

# Operation Torch - The Allied Invasion of North Africa

---

*By Frank Kalinowski II*

The year was 1933. The United States was firmly gripped by the Great Depression and millions of people were out of work. Jobs were few and prospects looked bleak for young people seeking work. However, economic conditions would not deter a young man from pursuing his dream of joining the United States Army Air Corps.

Seventeen year old Francis Saturn Kalinowski, my father, was a year shy of enlistment age. He solved that obstacle by altering his birth certificate to appear a year older. The problem of being underweight came next. This was easily resolved by consuming five pounds of bananas before taking the Army physical. Deaf in the right ear took a slight of hand to beat the hearing test. He pretended to put his finger in his left ear when instructed to do so during the test; problem solved. Still unable to enlist due to a freeze on military enlistments, he wrote a letter to President Roosevelt. The President forwarded the letter to the Secretary of War with the instruction to "find a place for this young man."

Francis, the son of two immigrants from Poland, entered the Army Air Corps in 1933 and reported to Mitchel Field, Long Island, New York. By 1942, Francis attained the rank of Master Sergeant while serving as an airplane mechanic with both the 99<sup>th</sup> and 97<sup>th</sup> Observation Squadrons.

Francis was promoted to the rank of Warrant Officer in July 1942. This resulted in his transfer to the 154<sup>th</sup> Observation Squadron, an Arkansas based National Guard unit that had been called to active duty. The unit sailed from the United States to England in the fall of 1942. Immediately after arriving in England, the unit was assigned to participate in "[Operation Torch](#)," the allied invasion of North Africa.

We now turn to Sunday, November 8, 1942. The following is an excerpt from Francis's diary from that day.

## **SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1942 (DIARY OF FRANCIS KALINOWSKI)**

"Awakened by heavy gunfire at 4:00 A.M. At last we are here and the battle is ON. Went up to the top deck to watch the battle and the gun flashes. Ship dropped anchor a couple of miles off shore and the men started going over the sides down the scramble nets at 6:00 A.M. At daybreak, the mosquito boats layed smoke screens between ships and shore. The invasion barges are shuttling back and forth between the ships and beach as fast as they can load and unload. Now it's a steady rumble of the big guns. Rifles & machine guns are keeping up a steady fire on shore. Can see two battleships in the distance shelling the port of Oran. Our troops are sending up smoke rockets and smoke pots are floating all over the water. Stayed up on deck all morning watching the fight. A few of our barges were sunk by gunfire from a fort on shore. Some were shot up and wrecked on the beach. Two barges collided in the smoke screen and sank. The battle went on all afternoon and troops kept pouring to shore. The fight is

now subsiding into the hills. Our troops have the shore pretty well in hand. God Bless America. Wrote few words to Bobbie after supper and went back upon deck to watch the lights and flashes of the battle. At times the sky towards Oran turned a bright red. Boy! They are catching HELL there. Can hear the cannons of our tanks off in the hills some-place. At about 10:15 P.M. a band of Arab guerillas came down out of the hills and attacked some points on shore. It's midnight and in a minute it will be tomorrow. Cannoneering and cracks of rifles and rattle of machine guns still rumbling in the night. I have my battle dress on, my pack is here beside me, my gun is loaded, my knife is sharpened and my spirits are 100% stars and stripes. Fell asleep in my bunk shortly after midnight. May be over side anytime."

### **MONDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 1942 (DIARY OF FRANCIS KALINOWSKI)**

"Awakened at 5:00 A.M. for breakfast. Had eggs and bacon which will probably be the last for a long while. This is zero hour for our outfit. Swung equipment on my back and went over the ships rail at 6:15 A.M. still dark. Made the 40 feet of scrambled net straight down to the invasion barge bouncing up and down without a scratch. It was so much fun that I felt like doing it over again. Our ships let up a balloon barrage this morning. At dawn, two ME-109's attacked from the east but the ship and shore guns drove them back. Landed on beach near Arzew at 8:00 A.M. Got my feet wet a bit. Didn't even notice that our men were pouring off the barges all along the beach. After the last man landed we started out down the road to town, column of files down each side of the road about fifteen feet apart. Marched through Arzew hugging the walls on each side of the street. The going is slow because the hills and buildings are full of snipers taking pot shots at our troops. Stopped by snipers in church steeple. One of our tanks came up and put a 75 mm shell right in the steeple and knocked it clear off the map. Seventeen Frenchmen and Arabs were captured there and they had a stock of rifles and machine guns and ammunition. Out we go through town and down the road to the hills. Two ME-109's harassing and strafing roads every once in a while. We scrambled for cover and hit the dirt quite a few times. Halted for lunch at 1:00 P.M. I had a can of cold hash, dog biscuits and a chocolate bar. Marched on and off until 5:30 P.M. and halted for the night. Had cold G.I. iron ration for supper but brewed myself a hot cup of coffee. Went to sleep in a barn in a pile of hay."

### **TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1942 (DIARY OF FRANCIS KALINOWSKI)**

"Up at 7:00A.M. and had G.I. slum. But I had my hot cup of coffee to melt my dog biscuits. Marched off further into hills after lunch. Passed about 300 captured French and Arabs being marched to town. Air raids and snipers harassing us all afternoon. No casualties in our outfit yet. Saw several loaded ambulances on the road. At 4:30 P.M. we arrived at the air corps encampment and started to dig in. I dug me a slit trench with my tin hat and lined the bottom with straw. A captured Spitfire got over our bivouac and opened fire. Our anti-aircraft defense went into action and a friendly Spitfire started chasing the Jerry. An anti-aircraft burst hit the Jerry and he came down in flames. The friendly Spitfire got its wing tip shot off and made a belly landing about a quarter of a mile from where I dug my hole. At 5:30, I cooked the first hot meal for ages. Beans never tasted so good and the dog biscuits tasted like angel food cake. Put on my field jacket and raincoat. Layed down in my trench, covered my face with my tin hat, and went to sleep with the sky for a blanket at 8:00. Rain drops woke me up at 10:30. No shelter to go to so I just layed there in the rain. It stopped after a while and I fell asleep again. At 11:30 it began

raining again but harder so I dug out my gas cape and got under it. I ate a candy bar, smoked and fell asleep again sitting up under the cellophane cape.”

### **WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1942 (DIARY OF FRANCIS KALINOWSKI)**

“It rained on and off and I slept on and off during the night. It’s not very comfortable sleeping in a trench sitting up in the rain. Something white was running around in my trench at 5:30 A.M. so I got up and out. The rain stopped finally so I snuck a smoke and ate another candy bar, then sat around until dawn. When I started to get my two cans of rations a little field mouse ran out from under my bag. That’s what was running around my trench this morning early. Everything is pretty wet especially my feet. My gabardine raincoat is just splotched with red mud. Oh well, its good camouflage. Dried my things out in the sun and took sun bath myself. Washed up for first time in 2 ½ days. My tin helmet sure makes a good wash bowl. Cooked myself three hot GI iron ration meals today. Heard only a few shots fired today. I guess everyone is beginning to realize that we didn’t come over here to invade but to protect. No bedding rolls yet so I went to sleep in the trench again. Tonight I wore an overcoat over the raincoat so I stayed fairly warm.”

### **THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 1942 (DIARY OF FRANCIS KALINOWSKI)**

“Woke up a few times during the night but all in all didn’t sleep so bad. At least it didn’t rain during the night. After a hot hash and dog biscuit breakfast I hoofed down a couple of miles to the Mediteranean for a swim and bath. This is the first time I had all my clothes off in four days and it sure felt refreshing to get into the water in my birthday suit. Fooled around a couple of wrecked invasion barges for a while then hoofed back to camp for lunch. On detail all afternoon getting signal flags and fire extinguishers and stuff from wrecked barges. Cooked some GI slum and made some coffee and had me a good supper. We got our bedding rolls about 6:00 P.M. just when it began raining. I slapped my pup tent up mighty fast and moved all my stuff in it. I sure picked a rough spot as I found out when I layed down to sleep.”

### **FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 1942 (DIARY OF FRANCIS KALINOWSKI)**

“I had to sleep in curves all night so as to keep off the bumps. It was a lot better than sleeping in a hole in the ground and I wasn’t wet with dew in the morning. After breakfast I knocked the tent down and started all over again. I dug up the lumps and smoothed a spot for my bedding roll. I layed that down and fixed it up with clean sheets, pillow case and all. I marked the size of the tent on the ground and dug a draining ditch about three inches deep. Made a small floor out of an old GI rations crate for my two bags. Then I put up my pup tent nice and pretty over the works with the sides pegged down in the drain ditch. A little straw on the remainder of the bare ground in the tent and finally an oval piece of canvas out of one of the wrecked barges and my domicile was complete even down to a canvas rug. I covered one half of the tent opening with the shelter end of my sleeping bag then got a bunch of rocks and made a small front porch so I wouldn’t have to crawl on mud or dirt when I went in and out of the tent. I sure am proud of the job and it was worth a whole mornings work. After I cooked myself some slum and coffee I hoofed down to the beach for a bath and a swim. I sure got dirty digging around in the dirt all morning. Had a pre-heated supper for the first time since that last breakfast on the boat. They got a

couple of the kitchen gasoline stoves set up and heated the GI iron rations. Now instead of every other guy building a fire they just passed out hot cans of GI rations and a can of biscuits and a cup of boiling water for coffee. Since we got off the boat we've been eating the iron rations every meal. Three times a day it was either hash, meat and beans, or stew plus the dog biscuits and coffee. Up to tonight you either built a fire and heated the chow and coffee water or else you ate it cold without coffee. Some of this water we were rationed looked like coffee before I even put the powder in. It was yellow and it tasted lousy with chlorine and iodine. I built myself a little stove out of an empty ammunition can and could start a fire, heat my ration, boil water, make coffee and be eating in half an hour. I had good coffee when I had good water but when the water was bad, I tried sweetening it with three lumps of sugar and about four pieces of hard candy but it still tasted like cough medicine. It was hot though and that's what counted most. Tonight I undressed the bed and crawled in between those white sheets. Boy! After this first week this felt like the softest bed in the world and I wouldn't swap it for a Simmons bed. At long last a peaceful nights sleep under cover, in a warm sleeping and on a smooth soft ground. God! It feels good."

#### SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 1942 (DIARY OF FRANCIS KALINOWSKI)

"☆☆?!☆ Are we never going to get any rest? I was sleeping so nice, dead to the world for the first time in a week and this had to happen. At four A.M. I was awakened to ....."

**Webmaster Note: Visit the website often to see how this story ends.**