

Jack Staggers
Colorado

Operation Dragoon

Michael woke up to the sound of his alarm clock blaring. He wondered, “Was it already time to get up?” He hopped out of bed and quickly got ready for the day. Teeming with anticipation, he waited near the front door for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, at 8:30 a.m., he heard 3 strong knocks, and with a quick turn of the lock, his best friend strolled into the entryway. “Grandpa!” he exclaimed with joy, “You’re finally here!” The elderly man, who was well into his eighties, smiled with happiness as he embraced his grandson. After half an hour of casual conversation, his grandpa’s smile morphed into a serious look. “Michael,” he said in his usual steady tone, “Do you know why your parents wanted me to come today?” Michael responded, “My dad wanted you to tell me a story, right? What is it about anyway?” His grandfather slowly sat down on the living room sofa and spoke with authority. “Son, I am going to tell you about the cost of your freedom, and how a small piece of sacrifice has a huge effect on a much grander picture.” With a reminiscent gaze, he recalled the time when the Allies invaded the southern coast of France.

“It was August 1943. Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met to discuss the opening of a few new fronts against German occupied France. U.S. and British strategists held differing views on how to carry out such an important undertaking, and thus, other conferences had to be held in Tehran and Cairo later that year. Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin was able to attend these other meetings and share some of his own agendas. (Britannica) Over the course of those strategic gatherings, it was agreed that an operation by the codename of Anvil was to be launched alongside the now famous attack that was Operation

Overlord. (Zinzou) Originally, Anvil was considered to be key to the success of Overlord, and it aimed to provide access points for the arrival of fresh Allied troops in the Southern France region. At the various conferences, it was decided that the operation could take place as early as May 1944. However, the British, especially Winston Churchill, looked upon the attack less favorably than the other Allied powers. They were worried about the impact such an invasion could have regarding the flow of supplies and soldiers needed to continue a previous invasion that occurred in January of 1944 at Anzio, Italy. (Operation Dragoon) Additionally, the assault's utility to Operation Overlord was questioned. Over the course of a few months, priorities changed, and the invasion was slowly squeezed out of Allied plans. Once Operation Overlord began with the assault on the beaches of Normandy, Anvil was almost forgotten. Still, American General, Jacob Devers, who oversaw the operation, continued its planning. Nearly a month after Overlord began on August 15, 1944, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and the British Combined Chiefs of Staff allowed the now newly renamed Operation Dragoon to begin." (Zinzou)

"Listen Michael, now that some of that history is out of the way, I'd like you to know that I was an American soldier in that very invasion." Michael, who had almost fallen asleep, perked up and exclaimed with new interest, "Really? You were in that battle Grandpa?" His grandfather chuckled, "Yes, I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in the American 7th Army; specifically, the 36th infantry division. We were told that we were amphibiously landing at a place called Cavalaire-Agay. It stretched along the French Côte d'Azur from Cap Benat to Antibes. (Operation Dragoon) Apparently, our intel had good understanding that the German defenses in the area were poorly built and undermanned. The U.S. Eighth Fleet and the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet transported us to the landing zone and provided bombardment, naval air support, and other special operations." His grandfather stopped to collect his thoughts, and

with a somber look, he continued, “I can recall the terribly vivid emotions I felt that day. I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d make it out alive. At the same time, I had hope, because of what we had been told about the weakly fortified condition of the landing zone. I knew we could beat those Germans, but something inside me wouldn’t let my nerves settle.” Michael cut in with a shaking voice, “What happened next?” His grandpa paused again, and then continued. “We had heard about the terrors of the landings at Normandy, and we were fortunate to not have it as bad as them. However, our attack still came with a cost. The American forces, consisting of the 3rd, 36th, and 45th infantry divisions, were led by General Alexander Patch. We hit the beaches, and a short time later, the French Army B, led by General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny landed. We came with the strength of 94,000 men, and we suffered 395 casualties in the initial assault. From there, I recall that the French Army pressed on to the port towns of Marseille and Toulon. They quickly surrounded them, and they fell by August 28th. The American 7th army, including my own company, attempted to cut off the German 19th Army near the town of Montélimar. (Zinzou) Unfortunately, the Germans escaped, but we left them bruised and broken. We sent them into a full retreat, and afterwards, we continued to press further inland. If I recall properly, I believe Operation Dragoon ended around mid-September, when we ran into General Patton’s 3rd army.”

“Now son, I wanted to tell you about my time in Southern France for a couple reasons. It’s not just some action story. I know that children your age live in a different time, and I want you to learn as much as you can about the sacrifices that so many people like me made. You must understand that I’m not trying to pat myself on the back by saying this, but the freedom that you have here in America came at a cost. The sooner you learn that the sooner you’ll be able to appreciate it. Operation Dragoon is an amazing example of how easily sacrifice can be forgotten. In fact, it seems that many people haven’t even heard about it. My company and I put our lives

on the line to liberate that part of France. Nazi Germany could have maintained a grip on that region for much longer if we didn't kick them out, and France was able to establish a foothold in the war again. They were able to fight to liberate their own people, and on top of that, vast amounts of allied forces came together to fight in the name of peace and freedom. We opened extremely important supply lines that hastened the liberation of Germany occupied France, and because of our swift actions, I do not doubt that we saved many lives that would've otherwise been lost. Here's what I'm trying to say; I hope that you learn to never forget what others have overcome before you and what others have done for you. If I didn't tell you about Operation Dragoon, you would not have realized its importance in creating freedom that still exists today. You wake up every morning, and you don't have to worry about where your next meal will come from. You don't have to wonder if your family is able to survive the very next day, and you live with the freedoms of speech, the right to assembly, the right to bear arms, and the freedoms of religion. However, I want you to know that your life could be very different if millions of soldiers didn't give everything to fight against the aggression, violence, and terror of the Axis forces. Those efforts, as well as the efforts before and after World War II, have shaped the nation that you live in today. Let me tell you about one more thing Michael. The Rhone American Cemetery in Draguignan, France, contains the final resting place of the U.S. soldiers that lost their lives in the Southern France invasion. (Wolfe) For the French people, it stands as a reminder of those who gave everything to bring them freedom. I doubt I'll get the chance to visit it myself, but I'm thankful that it remains as a testament to my fellow countrymen's sacrifices. Who knows, maybe you'll get to go there someday, and if you do, I want you to think of me."

Michael was a bit caught off guard by the gravity of his grandfather's message, but he thought to himself, "I never considered what my grandfather did for my country and me. During

my busy life, I somehow forget about the millions of troops that have sacrificed so much.” It dawned on Michael that he had learned a new lesson, an incredibly important lesson. He said to his grandpa, “Thank you for reminding me to appreciate what I often take for granted. I should make time to learn about what America’s armed forces have done for me.” His grandfather beamed a smile at him and said to him, “Sounds like a plan son, but don’t stop there. Keep my story and the stories of other soldiers alive. Continue to share with others, and with your own children, about the great cost of freedom.”

Works Cited

- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Tehrān Conference". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 21 Nov. 2021, www.britannica.com/event/Tehran-Conference. Accessed 17 October 2022.
- "Operation Dragoon: The Invasion of Southern France". *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 28 Aug. 2019, www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1944/operation-dragoon.html. Accessed 17 Oct. 2022.
- Wolfe, Jefferson. "Honoring Soldiers from Operation Dragoon". *U.S. Military*, 1 June. 2016, www.army.mil/article/168942/Honoring_Soldiers_from_Operation_Dragoon/. Accessed 17 Oct. 2022.
- Zinzou, Cameron. "Forgotten Fights: Operation Dragoon and the Decline of the Anglo-American Alliance". *The National WW2 Museum*, 17 Nov. 2020, www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/operation-dragoon-anglo-american-alliance. Accessed 17 Oct. 2022.