

PSF - Roosevelt, Franklin D., Jr.

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Narrative of Action against French Fleet and Shore Batteries off Casablanca, 8 November, 1942: By Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Lieutenant, U.S.N.R., Gunnery Officer, U.S.S. Mayrant.

U.S.S. Mayrant was part of Task Group 34.1, commanded by Rear Admiral Robert Griffen, U.S.N. in the U.S.S. Massachusetts. Other ships were the heavy cruiser Tuscaloosa and Wichita and Destroyer Squadron Eight composed of Wainwright, in which Captain D.P. Moon was embarked, Mayrant, Rhind, and Jenkins. This outfit made up the Covering Group for Task Force 34, commanded by Rear Admiral Hewitt in the Augusta, which consisted of approximately fifty transports and cargo carrying ships, two battleships, New York and Texas, a cruiser division, about forty destroyers, three mine sweeps, three minelayers, a tug and most important of all four combatant carriers, Ranger, Suwanee, Santee, Sagamon, and one carrier, Chenango, loaded with Army planes.

The Covering Group sailed from Casco Bay, Portland, Maine on Oct. 24 and two days later rendezvoused with the main body off Norfolk.

The two weeks trip across was without incident except for occasional depth charge attacks and investigations of neutral ships. During this phase our job was to protect the Task Force against any hostile surface or air attacks and was without incident.

The attack on western French Morocco, the Atlantic side, was our job and was coordinated with a simultaneous attack on Oran and Algiers in the Mediterranean. Briefly our plan of operations was as follows: The force was to be divided into three groups which were to land at 1) Mahdia - Port Lyantey, 2) Fedala Beach, just north of Casablanca, 3) Safi to the south. No consideration was taken of Dakar far to the south. If our operation was successful the forces at Dakar would be cut off from any sources of supply as the only railroad and main roads run north through Casablanca.

The main point of French strength was at Casablanca with two big shore batteries (10 inch guns), the points either side of the town and a great many guns of smaller caliber and A.A. stuff in the harbor itself. There were an undetermined number of aircraft at good airfields at all three landing points. The French fleet at Casablanca was known to consist of one battleship, Jean Bart, probably unable to get underway and docked so that its two four-gun 15-inch turrets could bear to seaward and so be used as harbor defense; two or three cruisers, three destroyer leaders, eleven submarines, numerous smaller craft such as mine-layers and sweeps. Minefields were known to exist off the harbor.

Our task during the actual attack was to prevent the shore batteries and French fleet to interfere the landing just to the

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OSD letter, May 3, 1973

By RT, NARS Date MAY 21 1973

north at Fedala.

On the morning of November 7, the Task Force split up into the three groups. That night after dark we cruised up and down 15 to 30 miles offshore. There were many groups of lighted fishing boats which we cruised right through, probably without ever being detected. We were amazed to find not one single patrol boat. We were somewhat worried that a patrolling submarine might simulate a fishing boat, running lights and all or that one of the boats might radio a warning of our presence. But apparently the French forces ashore were completely surprised when the first troops hit the beach in their landing boats at 0400, 8 November 1942.

At about 0300, I was sleeping peacefully in the Wardroom when the Doc woke me up to listen to an American broadcast that our troops were landing all along the coast and nowhere was there resistance, in fact they were being welcomed. There was also an excellent statement by Pa to the French people explaining the move.

The ship went to General Quarters at 0330. I told my Director crew about the broadcast and made a facetious remark to the effect that this was one time when Daddy was certainly looking after Junior's best interest. The answer came four hours later from one of the gang, after we'd shot down one plane and helped sink a cruiser, "Daddy seems to have forgotten all about Junior but Junior seems to be doing all right on his own", followed a few seconds later with - "Maybe", just as a big 10-inch shell landed close aboard just off the bow.

My station is the highest spot on the ship - with my head and shoulders sticking out of the Director. It's wonderful up there as you can see, better than anyone else, everything that's going on. But when the stuff whines by close to your ear you do feel as though they were taking their aim on your noggin. I had often wondered how I'd feel when the fun started and I was amazed to discover that I didn't even have that funny feeling in my stomach that I'd get before a crew race or a football game. I was so damn busy controlling the main battery I guess I just never had time to get scared and besides I had a complete belief, amounting to knowledge of a predetermined fact, that the ship would never be hit.

One other explanatory note. In case there was any resistance the signal "Play Ball" was to be flashed to all forces and "vigorous offensive action" was to be taken by all hands. We were all a little worried there'd be no "play ball" after all the preparations and work we'd done. But at 0600 dawn broke and at 0630 the signal "Play Ball" came and we headed for the beach and attack. There follows my report to my Commanding Officer of what I remember and believe to be the events that followed. It was a

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great day for the U.S. Navy, for the cause of the United Nations,
and Junior did his best to properly look after the interests of
his ship, his mates, and himself.

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At about 0630 I received word that we would "play ball". The formation was steaming at high speed on a NEasterly course, MAYRANT moving well forward on starboard bow of MASSACHUSETTS to be clear of her line of fire. At 0700 the sun was struggling through the clouds on the horizon. I spotted five or six aircraft at about 45° position angle coming from the East chasing two of our SOC's. I could not positively identify them until one flew right over us at about 1000 ft. elevation when I clearly saw the French emblem. I believe they were Dewoitines, but perhaps P-36 fighters. I saw them firing on our seaplanes and apparently one of these was hit as it glided to the water. All this I reported to the bridge requesting permission to open fire. MAYRANT turned sharply right unmasking the main battery to port all guns reported in automatic. No ships opened fire for at least a minute and I could get no word from the bridge. However, we continued tracking the right hand plane which was maneuvering radically in pursuit of an SOC. As soon as the Squadron Commander in WAINWRIGHT commenced firing I opened up with rapid fire in full automatic rate control using rangefinder ranges and no spotting. The FD Radar went out of commission on the first salvo. Our first target disappeared high into a cloud and I shifted targets to the left. At first our bursts were behind him. I told the Chief Firecontrolman, LIGHTNER, F.M. to increase target speed in the rangekeeper and he said it was already correcting itself, and then I saw one of our bursts land right on him and he started smoking and headed down. I shifted targets to the left again and I believe the ship began swinging left. I observed no other hits, in fact I could not identify our own fire as there were so many bursts and targets were crossing each other in violent maneuvering. Someone in the Director yelled, "There goes another one", and a gun captain yelled the same thing in the phones but I didn't see it. The rest of the planes soon climbed into some clouds and disappeared. I believe this firing had lasted about three and a half minutes when I ordered cease firing. All guns reported "No casualties", and I ordered the handling rooms to refill ready-stowage lockers and all hoists. No one could tell me how many rounds had been fired. The #1 powderman in each handling room had been designated to count the rounds he passed through the scuttle but they all said they lost track after the first couple of rounds.

We were now on the starboard quarter of the WICHITA, steaming a northerly course and the big ships had opened fire at the shore stallations and the JEAN BART whose salvos short of the big ships ahead of us. We were smoking heavily and word came from the bridge that the fireroom could not control it. In about ten minutes a fleet ? of about sixteen planes were reported to port flying toward us from the West and at once the main battery was trained on them and commenced tracking. They were at long range and high elevation with the sun reflected from them making identification almost impossible. I ? noticed the WICHITA on another can opened fire so I followed suit. When the first few rounds burst near them those planes scattered

climbed for the nearest clouds. Word came from the bridge that they were ours and to cease firing.

The big ships changed course to the East (to starboard) and we ended up on our proper station on the starboard bow of the MASSACHUSETTS. I noticed a couple of ships which I believe were cruisers off Casablanca harbor and I designated the left hand ship as our target. Their target angle was then about zero but she soon turned to the Southwest along the coast opening her target angle to about 60°. They were at about 20,000 yards making good speed. I think our cruisers opened fire on them as I noticed a lot of colored splashes around them. When the range closed to 17,500 yards I asked bridge for permission to open fire. It was granted and I commenced slow salvo fire at the rate of about five salvos per minute. They were smoking heavily and with the haze and big gun splashes I could not observe any firing and a big deflection spot was equally unobservable. I spotted down until I could see my salvo and then walked it up until I lost it and then began a continuous rocking ladder 300 yards on either side of what I believed was our best hitting range. The rangefinder operator reported several hits and I believe I saw a few. The enemy was slowed to about 3 knots early in the firing and one cruiser was observed heading toward the beach. However I do not know if it was actually beached. After about 10 minutes of this firing #1 handling room reported a lot of oil leaking down from the gun and A.A. LOPP, CBM(AA), the gun captain at once reported a serious leak in the hydraulic system. The Repair Party was asked to send D. SMALLWOOD, CGM(PA), at once to the gun. Shortly thereafter CBM LOPP reported the gun would not operate in automatic or power and he was ordered to shift to manual and then he reported the gun loaded and would not fire. The main battery then ceased firing as out of range. The firing pin on gun #1 was replaced and still the gun would not fire. The gun was unloaded through the breech after about 15 minutes and found to have been fired but it did not recoil. Probably a "ball of hay" had been fired. The casualty to the hydraulic system was more serious as a joint in a line had carried away. I sent R.A. WHITE, FC2c, to attempt repairs. He and H.M. STEEVES, CMM(AA), and J.C. HADLEY, FC3c, worked through the next firing phase renewing the line and joint, while the gun was firing in manual and successfully completed repairs so that the gun ended up the action in full automatic power.

By this time we had reversed course to the Southwest and the MASSACHUSETTS appeared to be firing at the shore batteries while our cruisers continued firing on the enemy cruisers. We were out of range. When well to the Westward all ships ceased firing and there was a ?. I believe it was then about 0830.

We began the second phase of the action by changing course to the Northeast, again heading for Casablanca. The big ships soon opened fire at the shore installations but these were well beyond our range although we were on the starboard bow (the shoreward) of the MASSACHUSETTS. I was ranging on the lighthouse of El Hank when the

bridge reported three ships about 60° on our starboard bow just to the North of Casablanca running to the North East in the direction of our landing force at Fedala. We immediately identified them as French and began tracking them and almost at once got word to commence firing which I did on the leading DD as we were in the van of formation. The WAINWRIGHT moved over astern of us. The opening range was about 16000 yards and I asked the Captain to close range. I was firing salvo fire, about five or six a minute. I had forgotten to bring up an ordnance stop watch but my "gadget" stop-wrist watch worked like a charm, oblivious to all the firing. Often my big stop watches have been stopped by the concussion.

We were smoking very heavily, partly obscuring the ships astern and, as we were the nearest target for the enemy ships and shore batteries, we began to catch a little modified hell with enemy fire landing pretty much all around us. WATSON was doing a grand job of zigzagging us which probably saved us from being hit. For quite a while we were the only ship firing on the leading destroyer and I was able to spot in accordance with the usual doctrine. Then one of our cruisers, I believe it was the AUGUSTA, well to the North East, opened up. We straddled the enemy twice and just then the cruiser straddled him and must have hit him. Our next salvo landed squarely on his stern with a big flash and smoke and steam started to pour from him as he appeared to stop. Then he turned toward the beach and his stern seemed to be underwater. He quit firing and I shifted targets to the next in line who was already smoking heavily. Just then the "ping" and "whine" of enemy shells going by me seemed to get a lot closer and some pink dye-loaded splashes were landing to close aboard so I ordered rapid fire and the boys really pumped them out. The range was 12300 yards and we rocked them through 300 yards either side of the target. There was so much smoke and splashes around those two cans that we couldn't see them. I believe the TUSCALOOSA and WICHITA were also firing on them. But this didn't last long as our formation reversed course turning outboard to port. We were really in the thick of things on that turn. I guess the enemy thought we'd been hit because of our smoke, and so concentrated on us. We were soon out of range and ceased firing. The rangekeeper had "clocked" the maximum enemy speed at 22 knots during this phase. Gun #1 had fired in manual and LOPP, CBM(AA), the gun captain, deserves much credit for keeping his gun in action, not missing a salvo. During the ensuing lull the gun tested satisfactorily in automatic and I reported it back in commission to the captain.

During the first AA firing at the French planes the cross-level on the director stable element had failed and had been operated in hand during all the ensuing action. Repairs were not satisfactorily accomplished until the following day. Likewise the control officer's selector telephone switch failed and

the trouble was not located until the following day. BAECHLER, C., RMLc, attempted at this time to repair the FD Radar but the next run began before this was accomplished. I believe the present installation is completely unsatisfactory when firing to port as the control unit is so exposed to the blast of gun #2 when firing to port.

We then got word that we were to head east again to intercept two enemy cruisers coming down the coast for Casablanca harbor. On our new course we were on the port (off shore) bow of the MASSACHUSETTS. The enemy was soon sighted and the big ships and JENKINS opened fire. The latter was really in the thick of it on this run and only a few "overs" came near us. We never fired at the range never got below 17,500, much to the disgust of all my boys, especially gun #1 who wanted to test their repairs. The enemy appeared to be a cruiser and destroyer. The former appeared to blow up when a MASSACHUSETTS salvo landed squarely on her and the destroyer appeared to sink just off the breakwater. I saw them both through the trainer's telescope, both sinking. Then we headed West again and, I believe, the MASSACHUSETTS, led by the WAINWRIGHT, headed us all for the beach for a short spell, but we were hopelessly out of it astern. When we squared away to the WEST again the TUSCALOOSA and WICHITA with RHIND screening were ordered off to destroy an enemy cruiser escaping to the S.W. and we screened MASSACHUSETTS while she recovered one plane, at 20 knots.

The final run was a short one to the East to unload seven of the MASSACHUSETTS's 16-inch rifles at EL HANK. The engagement was then broken off.

The personnel of the main battery and fire-control party acted with complete coolness and great enthusiasm throughout. All hands exhibited exceptional resourcefulness and thorough knowledge of their jobs. The training of each member of the gun crews in the duties of each station was of particular value as it permitted a steady rotation of reliefs. The ammunition supply was more than adequate. When casualties occurred the auxiliary method went into operation without the necessity of orders. In fact my orders in such cases proved to be nothing more than reminders or check-ups. I cannot give too much praise to the gun captains, LOPP, JONES, EDDY, and HEIMRICK and to Chief Firecontrolman LIGHTNER for the thorough training of the men under them and for their fulfilling of their responsibilities in action.

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, JR.,
LIEUT., U.S.N.R.,
GUNNERY OFFICER.