

A Desperate Venture

Two men with special qualifications were selected for a mission that could save many American lives.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

TORCH, the Allied invasion of North Africa that kicked off on November 8, 1942, was one of the most important but perhaps least remembered campaigns against the Berlin-Rome Axis. It led to the defeat of Germany's Afrika Korps, secured North Africa and the Mediterranean as a base for the invasion of Southern Europe, and temporarily placated Joseph Stalin, who was impatiently demanding the opening of a second front.

The plan called for landings by British and American forces near Oran and Algiers on Algeria's Mediterranean coast and by American troops under Maj. Gen. George Patton at three sites near Casablanca on Morocco's Atlantic coast. The defenders in all areas were French troops under commanders who had given their oaths of loyalty to Marshal Pétain's Vichy government, which was collaborating to varying degrees with the Germans. The strongest opposition was expected in Morocco, where Patton's 37,000 men would face about 55,000 French troops supported by 130 combat aircraft, several naval vessels, and many shore batteries.

Most important of Patton's three landing beaches was Mehdia, about eighty miles north of Casablanca. Troops landing there at 0400 hours were to seize the airfield at Port Lyautey, a short distance up the Sebou River. Until the field was secure, air support would be provided by US Navy carrier aircraft.

Of the many uncertainties confronting General Patton, most worrisome was the degree of intensity with which the Vichy French would oppose the landings. President Roosevelt and General Eisenhower had broadcast messages urging the French not to resist, but had the messages been received? Would they be heeded? Brig. Gen. Lucian Truscott, commander of the Mehdia landing force, decided on what he described as "a desperate venture." He would send two emissaries through the French lines to locate the area commander and persuade him to cooperate. From many volunteers, Truscott selected Maj. Pierpont Morgan Hamilton and Col. Demas "Nick" Crow, the commander of his air contingent.

Why these two? Harvard graduate Pete Hamilton had been an Air Service pilot in World War I. In the

interwar years, he was engaged in international banking. He had lived in France for several years and spoke fluent French. He was serving as General Truscott's intelligence chief. Colonel Crow, a 1924 graduate of West Point, had commanded pursuit units before serving as Military Air Observer with the RAF in Egypt and as a military attaché in Greece and Turkey. A man of persuasive personality, he had many friends among foreign officers, including the French.

At first light on D-Day, Crow and Hamilton headed for shore aboard a landing craft. They intended to go as far up the Sebou River toward Port Lyautey as possible, then proceed in a light truck driven by Pfc. Orris Corey, but heavy artillery fire from shore batteries prevented them from entering the river. They finally made a landing on the beach



The daring truce mission of Maj. Pete Hamilton (left) and Col. Nick Crow saved hundreds of American lives in French Morocco in World War II. They were the first AAF recipients of the Medal of Honor in the European-Mediterranean theater and the only airmen to receive the Medal for valor not involving air combat.