objective. Despite the treacherous surf, he and his shipmates skillfully and courageously accomplished their hazardous mission of cutting the cables at the mouth of the river, as guns from the French fort opened fire. Countering the enemy's attack, Lieutenant Starkweather dauntlessly started back and, in spite of enormous breakers which battered his boat, brought her and her courageous crew back to safety. His conduct throughout this action reflects great credit upon himself, and was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.<sup>28</sup>

### **FLEET TUG *CHEROKEE***

*Cherokee* earned a battle star for the period 8-11 November 1942 of the Algeria-Morocco landings, the first and only American tug to so in the African Theater during the war—qualifying her crewmen to affix a star to the European-African-Middle Eastern campaign ribbon on their uniform blouses. This accolade combined with the award of eleven Navy Cross Medals for heroism to one officer and ten men detailed from her for a special operation ensures *Cherokee* a unique place in the annals of Navy tug history. While the demolition detail was engaged with the Northern Assault Group in the Mehdiya-Port Lyautey area, the fleet tug was with the Southern Assault Group. She had left the main body of the convoy with the other units of the group on Saturday, 7 November, bound for Safi about 150 miles south of Casablanca. As *Cherokee*—steaming on the flank of the now single-column formation—drew nearer the Moroccan coast, she sighted lights on shore at

Safi. The group arrived at the transport area, eight miles off the beach a little before midnight and began lowering boats. While preparations aboard the assault ships continued, the tug's crew readied her towing equipment should it be required.<sup>29</sup>

The destroyers *Bernadou* and *Cole*, which each had aboard 197-raider trained soldiers in addition to their crews, had the unenviable task of landing the troops inside the harbor. The only factors in their favor were, hopefully, surprise and low ship silhouettes that might help them in darkness avoid being seen by the enemy. In preparation for the mission, the masts had been removed and stacks cut down on both destroyers. As *Bernadou* entered the narrow harbor mouth at 0428, the 75mm battery at the Front de Mer (sea front), machine gun nests around the harbor, and even a 155mm battery two miles to the southward opened up on her. Unfazed, the destroyer swept the jetty on her starboard side and the dock and phosphate pier with 20mm and 3-inch fire, and with her remaining 3-inch guns took the Old Portuguese fort and Front de Mer under fire. These prompt actions prevented manning of any guns in the fort and silenced the 75mm battery as a raider-operated grenade launcher on board the ship took out a machine gun nest on the jetty. The *Bernadou* landed the raiders near the harbor head, who after climbing down a landing net onto the rocks at water's edge, were minutes later pursuing the famous French Foreign Legion as they retired. *Cole* entered the harbor at 0517, having been temporarily lost in the gloom.<sup>30</sup>

Upon observing guns firing on the beach at 0430, the tug *Cherokee* had gone to general quarters. Thereafter, from daylight on, the sailors and troops in the harbor area were shot at from the hill slopes to the east. When the Army asked for naval gunfire on the headquarters of the snipers at the Front de Mer, the *Cole* shot away one corner of the top story with one gun salvo forcing the surrender of those within the building. (For their actions on 8 November, *Bernadou* and *Cole* would receive the Presidential Unit Citation—the highest award for heroism that a military unit may earn, and the equivalent of the Navy Cross for an individual. *Dallas* was similarly lionized for her deeds on 10 November. They would be the only American destroyers that served in the African, European, or Mediterranean Theaters thus honored during the war.)<sup>31</sup>

In the early afternoon, *Cherokee* escorted the transport and aircraft ferry *Lakehurst* and attack cargo ship *Titania* (AK-55) into harbor, and then anchored outside the breakwater at Safi. Following an air warning at dawn on 9 November, the tug maneuvered in the harbor during the ensuing attack before being dispatched to salvage tank landing

craft south of Safi. At completion of this chore, she anchored once again off the Safi breakwater. Crew rest was scant that night. In the early morning darkness on 10 November, she got under way at 0258 for Fedala.<sup>32</sup>

*Cherokee* arrived at her destination fifteen miles north of Casablanca later that day. The following morning she began unloading amphibious-tracked vehicles from a ship alongside and placing them in the water. She broke off from this work to haul a 50-foot Higgins boat off the beach, and then resumed her earlier work. That evening, men aboard the tug witnessed the explosion of the transport *Joseph Hewes* (AP-50) which, lying at anchor in Fedala Roads, was torpedoed by the German submarine *U-173*. The ship sank at 2032, taking the commanding officer and over one hundred seamen and soldiers to the bottom. *Cherokee* stood out to sea and retrieved twenty-three of the survivors, anchoring at 2334 in the outer harbor at Fedala. Early the following day, 12 November, she observed an explosion at 0550. The fleet tug quickly transferred the *Hewes* survivors to *Leonard Wood* (APA-12), and then made her way to the destroyer *Hambleton* (DD-455) hit amidships on her port side with a torpedo fired by the same submarine. She was still afloat with a 12-degree list to starboard. *Cherokee* embarked 200 officers and men from the destroyer, and took her in tow for Casablanca. Following the delivery of her charge, *Cherokee* returned to Fedala Harbor.<sup>33</sup>

That evening she observed torpedo explosions in the transport area off the harbor—the *U-173* damaging the oiler *Winooski* (AO-38)—and picked up survivors before joining ships in convoy clearing the harbor to avoid further attack.<sup>34</sup>

## **CONCLUSION OF OPERATION TORCH**

By mid-November, General Patton's Western Task Force had taken French Morocco, and Oran and Algiers had fallen to the joint British and American Center and Eastern Task Forces, giving the Allies control of French Algeria as well. Patton expressed his appreciation of the assistance provided by the Navy in a dispatch to Hewitt, which the admiral in turn transmitted on Sunday, 15 November 1942, to every ship of Task Force 34 remaining in African waters:

It is my firm conviction that the great success attending the hazardous operations carried out on sea and on land by the Western Task Force could only have been possible through the intervention of Divine Providence manifested in many ways. Therefore, I shall be pleased if in so far as circumstances and

conditions permit, our grateful thanks be expressed today in appropriate religious services.<sup>35</sup>

### **FLEET TUG DUTY**

*Cherokee* remained in North African waters to care for the many ships concentrating there with men and supplies until 3 May 1943, when she left Casablanca for Norfolk, Virginia. She served the Navy until 29 June 1946, when she was decommissioned and transferred to the Coast Guard. Other ships of her class continued their naval service well past that date. Some participated in the Korean and/or Vietnam wars. Others were with the Fleet in hotspots around the world, including Lebanon and the Quemoy-Matsu Islands of Taiwan in 1958; the Dominican Republic in 1961 and 1965; and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The last of the World War II era fleet tugs, *Paiute*, *Papago*, and *Takelma*—which served in the Pacific Theater—did not leave service until 1992, nearly fifty years after they first joined the fleet. A summary of the fleet tugs and associated data, their builders' yards, and the names of commanding officers (if known), and significant awards earned, is provided in Appendix A.<sup>36</sup>