EXHIBITION REVIEW

COMMEMORATING A BATTLE AND BOGIE

BY MARK YOST

Natick, Mass.

THERE WILL BE many retrospec-
tives marking the 75th anniversary of “Casablanca,” the November 1942 motion picture of World War II intrigue starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. But none will integrate the actual battle of Casablanca, Nov. 8-16, 1942, quite like “The Real and Reel Casablanca,” a new exhibit opening Nov. 8 and running through Feb. 3, 2018 at the International Museum of World War II.

This special exhibit consists of four large display cases, three of which feature maps, telegrams, posters, letters, propaganda leaflets, photos and weapons from the brief but strategically important Operation Torch, the joint British-American attack on North Africa that would be the largest amphibious operation in history to date and included the capture of Casablanca, Morocco. The fourth display case, along with posters and stills on the walls from the museum’s collection, is dedicated to the film.

With 100,000 troops and more than 800 ships, Operation Torch was mostly an American operation with minimal naval and air support from the British. This was necessary, the exhibit explains, because in July 1940 Churchill had ordered the sinking of the French fleet in Algeria, worried that the Germans would use the ships against Britain. The British naval attack, while understandable in the broader context of the war, became a rallying point for anti-British, pro-French partisans in North Africa. On display is one of the propaganda posters, showing desperate Frenchmen drowning during the attack.

Also here is an Oct. 24, 1942, Naval Intelligence report on a possible security leak at a Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, Va. A young ensign who was a patient told his wife and another visitor, the report states, that “A large force, composed of three Task Groups, would leave Norfolk within short time for the North Coast of Africa.” Secrecy was important, the exhibit explains, because the Americans were unsure whether Vichy France, which had collaborated with the Germans to save monuments and lives, would greet them as liberators or invaders. On display here are propaganda leaflets in French and Arabic with images of the American flag and President Roosevelt, dropped over Casablanca, telling Moroccans that the Americans are their allies, there only to wage war against the Germans.

The second display case is dedicated almost entirely to Gen. George S. Patton Jr., then a two-star general relatively unknown to the American public. Patton commanded some 33,000 ground troops around Casablanca, and kept some of the exhibit’s most impressive artifacts, including a map of the invasion beaches with Patton’s handwritten notations. There’s also a copy of the telegram Patton received at the start of the landings with the code words “Play Ball.”

Perhaps the most impressive piece here is a carbon copy of the Nov. 10, 1942, letter that Patton sent to the sultan of Morocco, two days after the landings, pleading for as little bloodshed as possible. But Patton minced no words:

“Your majesty must realize the painful sentiments which I entertain in contemplating the necessity of shedding the blood of my friends, but the stern necessity of war demands that if the French armed forces continue to demonstrate the hostility they have already shown, it is my military duty and purpose to attack by air, by sea, and by land, with the utmost violence known to modern war.” Patton’s words must have been well-received, because also here are the ornamental daggers presented to Patton by the sultan.

A third collection of artifacts is dedicated to the Casablanca Conference, the January 1943 confab at the Anfa Hotel in Casablanca, which featured Churchill and Roosevelt and all their military commanders, gathered to plan the next phase of the war. The museum has a signed photo of the participants, as well as Churchill’s early manuscript for his memoir “The Second World War.” Handwritten in the margins: “All our great affairs marched forward together...the End of the Beginning was at hand...”

Film memorabilia includes a copy of the script, eight colorized stills, and a prop chair from Rick’s Café American. But most impressive is a photo of Bogart, as saloon-keeper Rick Blaine, playing chess across from Peter Lorre. A nearby panel explains that the chess board seen in the film was a real game Bogart was playing by mail with Irving Kowner of Brooklyn, N.Y. Bogart suggested to director Michael Curtiz that showing Rick playing chess would add depth to the character. That’s an exquisite detail that both Bogart and Patton, the two main actors of this fine exhibit, could drink to.

The Real and Reel Casablanca;
American Troops Enter World War II, Landing in North Africa
The International Museum of World War II, Nov. 8-Feb. 3, 2018

Mr. Yost is a writer in Houston.