

THE FORGOTTEN INVASION

TODAY, OPERATION DRAGON — THE INVASION OF SOUTHERN FRANCE — HAS BEEN ECLIPSED IN IMPORTANCE BY OPERATION OVERLORD — D-DAY. HOWEVER, THIS FORGOTTEN ACTION WAS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BATTLES OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

BY RANDALL BROOKS

Operation *Dragoon* was the Allied invasion of southern France on 15 August 1944. Before it was over 12,224 Allied troops shed their blood on French soil, with the German enemy suffering 27,456 casualties. The invasion was initiated via a massive parachute drop by the 1st Airborne Task Force, followed by an amphibious assault by elements

of the US Seventh Army, followed a day later by a force made up primarily of the French First Army. The landing caused the German Army Group G to abandon most of southern France and to retreat under constant Allied attacks to the Vosges Mountains.

Despite being a large and complex military operation with a well-executed

amphibious and airborne component, Operation *Dragoon* is not as well-known as larger Operation *Overlord* which had occurred nearly seven weeks earlier and overshadowed it in both drama, impact and size, but not in importance.

During planning stages, the operation was known as *Anvil*, to complement Operation *Sledgehammer*, at that time

the code name for the invasion of Normandy. Subsequently, both plans were renamed; *Sledgehammer* becoming Operation *Overlord*, and *Anvil* becoming Operation *Dragoon*. An apocryphal story holds that the name was chosen by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who was opposed to the plan and claimed to having been “dragooned” into accepting it.

Operation *Dragoon* was a controversial political issue from the outset of its first proposal. The American military leadership and their British counterparts disagreed on both the need for and suggested execution of the operation. Churchill argued against it on the grounds that it diverted military resources needed in the Italian campaign. Instead, he favored an invasion of the oil-producing Balkans. Churchill reasoned that by attacking the Balkans, the western Allies could deny Germany oil, forestall the advance of the Red Army of the Soviet Union, and achieve a superior negotiating position in post-war Europe, all with a single bold stroke. At the time Operation *Anvil* was first considered, the Allied landing at Anzio had gone badly and *Anvil* planning

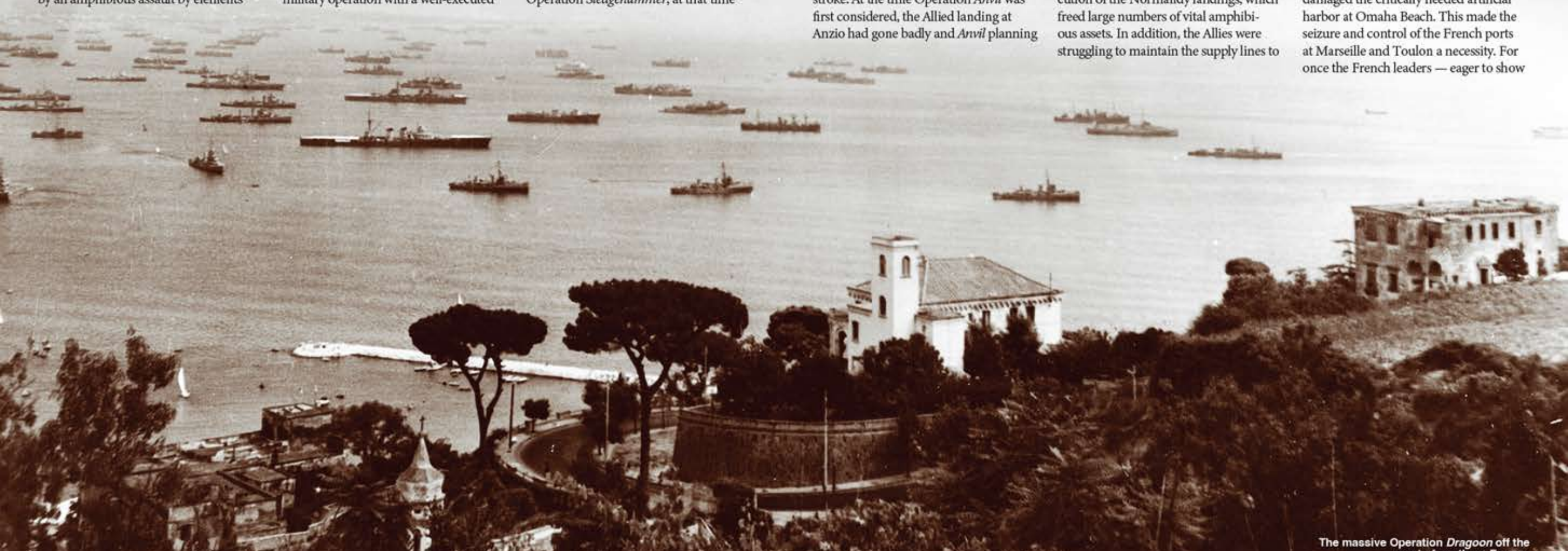


Map showing the landings and advance in southern France as well as German defensive positions.

was put on hold.

The operation, now renamed *Dragoon*, was revived after the successful execution of the Normandy landings, which freed large numbers of vital amphibious assets. In addition, the Allies were struggling to maintain the supply lines to

their growing forces in France, because the Germans had destroyed Cherbourg's port facilities and a vicious storm had damaged the critically needed artificial harbor at Omaha Beach. This made the seizure and control of the French ports at Marseille and Toulon a necessity. For once the French leaders — eager to show



The massive Operation *Dragoon* off the coast of southern France.