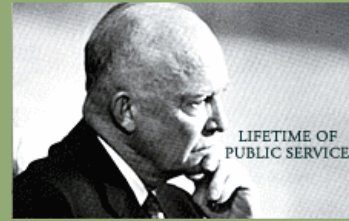


DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER MEMORIAL COMMISSION

It's time to build a national memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower.



Eisenhower Stories

Dealing with the Devil

Ike's first combat command came in 1942 when Great Britain and the United States assigned him to lead the allied invasion of North Africa. During the early days of that operation he had to decide whether to make a "deal with the devil" in order to save soldiers' lives. How he handled it says a lot about his character.

Eisenhower's "devil" was a French naval officer, Admiral Jean-François Darlan, who was able, perhaps, to help the Allied command solve one of its most complex problems. During the planning stages of the invasion the Allies did not know what the French in North Africa would do. The main target of the Allied forces was to defeat the German army that occupied and controlled Tunisia. But it would also be necessary for Eisenhower's invading forces to go through the French colonies of Morocco and Algeria to get there. Major elements of the French Army were in those two colonies. Would the French soldiers resist the Allied invasion by fighting American and British troops in order to protect French territory? Ike and everyone in the Allied forces hoped they would not, but no one knew.

The heart of the problem was French politics. At the outset of the war in Europe in 1939 France and England were allies in opposing Germany. However, during the German invasion of France in 1940, the British troops had withdrawn through Dunkirk and escaped back to the British Isles, leaving the French troops on their own. Shortly afterwards, German forces defeated the French army and many French citizens felt that England had deserted them. French resentment turned to bitterness two months later when the British Navy bombarded about half of the French fleet while their ships were at anchor in French Morocco. The British felt it necessary to disable the French warships so that they wouldn't fall into German hands, but the French public, and especially the French military, came to hate their former ally for killing over a thousand helpless sailors during the attack.



Admiral Jean-François Darlan (foreground) and Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain

Now the Allies were fearful that once the invasion of North Africa got underway the French soldiers would fight back. Ike had tried diplomatic efforts to tell the French that the Americans were going to invade Algeria and Morocco and to convince them to

lay down their weapons and join in the fight against Germany. These pre-invasion efforts failed and when the Allied troops stormed the beaches near Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers on November 8, 1942 no one knew how the French forces would react.

The answer was delivered by French bullets. Although some French defensive positions surrendered after only an honorable show of force, many units fought fiercely in defense of sovereign French soil. Eisenhower knew that his troops could defeat the French resistance, but he had come to North Africa to kill Germans, not Frenchmen. Further, the French police were maintaining civil order in cities and towns throughout Morocco and Algeria and if Ike couldn't turn the French from hostility to collaboration he would have to leave a huge number of his troops behind as occupation forces when the Allies moved toward the German objectives in Tunisia.

The French officers in Africa told Eisenhower's emissaries that they would surrender and cooperate only if they received orders to do so from their government. But at that time the government of France was controlled by the Germans. They did so through a puppet Fascist government housed in Vichy, France and led by Marshal Henri Philippe Petain. Even if Petain had been willing to order surrender in North Africa, he dared not do so out of fear that the German forces occupying France would extract a savage retribution.

Fortunately for Ike and his command, his forces captured Admiral Jean-François Darlan. This high ranking official of the Vichy government, a well known Fascist and German collaborator, had been in North Africa visiting his son at the time of the allied attack. As Eisenhower knew, the combatant French forces would lay down their arms if Darlan ordered them to do so.

But could the Allies strike a deal with this traitor to their cause? Should they? As Eisenhower told his staff, "In both our nations, Darlan is a deep-dyed villain. When public opinion raises its outcry our two governments will be embarrassed." Ike had to decide what to do.

His decision was to cut a deal with Darlan in such a way that when the American and British media condemned the arrangement the blame would rest solely on his shoulders. Thus, he would establish what today we would call "plausible deniability" for the heads of state. Political pressures at home might well force them to fire Eisenhower, but he decided that this would be a small price to pay if he could prevent needless casualties and enable the Allies to get on with the attack on the German army.

Without seeking approval from higher authorities, Eisenhower flew to Algiers and met with Darlan. He struck a deal: Darlan became commander of all French military personnel and was given control of all civil authorities. In return, Darlan agreed to an immediate cease fire and unlimited permission for the allied forces to establish and operate air bases, supply depots, and troop facilities. The fighting between French and Allied forces stopped.

Newspapers in both the United States and Britain expressed outrage at Eisenhower for collaboration with the enemy. Banner headlines denounced his incompetence and political naïveté. Ike ignored the press.

As became apparent later both Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, fully understood that large numbers of lives had been saved and the huge cost of occupation avoided. They backed Eisenhower's deal. Ike's head didn't roll, as he had half-expected. He had absorbed the heat that otherwise might have been directed at his political superiors, and he and his Allied command were able to get on with the job of defeating the Axis forces in Africa.

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