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THE INTELLIGENCE BACKGROUND OF OPERATION TORCH

by

JOHN C. BEAM

Robert Murphy was a career diplomat who served the State Department for 42 years, beginning in 1917 in Switzerland. In 1940, in the early days of World War II, he was charge d'Affaires at the embassy in Vichy, France, following France's defeat that spring. Together with the Naval Attache, Commander Roscoe Hillenkotter, he reported to Washington on the conditions in Vichy and in French North Africa. He and Hillenkotter reported that the Nazis had left French Africa to its own devices and that it contained 125,000 combat-trained men on active service. They reported also that if France was going to fight again anywhere in the war, North Africa would be the place.

The reports elicited no comments from Washington. Murphy did not even know whether they were of interest to anyone until he was abruptly summoned to Washington and told by Under Secretary Sumner Welles that his reports had been passed to President Roosevelt, that he had read them carefully, and that the President wished to talk to Murphy. Murphy described that meeting in November 1940:

There is no official record, so far as I know, of that hour-long conversation which opened very informally . . . This situation intrigued Roosevelt, who believed that North Africa was the most likely place where French troops might be brought back into the war against Nazi Germany. Spread out on his desk was a large map showing all of French North and West Africa, and the President told me that he had given much thought about how to help French officers

who were operating in the relatively independent conditions prevailing in Africa. The President then said that he wanted me to return to Vichy and work unostentatiously to get permission to make a thorough inspection tour of French Africa and to report my findings to him. The French African policy of the United States Government thus became the President's personal policy. He initiated it, kept it going, and he resisted pressures against it, until in the autumn of 1942 French North Africa became the first major battleground where Americans fought Germans . . . As Roosevelt concluded his suggestions for my African assignment, he said casually, "If you learn anything in Africa of special interest, send it to me. Don't bother going through State Department channels." . . . Thus I became one of President Roosevelt's "personal representatives," assigned to carry out secret missions under his orders during World War II.¹

This was the opening of a new world for Murphy, the diplomat. It would include, among various other things, secret meetings, the use of a false name, and the clandestine reception of a submarine on the coast of North Africa. President Roosevelt did not hesitate to use his bureaucracy in imaginative ways.

Murphy made his inspection tour and sent his report to Roosevelt, who used it as the basis of his African policy. At the President's direction, Murphy also made contact with General Maxime Weygand, the senior ranking official of Vichy in Africa. Roosevelt had encouraged Murphy to

cultivate him, even, as a fellow Roman Catholic, to go to church with him. Weygand, despite having participated in the surrender to the Germans, was respected by both French and Allied officials. Roosevelt considered this tough, 74-year-old soldier a potential ally against pro-German elements in Vichy and even against the Germans themselves.

Murphy had recommended in his report that he negotiate an agreement with Weygand under which the United States would provide food and other essential material to the population of North Africa. The President approved, and the resulting Murphy-Weygand Accord was signed in early 1941. Roosevelt's political and strategic motive behind the agreement was to counter German influence and retain the goodwill of the French and native populations. The agreement was also intended to encourage anti-Vichy, anti-Fascist sentiments among the French military in North Africa. Roosevelt could not do more than this in 1941. In the 1940 election he had assured American mothers that their boys would not be sent into any foreign wars. Yet he wanted to block any move that Hitler might make into the region, a possibility that could close off the entire Mediterranean and endanger American interests in the South Atlantic and the Southern Hemisphere.

The accord provided for an American Control Commission, which Murphy headed in Algiers, to oversee the distribution of the American goods and to ensure that they did not go to aid the German war effort. The commission, a reflection of both Murphy's skill and Weygand's basic pro-Allied sentiments, called for the presence of 12 "vice consuls." Under a secret agreement initialed by Murphy and Weygand, these men would be allowed to use codes and employ couriers carrying locked pouches, "a privilege usually restricted to diplomatic missions and not extended to consular offices in French North Africa." As Murphy described it,

This secret understanding . . . became the basis of one of the most effective intelligence operations of the war, for it provided that

Americans not only could watch what transpired in French Africa, but also could get out uncensored confidential reports to our Government.²

Information-gathering of this sort was unfamiliar to the bureaucracy of Washington and created a great deal of discomfort both in the State Department and in the War Department. A reflection of this was the fact that the State Department could not provide the specialized personnel called for by the project, "involving as it did a certain amount of irregular activity and danger."³ The department turned to Army and Navy intelligence for specialists who could appreciate objects and events of military significance. Murphy further related that North Africa seemed almost another planet to military intelligence in 1940 and, moreover, it had no personnel qualified in Arabic. Additionally, the

services were reluctant to associate themselves with a State Department enterprise, but after considerable discussion, the chiefs of Intelligence at length agreed to assign to Africa several reserve officers, commissioned as vice consuls, and to pay their salaries—providing the State Department would pay their other expenses. The men thus selected all had some experience in France and knowledge of the French language . . . Then somebody pointed out that commissioned officers, if they performed civilian functions while on active duty, could be shot as spies if war broke out. So some of the officers who had been selected were discharged. So now they were civilians—and who would pay them? The services were operating on a financial shoestring. It was finally decided to pay them from the President's emergency funds.⁴

By midsummer 1941, the 12 "vice consuls" were in Algiers, Tunis, and Casablanca reporting on harbor facilities, road and rail networks, order of battle information, and attitudes of French officers

toward fighting Germans. A sampling of the material sent to Washington shows that they also provided detailed sketches and maps of the roads, airfields, and port facilities in North Africa. In addition, the officers cultivated sources within the military establishment who provided them with copies of original documents from the military files. Murphy sent these back by cover letter using the State Department terminology of the day. An example:

Subject: Immediately Available Munitions Supplies Within Algeria. I have the honor to enclose copies of documents which were taken from the official archives of the 19th Army Corps Area (Algiers) which have been secured by Vice Consuls Boyd and Knox from a source we have found reliable. As in the case of the official effectives' list (see my dispatch No. 1572 of July 28, 1942, Military Effectives in Algiers), there is of course, a certain amount of secret supplies and depots which are not known to the Axis Armistice Commissions.⁵

The volume and quality of the information provided by these officers was later praised highly by Eisenhower, and their work was credited as a contribution to the eventual success of Operation TORCH, the Allied invasion of North Africa.

The Germans in North Africa, however (and fortunately), did not have so high an opinion of the vice consuls. An intercepted German intelligence report of 16 March 1942 stated,

Since all their thoughts are centered on their social, sexual, or culinary interests, petty quarrels and jealousies are daily incidents with them. Altogether they represent a perfect picture of the mixture of races and characters in that savage conglomeration called the United States of America, and anyone who observes them can well judge the state of mind and instability that must be prevalent in their country today Lack of pluck and democratic degeneracy prevails among them, resulting from their too easy life, corrupt morals, and consequent lack of

energy They are totally lacking in method, organization and discipline We can congratulate ourselves on the selection of this group of enemy agents who will give us no trouble.⁶

Despite these unkind observations by the Germans, the vice consuls were active and working seriously at their duties. They were also in danger of being misunderstood by their own masters, however, when they expressed a need for discreet settings to meet their contacts who were providing them with information. In the days before OSS and its successors provided budgets for safehouses, the State Department had to be carefully approached for money for unorthodox purposes. Murphy sent the following letter in support of such a request.

In any propaganda effort from what I have seen in Europe through the years, I should say that personal contact with a few powerful individuals under favorable auspices is of the greatest importance. Among the elements composing "favorable auspices" would be an appropriate establishment where contacts could be received, friendly meetings arranged and conversations carried on without surveillance. Under present conditions, hotels are utterly unsuitable and many contacts refuse point blank to meet our people in hotels or public places In Marrakech our Vice Consul was able to obtain the house of an American citizen which is suitable for this purpose. He fortunately obtains it at a

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low rental Aside from acquainting you with our small efforts along these lines, the purpose of the foregoing is to inquire whether the Department would be disposed to add a special allowance for, shall we say, "propaganda" a much abused and naughty word, but it will serve in this case to describe activity in behalf of the allied cause If so I feel that an allotment should be made out of the President's Fund of \$500 monthly for Fez and Marrakech.⁷

Murphy eventually received his funds, but was instructed to obtain from the officers in question subvouchers to support his accounts.

Information-gathering was an important part of Murphy's task, but he had also the greater mission of enlisting Weygand to take action to prevent a German invasion or, as events later developed, to assist the Allies in their takeover. As Dr. Arthur Funk described in his *Politics of TORCH*,

Murphy knew that his primary responsibility required a continuous relationship with Weygand—cautious, diplomatic, not so close as to alarm the Axis but sufficient to reassure the French that the United States would sooner or later help in defeating Hitler.⁸

Unfortunately, although Murphy did an admirable job of cultivating Weygand, he very likely caused the failure of this important part of his mission by his insistence on the use of the State Department cipher system.

From before World War I to the middle of World War II, the US diplomatic codes were open to any cryptanalyst in the world who wanted to make the effort to read them. State paid no attention to this arena, and in 1941 a unit of the German Foreign Ministry, Pers Z, was reading the US diplomatic traffic. Murphy was sending to Roosevelt his most sensitive negotiations with Weygand, including a request from Weygand for military assistance and Roosevelt's assurance that it would be forthcoming. Murphy insisted on using the State Department codes to

preserve his autonomy, and even though American officers in Eisenhower's command pointed out their insecurity, he was certain that the Germans had not broken his codes. As early as 12 August 1941, however, the state secretary of the German Foreign Office could hand to von Ribbentrop fully solved copies of Murphy's telegrams of 21 July and 2 August.⁹ The result was that on 18 November 1941 Weygand informed Murphy that the Germans had told Vichy that unless Weygand were removed, they would occupy all of France and let the French population starve while the German Army lived off the land. Weygand was recalled and retired to southern France. He never again played a role in the war effort.

Murphy entered 1942 having to start again to find an individual like Weygand or to construct an underground network that would accomplish the same purpose. By then the United States had entered the war and OSS (then known as the office of the Coordinator of Information, or COI) came to North Africa. COI was formed in July 1941 based on a suggestion from Churchill to Roosevelt that America needed an arm solely for intelligence and covert operations. General William Donovan was named its chief, and one of his first steps was to submit a plan to Roosevelt for operations in North Africa. Like Roosevelt, Donovan had seen the Mediterranean as a potential battleground and had all along urged Allied control of the African coast. Roosevelt approved the plan, and Donovan appointed Marine Lieutenant Colonel William Eddy as Naval Attaché at the US Legation in the International Zone of Tangier, Morocco, in December 1941.

Eddy had been born in Syria, spoke Arabic fluently, and had considerable experience in the Middle East. He had served in World War I and had won five banks of decorations with the Fighting Fifth Marines. (In a briefing session which Eddy gave for General Strong, Chief of Army Intelligence, and General George Patton in July 1942, Patton noted the ribbons—two more rows than he had—and grunted, "I don't know

who he is, but the son of a bitch has sure been shot at enough.”)¹⁰

The final decision to go ahead with the landings and serious preparation for them did not occur until late July 1942. But Eddy’s arrival in December 1941 brought to Murphy and his team a heightened sense of participation in a major enterprise. This came largely from the fact that North Africa was the first arena for OSS clandestine activity in the field. Donovan, wishing to establish his new agency in the Washington bureaucracy, generated a great deal of activity with the generous budget he was allotted by Roosevelt.

At the same time, however, the arrival of Eddy and COI compounded the confusion in the command structure in North Africa. At this point it was chaotic. Murphy was working for the State Department but was detached from it on verbal orders from the President. His salary came from State, and his expenses came from the President’s emergency fund. His vice consuls, who were reporting to him, were being paid also from the President’s emergency fund. Eddy’s upkeep came from COI’s budget. Eddy was assigned to the Legation in Tangier and was instructed to work with Murphy. Another military officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Solborg, was working for Donovan as assistant military attaché in Lisbon. There he was responsible for organizing clandestine activities in both the Iberian peninsula and North Africa. He also was instructed to coordinate his activities with Murphy. Murphy was theoretically in charge.

This disorganization in the field was a reflection of the overall American approach to intelligence activities during the period. Historically, it was a subject the country’s leaders did not want to deal with, but with the United States having been thrust into world affairs, men like Roosevelt saw the need for organized and discreet information-gathering. Murphy’s assignment was a beginning, and the formation of COI was the next step in the process. How this unfamiliar new arm was going to fit into the US government bureaucratic structure was a problem then, and for many officials it remains a problem to this day.

Eisenhower attempted to deal with the wartime command relationship by urging General Marshall to advise the President to make the COI directly responsible to the JCS. But the Army had a problem with its officers engaging in spying or subversive actions. Eisenhower recommended that such work in foreign countries “be conducted by individuals occupying a civilian rather than a military status.” Despite such status, however, Ike recommended that they “be subject to the higher control of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” In June 1942 Roosevelt changed COI to OSS and did place it under the JCS in the chain of command. Murphy’s role was later clarified when, at his request, he was formally detached from the State Department to the Office of the President as Roosevelt’s personal representative, until after the landings when he was named adviser for civil affairs under Eisenhower. He was among the first civilians to serve on the inner staff of an American military commander’s headquarters in wartime.¹¹

Fortunately, Murphy and Eddy, the men in the field, had the personalities and good sense to be able to get along and work together in all this early confusion. Murphy became part of the overall plan for North Africa that General Donovan had submitted to the President. It stated in part “that the aid of the native chiefs be obtained, the loyalties of the inhabitants cultivated, fifth columnists organized and placed, demolition materials cached, and guerilla bands of bold and daring men organized and installed.”¹²

As one of their first moves to achieve these noble goals, Eddy and Murphy set up a clandestine radio network across North Africa. The key station *Midway* at Tangier was located in a winepress overlooking the airfield; *Lincoln* was in Casablanca; *Yankee* was in Algiers; *Pilgrim* in Tunis; and *Franklin* in Oran.¹³ But Murphy’s intensified and untraditional activities troubled some of his more orthodox colleagues. He wrote,

Those transmitters were immensely useful to us. One of them was installed in the attic of the Casablanca consulate general, and this disturbed one of our senior consular officers who thought it might be contrary to

regulations. He said . . . rather dejectedly, "Murphy, I hope you know what you are doing. But I should like to make clear that I disapprove of espionage."¹⁴

The State Department was not the only place where one could find disapproval of unorthodox activities. Many military officers were also not ready to accept them. Eddy had submitted a preliminary plan for subversive activity in connection with the landings, and Donovan had set aside \$2 million for these secret plans. Most of the suggestions were accepted by the JCS with the proviso that control of all secret activities in connection with TORCH should be vested in the Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower. But there was little enthusiasm on Eisenhower's staff for clandestine activities. In one instance, OSS proposed that members of the Nazi military staff in North Africa (many of them Gestapo officers) be assassinated when the landings began. The assignment for this cold-blooded task had already been accepted by the father of a French boy shot by the Germans in Paris. Eisenhower's aides did not take the suggestion seriously, though, and it was "squashed at a higher level." A plan that eventually was carried out involved smuggling out of Morocco two experienced hydrographers (one the captain of a tugboat company; the other, chief pilot of Port Lyautey) who were familiar with the North African coastline. Eisenhower had not approved the plan, however, and was furious when he heard of it. An investigation revealed that General Patton had approved the project but had neglected to inform Eisenhower's staff.¹⁵ Another OSS project possibly inadvertently provided the inspiration for the later British deception coup that they carried off in *The Man Who Never Was*. In this an officer of General De Gaulle's Free French Forces was to be assigned to the OSS team at Tangier. The Gaullist officer left London in a British plane, but it crashed or was shot down over Spain. The Frenchman was killed, and his papers, which contained highly classified information, were seized by the Spanish police (and undoubtedly made available to the Germans).¹⁶

These were only a portion of the activities OSS carried out in North Africa, but Murphy, still the man in charge, found himself playing more unfamiliar roles after serious planning for TORCH got underway.

Washington needed a first-hand appraisal of the situation in the unknown territory of North Africa. Murphy was called to Washington in August to describe his operational plan and to discuss his selection of French military officers who could provide a friendly reception for the landings. His underground had selected General Henri Giraud, a respected officer who had escaped from a Nazi prison, as the man who could take control of the French forces. After explaining his plan to Roosevelt and the JCS, Murphy was instructed to go to London and brief Eisenhower. In keeping with the overall need for complete secrecy, Murphy was put in a lieutenant colonel's uniform, given the name McGowan, and ferried across the Atlantic in a B-17 Flying Fortress. General Marshall had told him he would be disguised in a lieutenant colonel's uniform because "nobody ever pays any attention to a lieutenant colonel."¹⁷

In London he briefed Eisenhower and his advisers on North Africa and entered his role as war planner based on his knowledge and special experience in that area:

I was the only person at the London conference with prolonged experience in Africa itself, and from questions asked I could see that Eisenhower and some of his officers had mental pictures of primitive country, collections of mud huts set deep in jungles . . . Eisenhower then prudently inquired whether winter underwear would be necessary, and I told him it was, especially on the high plateau in eastern Algeria. Thousands of American soldiers appreciated that the following winter.¹⁸

Murphy admitted to his "appalling ignorance of military matters" and wrote that he was participating in the initial important offensive of World War II not knowing the first principles of military

science. It was here, however, that he provided the contribution to military planning that his successors would follow in later years. "My interests had always been political and my professional training was in diplomacy," he wrote. "But I took comfort in the knowledge that the expedition to French Africa would require political as well as military strategy."¹⁹

Eisenhower also gave credit to the political considerations of the military operation. Regarding "discussions involving political possibilities," he wrote

Our concern over these affairs illustrates forcibly the old truism that political considerations can never be wholly separated from military ones and that war is mere continuation of political policy in the field of force.²⁰

That much of the London meeting was devoted to this political side of military operations came about because the United States was invading neutral territory. The preparations included covert political action, which in this case meant organizing an underground network of individuals sympathetic to the Allied cause.

In London it was decided that General Mark Clark should make a trip to Algeria to meet with Murphy and some of his French conspirators in order to reassure the French and to obtain a first-hand assessment of the situation there.

The clandestine reception of Clark in North Africa, later well publicized, was arranged by Murphy, who once again played more the role of an intelligence operative than a diplomat. Clark and his party flew from London to Gibraltar and proceeded to Algeria by submarine. After arriving on the Algerian coast east of Algiers, they saw prearranged light signals from a house Murphy had borrowed for the occasion. The party rowed to the shore in kayaks and "from the darkness they heard a voice: 'Welcome to North Africa,' said Robert Murphy, alias Lieutenant Colonel McGowan. 'Damn glad we made it,' said Clark."²¹ Clark had a long and successful meeting with the represen-

tatives of Murphy's underground, but afterward, while they were waiting for night to fall before returning to the submarine, word came that the police were on the way. In reality the police were looking for smugglers, but the party did not know that. Clark's group divided and hid in the cellar and upstairs. Murphy now played another perhaps unaccustomed role. He and his assistant received the police while the owner of the house explained that Murphy was an American diplomat at his house as a guest for a pleasant party. The party of course included some ladies, who were upstairs. The scene of empty wine bottles and the hint of ladies were enough to convince the French police that they need not search further.

Clark made it back to the submarine with only minor additional mishaps, including losing his trousers while trying to launch a boat in the surf, and Murphy returned to Algiers to complete preparations for the landings.

The invasion took place on November 8th as scheduled, but it met opposition by units of the French military, especially the navy. The result was 1800 Allied casualties. What went wrong can be attributed to many factors, but the principal one was that after Weygand's recall there was no officer in overall charge who could suspend French operations. Murphy had a group of officers up to divisional level who could sow confusion, but the senior officer they brought in proved to be ineffective.

Eisenhower described the preparations and results from his perspective:

From Mr. Murphy we learned the names of those officers who had pro-Allied sympathies and those who were ready to aid us actively. We learned much about the temper of the Army itself and about feeling among the civil population He gave us a number of details of French military strength in Africa, including information concerning equipment and training in their ground, air, and sea forces. From his calculations it was plain that if we were bitterly opposed by the French a bloody fight would ensue; if the French should

promptly decide to join us we would expect to get along quickly with our main business of seizing Tunisia and attacking Rommel from the rear. It was Mr. Murphy's belief that we would actually encounter a mean between these two extremes. Events proved him to be correct. On another point, however, he was, through no fault of his own, completely mistaken. He had been convinced by the French Generals . . . that if General Henri Giraud could be brought into North Africa . . . the response would be immediate and enthusiastic and all North Africa would flame into revolt, unified under a leader who was represented as being intensely popular throughout the region. Weeks later, during a crisis in our affairs, we were to learn that this hope was a futile one.²²

In the end, however, TORCH was a strategic success. In military terms it was a host of firsts. Among these, it was the largest amphibious operation to that time, and it was the first invasion to be planned by commanders and staffs of two nations with different outlooks and military experience. The military organization was truly impressive, bringing together as it did an armada from widely separated points of the earth to rendezvous at a number of points on the African coast on target and on time. In intelligence terms, it launched OSS and provided experience in organization and planning for its future operations.

The most valuable result, however, was the degree of civilian-military cooperation and understanding it exhibited. This is perhaps less extraordinary now, but it still remains an important factor where men of different backgrounds have to cooperate on a single venture. An American diplomat pursuing his normal duties was suddenly and dramatically pulled from his accustomed world to that of intelligence and planning for a large-scale military invasion. The quality of the man is shown in the fact that he could adapt, relate to his military counterparts, and earn the respect of all concerned. His lack of success in an important aspect of the operation was unfortunate. But in all

operations there are many variable factors, and other key factors in this shortcoming may remain obscured. The fact remains that without Murphy's efforts the Allied casualty total would likely have been much higher.

The story of Murphy's work illustrates well the interrelationship between military and civilian partners in operations, especially in those parts of the world with complex political situations. Having the resources of a man such as Murphy who is assigned to an area and who thus knows the terrain and, especially, the political scene is vital. Equally essential is military and civilian understanding of the contribution each makes to the operation.

What Murphy stated in his book about his own ignorance of military matters is revealing. He said that Eisenhower and many of his brother officials had the benefit of previous instruction in political problems,

such as the excellent course given at the Army War College and other military schools, but I had had no equivalent training in military matters. Nowadays [1964] we try to teach our diplomats a great deal about military affairs, and we try also to teach our professional soldiers more about world politics and diplomacy. In 1942, American soldiers and diplomats alike had to contend with large areas of ignorance.²³

We may have come far since 1942 in mutual education on military and political matters, but in honesty we must admit that gaps still exist in mutual understanding between military and civilian officers, perhaps even more problematic than the gaps in our awareness of the cultural and political factors of the Third World. We should seek to fill the former no less than the latter before American soldiers are once again sent into an unfamiliar war zone. The cooperation of Murphy with Eisenhower and Eddy provides an example for us to follow.

NOTES

1. Robert Murphy, *Diplomat Among Warriors* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 67-70.

2. Ibid., p. 90.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pp. 90-91.
5. Dispatch No. 1573, 28 July 1942, from Murphy to the Department of State, National Archives.
6. R. Harris Smith, *OSS, The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1972), p. 39.
7. Letter from Murphy to G. Howland Show, Assistant Secretary of State, 20 February 1942, National Archives.
8. Arthur Layton Funk, *The Politics of TORCH* (Lawrence, Kans.: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1974), p. 18.
9. David Kahn, *The Codebreakers* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 497-98.
10. Corey Ford, *Donovan of OSS* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 157.
11. Murphy, p. 106.
12. Ford, p. 155.
13. Ibid.
14. Murphy, p. 108.
15. Smith, p. 57.
16. Ibid., p. 56.
17. Murphy, p. 102.
18. Ibid., p. 103.
19. Ibid., pp. 103-04.
20. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948), p. 88.
21. John S. D. Eisenhower, *Allies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982), pp. 139-40.
22. Dwight D. Eisenhower, pp. 86-87.
23. Murphy, p. 104.

