



August 15, 1944, from the sky: American and British paratroopers open the Battle of Provence in a fiery Ferragosto

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When discussing the Allied landing in France in 1944, thoughts inevitably turn to Normandy and the D-Day of June 6. However, just over two months later, the Allies opened a second major front on French territory.

It was **August 15, 1944**, and on the coasts of Provence, **Operation Dragoon**, the great invasion of southern France, began.

The divisions of the Seventh U.S. Army would arrive from the sea. But even before the first assault waves reached the beaches, another battle had already begun inland.

The battle of the paratroopers.

Dragoon: the second great landing in France

The operation, initially named **Anvil**, was conceived as a complement to the Normandy landing. Strategic divergences and problems with the availability of landing craft, however, delayed its execution.

When the plan was finally approved, the objective was ambitious: to create a large bridgehead in southern France, quickly liberate the ports of **Toulon and Marseille**, and open a new logistical route to support the Allied advance towards the heart of Europe.

The U.S. Seventh Army, commanded by General **Alexander Patch**, would lead the main assault along the Mediterranean coast.

On August 15, the American divisions **3rd Infantry Division, 45th Infantry Division, and 36th Infantry Division** landed on the beaches of Provence, supported by a massive naval and air component.

But to protect those beaches, it was necessary to prevent the German units present inland from moving quickly towards the coast.

And this is where the airborne troops came into play.



Men of the Airborne Task Force gathered before departure for the invasion of southern France, August 14, 1944, on the eve of Operation Dragoon. Photo: Leibowitz, 163rd Signal Photo Company – Signal Corps Archive.

The 1st Airborne Task Force

A special multinational formation was created for the operation: the **1st Airborne Task Force**, under the command of American General **Robert T. Frederick**.

It was not a traditional airborne division but a force specially created by bringing together different American and British units.

Among the main units were the **517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team**, the **509th Parachute Infantry Battalion**, elements of the **551st Parachute Infantry Battalion**, airborne engineer and artillery units, and the British **2nd Independent Parachute Brigade**.

The task assigned to the airborne force was crucial for the success of Dragoon.

The paratroopers were to land in the area of **Le Muy**, in the Argens valley, several kilometers inland from the landing beaches.

From there, they were to occupy and control the main communication axes, capture bridges and crossroads, hold the heights, and above all, prevent German forces from quickly reaching the landing zones.

In other words, they had to **isolate the battlefield behind the coastal defenses**.



Paratroopers of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team during Operation Dragoon, August 15, 1944, in southern France. The 517th, a U.S. airborne unit, was deployed in the area of Le Muy and La Motte to occupy the main road junctions and prevent the Germans from reinforcing the coastal defenses. - Copyright U.S. National Archives / U.S. Army

Into the night towards Provence

In the early hours of August 15, hundreds of transport aircraft took off from Allied bases in the Mediterranean, carrying men, weapons, and equipment.

The first elements of the **509th Parachute Infantry Battalion**, the famous “Geronimos,” began to jump around **04:18 in the morning**.

Thus, hundreds of parachutes appeared in the sky over Provence.

The airborne phase of Dragoon had begun, also known in Allied planning as **Operation Rugby**.

The plan called for a series of drop zones around Le Muy and La Motte, where the units were to quickly concentrate before moving towards their assigned objectives.

As often happened in the great airborne operations of World War II, however, reality was much more confused.



U.S. paratroopers just arrived near La Motte, in Provence, on August 15, 1944, during Operation Dragoon. The men are sheltered next to a recently landed glider, while some U.S. Army medics are in front of a second aircraft. Official U.S. Army photo, collection of The National WWII Museum.

Fog, errors, and scattered paratroopers

Weather conditions significantly complicated navigation.

Fog and poor visibility prevented many crews from correctly identifying the drop zones. Several formations scattered, and numerous paratroopers ended up far from the intended points.

Some groups landed kilometers away from their targets.

But that dispersion did not mean the failure of the operation.

Small groups of men immediately began to reorganize, moving through the countryside, roads, and villages of Provence. In many cases, the units improvised, occupying crossroads, disrupting communications, and attacking German positions encountered along the way.

The chaos caused by the airdrops paradoxically also contributed to increasing uncertainty in the German rear: it was difficult to immediately understand where the main Allied effort was concentrated.

One of the main objectives was **Le Muy**: the town was strategically located along the routes connecting the hinterland with the coast. Controlling it meant making it much more difficult to send German reinforcements to the beaches.

The paratroopers began to close the circle around the area while other airborne units occupied the surrounding heights and roads.

In the following hours, reinforcements transported by gliders also arrived, bringing men, heavy weapons, vehicles, and materials necessary to consolidate the captured positions.

The battle in the hinterland continued simultaneously with the landing of American divisions on the coast.

The connection between the forces coming from the beaches and those air-dropped would be one of the decisive phases of the operation.

Le Muy was finally secured by the Allies, and the communication routes through the area came under their control.



Two Douglas C-47 Skytrains of the USAAF, belonging to the 81st Troop Carrier Squadron, flying towards southern France with paratroopers destined for Operation Dragoon, August 15, 1944. - Copyright U.S. Air Force – Public Domain

American and British paratroopers together

Dragoon also represented one of the most interesting multinational airborne operations of the conflict.

Alongside the American units, the British paratroopers of the **2nd Independent Parachute Brigade**, commanded by Brigadier Charles Pritchard, also operated.

Americans and British were to act as one large force, despite coming from different units and having different operational experiences.

The 1st Airborne Task Force had been formed only a few weeks before the invasion and would exist for only a few months.

Provence was its decisive moment.

It should be remembered that the airborne operation was not composed solely of parachute drops.

After the first waves, the **gliders** also came into action, used to transport additional troops, equipment, and materials directly to the captured areas.

Photographs from August 15 show men of the Seventh Army and the 1st Airborne Task Force disembarking from gliders in the fields of Provence immediately after landing.

It was the fundamental principle of airborne operations of the time: the paratroopers constituted the vanguard, while the gliders allowed for the rapid arrival of what would have been difficult or impossible to drop individually with a parachute.

When around **08:00** in the morning the main landings on the coasts of Provence began, the airborne troops had already been fighting for hours in the German rear.

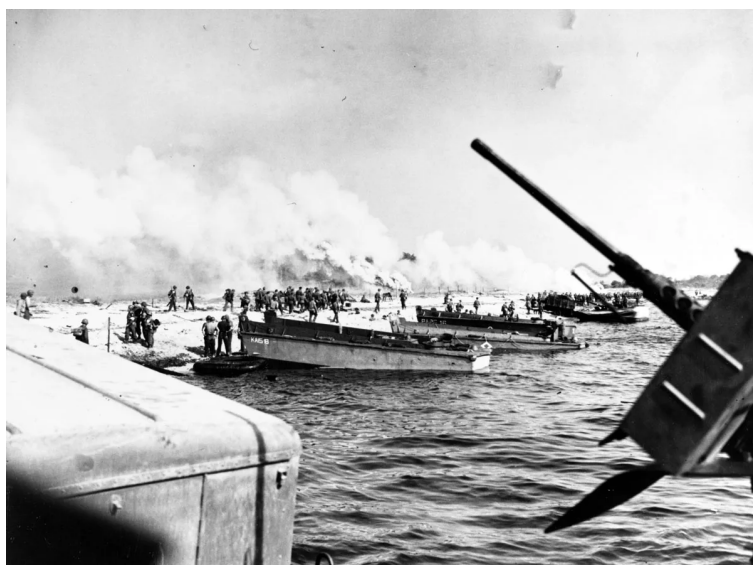
The German coastal defenses proved generally less solid than those faced by the Allies in Normandy.

The bridgehead expanded rapidly.

As the units coming from the sea advanced inland, the paratroopers maintained pressure on the communication routes and strategic points.

The combination of amphibious offensive and airborne operation worked.

And it was precisely what the planners of Dragoon had anticipated.



LCVP landing craft of the U.S. Navy beached in the Bay of Cavalaire, southern France, on August 15, 1944, during Operation Dragoon. In the center, units from the USS Andromeda (AKA-15) and the USS Samuel Chase (APA-26); in the background, German prisoners of war and a smoke screen - Copyright U.S. Navy photo 80-G-59475 Naval History and Heritage Command.

A very rapid campaign

The invasion of southern France achieved results beyond expectations.

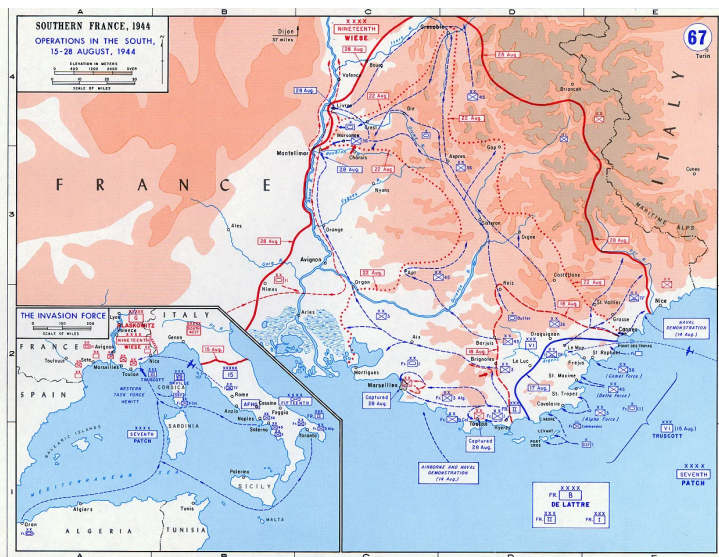
The German forces began a large retreat northward while the Allies advanced rapidly along the Rhone Valley.

One of the most important strategic objectives was achieved in a few days: **Toulon and Marseille were liberated**, allowing the Allies to progressively use the large Mediterranean ports to logistically support the forces fighting in France.

The availability of these infrastructures would have a considerable impact on subsequent Allied operations.

Dragoon also contributed to forcing the German forces in southern France into a long retreat, while from the north the armies coming from Normandy continued their advance.

Germany thus found itself under pressure along an increasingly vast front.



Map of Allied operations in southern France between August 15 and 28, 1944, during Operation Dragoon. The landings on the Provençal coast, the airborne operation area near Le Muy, and the subsequent Allied advance north along the Rhône Valley are highlighted.

The Paratroopers' Ferragosto

On **August 15, 1944**, while in Italy the date was the traditional Ferragosto, thousands of men were crossing the sky of Provence hanging from the cords of their parachutes.

Beneath them were fields, roads, bridges, and small villages that a few hours later would become crucial nodes of the battle.

Their task was not to conquer a large city or hold a position destined to immediately enter the history books.

It was something more typically airborne: **to get behind enemy lines, occupy their vital points, and prevent them from reacting.**

As Allied ships appeared off the coast of Provence, the battle had already begun inland.

From the sky.

It is one of the less remembered episodes of the liberation of France, inevitably overshadowed by the gigantic Normandy landing.

But that **fiery Ferragosto of 1944** saw one of the most important airborne operations of the European Mediterranean front and once again demonstrated the strategic value of troops capable of being launched beyond enemy lines.

Sources

- [Naval History and Heritage Command - Operation Dragoon: The Invasion of Southern France](#)
- [Naval History and Heritage Command - Operation Dragoon Landings](#)
- [American Battle Monuments Commission - 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion](#)
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- [National Archives / NWWIIGPA Collection - Southern France, 1st Airborne Task Force](#)