

Book Review: *An Army At Dawn*
The War in North Africa, 1942-1943

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Author Rick Atkinson states that during the battle at DjebelBouAoukaz “Bodies in the Bou’s ripening fields were marked with rifles stuck bayonet-first in the ground, with a soupbowl helmet hung from the butt; the gravediggers sent to collect the fallen one night reported that a hay field had sprouted ‘a forest of rifles’ ” (Atkinson pg 498). Painstaking numbers are provided by the author in the depressing account of Anglo-American casualties in 1942-43 North Africa. The daunting effort of the allies and the horrific casualty rates make the German Wehrmacht appear unstoppable. Secondary teachers often show little concern with the detailed battles of the North Africa campaign of World War II. Often mentioned is the victorious and larger than life generals who move on to the European field of battle. On numerous occasions my content knowledge concerning North Africa has led to praise for General George Patton and very little else concerning Operation Torch. The minuscule role of Patton in Operation Torch revealed in Atkinson’s work shows that Patton’s impact would come later due to several failures on the battle fields in Tunisia. Readers will quickly learn that battles in Tunisia after the Moroccan landing would see the Anglo-American troops become battle tested and hardened killers.

The work of Atkinson provides three major themes that can be useful for secondary teachers. Atkinson strongly draws on the idea that American soldiers, more than the British, needed experience on the battlefield and that North Africa would ease them into battle-ready mode for the invasion of Europe. Churchill’s rationale is mentioned by Atkinson early on, thinking that “green” American troops will need to be exposed to the horrors of the battlefield. The author details the unfortunate reality that Americans were not ready to kill their enemy. Atkinson also focused on the conflict between British and American troops. This second theme was especially true when concerning commanders. President Roosevelt and his bond with Prime Minister Churchill would strengthen this bond but commander and chief Dwight D. Eisenhower is largely

credited with playing down nationalism and realizing the ultimate importance of long-term Allied cooperation. The last theme was unknown to me. I honestly can say that my knowledge of the “Vichy” government always focused on southern France and never on North Africa. French politics under Nazi-occupied North Africa was a major hindrance for the Allies effort and was difficult especially for Eisenhower as commander and chief. French general’s Giraud and Darlan made it difficult for Eisenhower even before troops landed in Morocco and Algeria. Adding to the conflict was concerns with Generals Petain and De Gaulle and how they saw occupied France’s relationship with the Axis Powers.

The large number of Allied casualties in North Africa made it obvious to the reader that Churchill was right when stating that American soldiers needed “combat experience” before a frontal assault in Europe (Atkinson pg 13). The fact that soldiers need to be exposed to the horrors of combat is clearly the most important message the author can express to his readers. Atkinson provides casualty rates and describes how “Most soldiers also remained wedged in the twilight between the habits of peace and the ruthlessness of war” (Atkinson pg 160). Americans would be victorious in Algiers but would be facing French troops not Germans who began to amass in Tunisia. Kasserine Pass, the most well known battle site, saw major allied casualties. American casualties exceeded 6,000, “Kasserine Pass may fairly be considered the worst drubbing of the war”. Eisenhower told Marshall, “Our people from the very highest to the very lowest have learned that this is not a child’s game” (Atkinson pg. 390). Eisenhower would take the blame for Kasserine Pass yet still find positives to keep the allied forces moving toward an ultimate goal. Writer Ernie Pyle expresses how Kasserine Pass would teach the Americans how to hate and that a “Psychological Transition” would take place which allowed Americans to no

longer see killing as wrong but rather a way to end the war more quickly (Atkinson pg. 461). Once soldiers learned to hate, killing the enemy was their only goal according to Pyle.

Removing commanders Fredendall and Ward would not be easy for Ike. Early on General Eisenhower clearly understood his role and the righteous crusade that was at the center of this war. Eisenhower was writing letters to his son and explaining that “individual liberty” and “our great democracy” was at issue (Atkinson 466). Fredendall’s removal led to Patton’s increasing role in combat. This also included more conflicts with the British. Anglophobia would become commonplace among American commanders.

Eisenhower’s struggles with the British hero General Bernard Montgomery are well documented. Ike faced criticism from Generals Brooke and Anderson and even gave both generals greater autonomy on the battlefield. It was common for the British to question the valor of American troops. Several American commanders felt Eisenhower was a puppet controlled by the British in North Africa. One obvious problem was concerning mixing French, British and American military units. The A.E.F. of World War I quickly limited mixing military units and Ike would address this issue in North Africa. President Roosevelt saw coordination among military units as a problem and states that “to mix and fragment units is a military crime of the gravest sort” (Atkinson pg. 276). If General Montgomery had his way the American “cousins” should be left to deal with removing land mines. It should be noted that several British commanders did have strong arguments which called into question the weak American commanders who were not willing to move closer to the front. General Patton, often criticized by the British, was constantly questioning the willingness of his own American troops to fight. Author, Rick Atkinson discusses issues of combat fatigue and how many generals like Patton wanted nothing to do with it. On too many occasions, Patton crossed the line in his treatment of soldiers,

slapping a wounded American later in Sicily. Trying to be sympathetic to the French under occupation was also a difficult task for Eisenhower. Politics concerning the Petain government always focused on the fact that Hitler could slaughter Frenchmen if the Vichy government took up arms. Eisenhower would have to gingerly deal with Vichy representatives.

The French were still dealing with German occupation in Paris and the biggest challenge to Eisenhower was the demands by General Henri Giraud and his desire to replace Ike as the Allied commander and chief in North Africa. After the assassination of the German sympathizer Jean Louis Darlan Eisenhower feared that Giraud's increased political clout could be disastrous. Darlan's Nazi support was only bested by his intense hatred of the British and he called the Allied invasion of Northern Africa a "massive blunder" (Atkinson pg.95).

The aforementioned themes show that North Africa was more than American troops were ready to handle. Drawing on this fact can also provide several positive factors that need to be addressed. North Africa must also be seen as a positive start which allowed American troops to move forward towards victory. 70,000 allied casualties would have been much greater had Churchill's plan been overlooked. The D-Day invasion of Normandy was a staggering undertaking which would not have been successful had Allied troops invaded three years earlier. According to Rick Atkinson, Eisenhower benefitted the most from the North African Campaign. Peers and correspondents of Ike believe he grew into the role of commander and chief and learned from past mistakes. Revealed lastly, with the final battle to capture the capital city of Tunis, we see America's Arsenal of Democracy become a major advantage for Allied troops. The United States Air-force could now compete against the Luftwaffe and Hitler's Tiger tanks played less and less of a role when German fuel supplies ran low. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel would predict that "supplies" was the key to victory. His prediction was coming true in the

mountains surrounding Tunis and the city of Bizerte. Churchill would optimistically predict that Operation Torch would be “not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning” (Atkinson pg. 159). Progress and growth was clearly established and the Allied forces had caught up to the Axis juggernaut that invaded Poland in 1939. Appeasement was no longer on the minds of the Worlds democratic leaders.