

# TAC NEWS

January - February 1998

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## American Muscle Masters Morocco

**T**he naval battle of Casablanca was one of several engagements fought by the US Navy while supporting the North African TORCH landings. In this action an American victory was never in doubt, but the French inflicted damage and had opportunities to inflict much more.

For Operation TORCH, American naval forces were organized into four separate entities, The Covering Group, the Air Group, Detachment One-H, and Detachment Two-H.

The Covering Group, commanded by Rear Admiral Robert C. Giffen, consisted of:

Battleship: *Massachusetts*  
(flagship)

Cruisers: *Tuscaloosa* and *Wichita*

Destroyers: *Wainwright*,  
*Mayrant*, *Rhind*, *Rowan* and  
*Jenkins*

Oiler: *Chemung*

The Covering Group approached Casablanca with the heavy ships in column, spaced at 1,000 yard intervals. The *Massachusetts* was followed by the *Tuscaloosa* and the *Wichita*. These ships were



Casablanca Harbor

November 1942

viewed from above Point El Hank

screened by four destroyers in a semicircular formation about 3,000 yards ahead of the flagship, the *Wainwright* and *Mayrant* to starboard, the *Rhind* and *Jenkins* to port.

The French naval forces in Casablanca Harbor, commanded by Rear Admiral Gervais de Lafond, consisted of:

Battleship: *Jean Bart*

Light cruiser: *Primauguet*

Flotilla leaders: *Albatros*, *Le Malin*, *Milan*

Destroyers: *Alcyon*, *Boulonnais*,  
*Brestois*, *Fougueux*, *Frondeur*,  
*Simoun*, *Tempête*

Submarines: *Amazon*, *Amphitrite*,  
*Antiope*, *Conquérant*, *Méduse*,

*Oréade*, *Orphée*, *Psyché*, *Sidi-Ferruch*, *Sybille*, *Tonnant*, *Vénus*  
Sloop: *Commandant Delage*,  
*Gracieuse*, *Grandière*

The uncompleted battleship *Jean Bart*, moored at the Môle du Commerce in Casablanca harbor was the principal target. On paper the *Jean Bart's* armament consisted of eight 15-inch guns mounted in two quadruple forward turrets, but only one turret was fitted with guns. Of the battleship's secondary 6-inch batteries, only five of the fifteen guns were aboard ship. The remaining ten 6-inchers were emplaced as either fixed or mobile shore batteries.

# The Battle of Casablanca

November 8, 1942

## FIRST PHASE,

0610-0624 Covering Force launches nine floatplanes.

0641-0642 Floatplanes encounter AAA fire and hostile aircraft.

0702. *Massachusetts* opens fire on enemy planes.

0703 Gun flashes are observed from Point El Hank and *Jean Bart*.

0704 *Massachusetts*, *Tuscaloosa* and *Wichita* return fire.

0720 *Massachusetts* divides fire between Point El Hank and *Jean Bart*.

0741 Reverse run started.

0751 *Wichita* opens fire on Table d'Aukasha.

0808 Cruisers concentrate on harbor mouth.

0833 Covering Group ceases firing.

At midnight, the French naval authorities were alerted to the American presence, but launched no follow-up reconnaissance and left the lighthouse on Point El Hank lit.

At 0641 the *Massachusetts*' floatplanes reported antiaircraft fire from the beach and hostile aircraft. At 0700 six enemy fighter planes were

observed ahead of the flagship at a very low altitude. The AAA batteries on *Massachusetts* opened fire, downing one aircraft and damaging another.

At 0703 the shore batteries on Point El Hank straddled the *Massachusetts* with a first salvo. Five or six shells from the *Jean Bart* splashed 600 yards short on the flagship's starboard bow. At this moment all major American ships commenced firing.

At 0704 *Massachusetts* started its initial firing run. The moored *Jean Bart* should have been a sitting duck, but she received only one hit. Unfortunately for the Americans, the *Massachusetts*' radar range finders were knocked-out by the concussion of the flagship's own large caliber guns. Floatplanes tried to correct the fall of shot, but their efforts were hampered by smoke, antiaircraft fire and enemy fighters. Fortunately, a bearing was obtained on the lit Point El Hank lighthouse and after another fifteen minute bombardment, a 16-inch shell hit *Jean Bart* which effectively jammed the battleship's one operational turret.

At 0705 the *Tuscaloosa* opened fire on

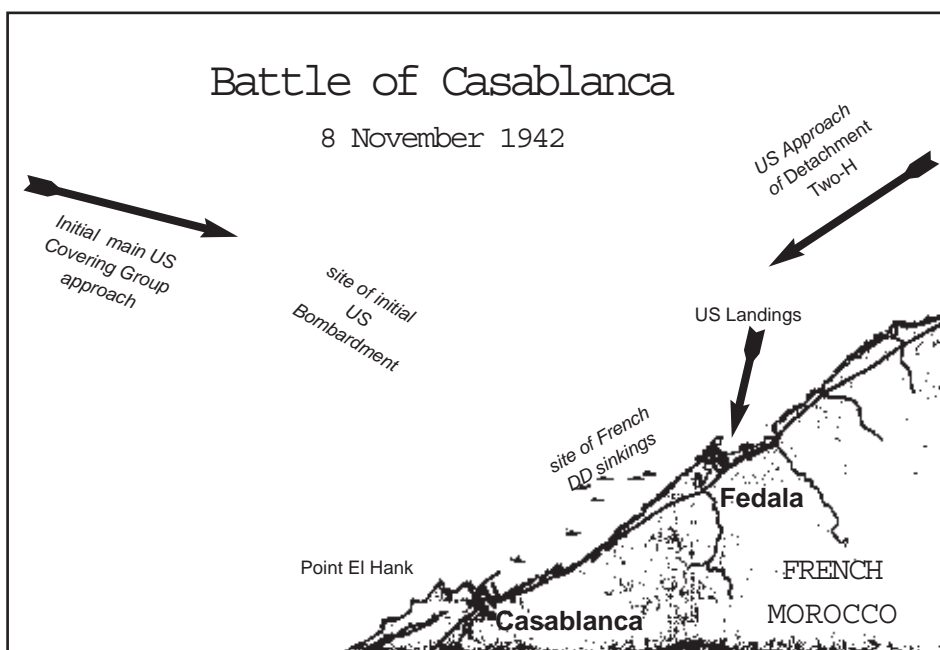
the submarine berthing area in Casablanca Harbor. At 0719 *Tuscaloosa* shifted fire to the shore batteries at Table d'Aukasha. Floatplanes corrected the fall of shot and after twenty minutes the batteries were destroyed.

The *Wichita* opened fire at 0706 on Point El Hank, range 21,800 yards (using reduced charges) and at 0727 shifted fire (with full charges) to the submarine area in the harbor, range 27,000 yards. At this moment, Enemy torpedo planes began circling the Covering Force, but did not come within antiaircraft range.

At 0741 the Covering Force shifted course south, preparatory to a reverse run to the westward. The forward turrets of the *Massachusetts* resumed fire on the *Jean Bart* at an initial range of 26,000 yards. Five hits were scored and *Jean Bart* started to settle by the stern. At 0803, the flagship resumed firing at Point El Hank with turret number three, initial range 24,000 yards. Between 0828 and 0833 three salvos from all three turrets were fired at Point El Hank.

The *Tuscaloosa* commenced firing on a second run at 0759 on targets in the harbor (initial range 22,500 yards), shifting at 0810 to Point El Hank (range 24,000 yards) and at 0815 to a destroyer in the harbor entrance (range 28,000 yds). Firing ceased at 0823 as the harbor targets were then out of range.

The *Wichita* opened fire at Table d'Aukasha at 0751, but checked firing when her floatplane reported the batteries silenced. At 0806 she fired on French ships in the harbor at a mean range 24,500 yards. At 0818, both cruisers concentrated fire on the harbor entrance after enemy submarines were sighted preparing to sortie.





# United States Navy : Operation Torch

## Covering Group



BB-59 *Massachusetts*



CA-37 *Tuscaloosa*



CA-45 *Wichita*



DD *Jenkins*



DD *Rhind*



DD *Mayrant*



DD *Rowan*



DD *Wainwright*

## Detachment 2-H



CL-40 *Brooklyn*



CA-31 *Augusta*



DD *Wilkes*



DD *Ludlow*



DD *Swanson*



DD *Rowan*

Despite heavy return fire from French shore batteries and naval units, the Covering Group remained unscathed, although there were numerous near-misses. By 0830, American ground forces ashore reported no resistance and that US naval fire was doing considerable damage to Casablanca proper. Cease fire was thus ordered at 0833. As the Covering Group retired, it was harassed by secondary guns on the *Jean Bart* and batteries on Point El Hank. With the area clear of American ships, the French sortied from Casablanca Harbor, thus initiating the battle's second phase.

## SECOND PHASE

0610-0730 French submarines sortie.

0715-0745 French destroyers sortie.

0818 *Augusta* plane reports movement.

0820 *Milan* opens fire.

0843 *Augusta* opens fire, followed by *Brooklyn*.

0918 *Massachusetts* opens fire, followed by *Wichita* and *Tuscaloosa*.

0925 *Massachusetts* disables *Milan* and *Fougueux*.

1000 *Primauguet* sorties.

*Fougueux* sinks.

1003-1021 French subs attack.

1045 *Boulonnais* sinks.

1100 *Massachusetts* withdraws to save ammunition.

1106-1142 *Tuscaloosa*, *Wichita* and *Rhind* engage enemy vessels.

1145 Cruisers of Covering Group damage *Albatros*.

1300 Cruisers rejoin *Massachusetts* and withdraw to northwest.

The French had suffered a devastating bombardment. The *Jean Bart* was wrecked and submarines *Amphitrite*, *Psyché* and *Oréade* were sunk. The flotilla leader *Le Malin* was struck by a 16-inch shell which ricocheted off the jetty and entered the port side of the vessel and caused a bulge outward on the starboard side. *Le Malin* could not sortie, nor did *Simoun* and *Tempête* which were laid-up for repairs.

Between 0610 and 0730 the submarines *Amazon*, *Antiope*, *Conquérant*, *Méduse*, *Orphée*, *Sidi-Ferruch*, *Sybille* and *Tonnant* sortied. Torpedo attacks were made on the Covering Force with no results, however, the *Massachusetts* was straddled by a four-fish spread. The submarines then broke off the attack and headed for open sea. The

*Méduse* eventually beached near *Mazagan*. The *Tonnant* reached Cadiz and was scuttled by her crew. The *Amazon* and the *Antiope* made Dakar. The *Conquérant*, *Sidi-Ferruch* and *Sybille* were lost. The *Orphée* was the only submarine to return to Casablanca.

Between 0715 and 0745 the surviving French destroyers sortied, heading northeast in the following order: Destroyer Division Leaders (*Milan*, *Albatros*) Destroyer Division 5 (*Brestois*, *de Boulonnais*), Destroyer Division 2 (*Fougueux*, *Frondeur*, *Alcyon*). Each division was in column and the columns in echelon. The *Primauguet* did not sortie at this time.

A floatplane spotted the French and by 0859 the Covering Group was on course towards Fedala, with orders to destroy the enemy vessels. Meanwhile, cruisers of Detachment Two-H, *Augusta* and *Brooklyn*, together with four destroyers, *Wildes*, *Swanson*, *Ludlow* and *Rowan*, were also ordered to intercept. At 0820 the *Milan* opened fire on the *Wildes*. Her shots were short. At 0835 the French Destroyer Division 2 opened fire.

The *Augusta* replied at 0843, followed at 0848 by the *Brooklyn*. Firing continued until 0904 at ranges from 13,000 to 24,000 yards. At 0800 the French destroyers temporarily reversed their course but soon returned to the attack. At 0920 the French vessels broke off and headed back to Casablanca.

While en route, they were intercepted by the Covering Group. At 0918 the *Massachusetts* opened fire, followed by the *Wichita* at 0919 and the *Tuscaloosa* at 0925. The French returned fire and hit the *Massachusetts* twice. A third shell passed through the flagship's colors. Within moments, however, the American firepower advantage began to tell. The *Milan*, racked by shell fire, turned to shore and was ultimately beached. The *Massachusetts* then shifted to the *Fougueux*, which disintegrated after three salvos. At 1016 the Covering Group ceased firing.

The ships of Detachment Two-H now re-engaged the retreating enemy, with *Brooklyn* opening fire at 1015 and the *Augusta* at 1025. At 1045, the *Brooklyn* was struck by a dud that injured six men. At 1102 the Center Fire Support ceased firing.

The *Primauguet* now sortied from Casablanca, joined the *de Brounnois* and proceeded up the coast. Soon these destroyers found themselves under the combined fire of the Covering Group and the Center Fire Support. After taking multiple hits, the *de Brounnois* limped back to port, where she capsized just off her berth.

By 1100 the *Massachusetts* retired to preserve ammunition. The cruisers of the Covering Group now continued the attack. At 1102, the commanding officer of the *Tuscaloosa* ordered *Wichita* and destroyer *Rhind* to shell

the harbor. During this run, the *Wichita* was hit by a shell from Point El Hank that injured fourteen men.

By this time the only French vessels afloat were the *Primauguet*, *Albatros* and *Alcyon*. Shortly after 1100 the *Primauguet* was hit by five times below the water line. Another 8-inch shell damaged her No. 3 turret. She continued fighting, until a direct hit on the bridge wiped out her command staff. About one-half hour later the *Albatros* was disabled by two hits. She retired under tow and was eventually beached. The only surface vessel to escape damage was the destroyer *Alcyon*. For all practical purposes, the Casablanca fleet was annihilated.

### THIRD PHASE

1326 Covering Group searches for enemy vessels proceeding to Fedala.

1341 *Massachusetts* locates one destroyer. El Hank opens fire.

1355 Cruisers of Covering Group advance to mouth of harbor.

1450 Land batteries at Casablanca compel retirement.

1558 *Massachusetts* retires with Covering Group.

After destroying the French ships in Casablanca, the Covering Group spent the rest of the afternoon chasing false reports of French cruisers up the coast from Casablanca. At 1326 the Covering Group set course towards

Fedala, searching for a reported "cruiser." The vessel turned out to be a sloop, which after two salvos from the *Massachusetts*, retired within the protective arc of the Point El Hank batteries. All turrets on the flagship then shifted to the shore batteries until firing ceased at 1350.

About this time the Covering Group was ordered to destroy any surviving French units in Casablanca harbor. At 1355, the American cruisers, plus the *Rhind*, stood in toward the harbor, outside of the covered arc of the El Hank batteries. No gunfire was observed from French ships, but accurate mobile shore battery fire forced an American retirement at 1450.

At 1423 the *Massachusetts* received orders to preserve ammunition for a possible sortie of the *Richelieu* from Dakar. There were, however, several loaded 16-inch guns on the flagship and it was decided to unload them on Point El Hank. This was done at 1558 at a range of about 30,000 yards. After one ranging shot a six-gun salvo was fired, producing a large secondary explosion. Shortly thereafter the flagship was joined by the cruisers and the group stood out to sea, thereby terminating the third and final phase of the Casablanca naval battle.

by Edward Morris

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