Operation Dragoon
Question & Answer Session
With YCHC member Richard Robinson
Conducted by Dr. Adam Bentz, Assistant Director, YCHC Library & Archives

While most WWII buffs know the significance of 15 Aug. 1945, York Countians should take special note of what happened exactly one year before V-J Day, the beginning of Operation Dragoon. In June, Operation Overlord had sent Allied armies hurtling through tough German defenses in northern France. Planners decided to open a second front in southern France with a daring invasion codenamed Anvil, later Dragoon. York’s own Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers commanded the newly-formed Sixth Army Group, a unit that would execute a nearly-flawless invasion and speed across southeastern France. Nazi defenses quickly collapsed in the face of Devers’ well-organized troops, and military historians debate to this day whether Devers could have ‘won the war in ’44’ had he been allowed to continue across the Rhine into Germany in November.

Rich Robinson, York, is a familiar sight in the Library & Archives and has been researching his own biography of Devers for several years. He shared his thoughts on the 76th anniversary of the invasion.

16 Aug 44
Allied ground forces landed by LCIs and invasion barges storm inland through a breach in an enemy beach defense wall. The wall, 8 feet high, made of concrete and steel, was blasted open by assault engineers.

From the Devers Collection, YCHC Library & Archives
A: What was Operation Dragoon? How did it work in conjunction with Operation Overlord and fit into the broader Allied strategy?

R: Operation Dragoon refers to the Allied invasion of southern France on August 15, 1944. It was originally named Operation Anvil when first proposed by American officers and intended to compliment Operation Overlord by keeping German forces in southern France from moving north to help oppose the Allied forces in Normandy. Moreover, the Americans saw the French ports of Marseille and Toulon as critical objectives to help keep the flow of men and supplies moving into the European Theater. From the start, Anvil/Dragoon was never part of the broader Allied strategy. The British, and in particular [Prime Minister] Winston Churchill, opposed the idea. Churchill believed strengthening Allied forces in Italy would enable a drive on Vienna under one of his favorite generals, Sir Harold Alexander. Churchill had always fancied himself a shrewd military strategist and was fond of enveloping movements beginning with the Dardanelles campaign of World War One. Few senior British officers shared Churchill’s appreciation of his own genius.

As planning for Overlord progressed it became evident the Allies did not have enough ships and landing craft to coordinate both operations. Anvil was cancelled as a result. The German resistance in the Normandy hedgerows and around Caen together with the lack of a serviceable port led the Americans to revive the idea of invading southern France. Churchill continued to resist this idea with dire predictions of casualties and delays. He was convinced a landing at Trieste on the Adriatic Sea would result in “a dagger thrust under the armpit” of German forces. Even General Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the British Imperial General Staff wondered if a dagger could be thrust at an armpit protected by the Alps. The American Chief of Staff, General George Marshall, refused to be persuaded. Marshall had never been enthusiastic about the Italian campaign and was determined to resist British proposals to expand it. Southern France was closer to Normandy than Italy or Austria and a better fit with a more direct American strategy: “Locate your enemy, then go and fight him.” In addition, General de Gaulle made it clear if French troops were going to fight they would do so to liberate their homeland and not to support British interests in the Mediterranean. Churchill had no choice but to accept the American position.

A: Who was Jacob Devers and what role did he serve in at the time of Dragoon?

R: Lieutenant General Jacob Devers was a career soldier in the United States Army and Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean under Field Marshall Sir Henry Maitland Wilson. Devers graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1909. One of his classmates was George Patton. Commissioned in the Field Artillery, he was one of the officers who revitalized American gunnery after the First World War and transformed this branch into one of the most formidable components of the U.S. Army. Devers had a pivotal role in training armored divisions and selecting the M-4 Sherman tank as the main battle tank of the Army. Following the death of General Frank Andrews in May, 1943, Devers was sent to England to assume command of all American forces in the European Theater of Operations. From May until December, 1943, Devers was responsible for the build-up and training of American forces in the United Kingdom and preparations for the invasion of Europe. During this time, he did not always endear himself to the Prime Minister. This relationship may have been a contributing factor to his transfer to the Mediterranean in December, 1943.
When Operation Anvil was resurrected and renamed Dragoon, Devers had proven himself an effective American theater commander who had achieved good working relationships with British, French, and Polish officers. He had formed strong and effective partnerships with Admiral Kent Hewitt of the Navy and General Ira Eaker of the Army Air Force. He was closely involved in the initial planning stages and recommended the formation of an army group consisting of American and French troops. As a professional soldier who had trained most of his career for this moment, and having been denied a role in Operation Overlord, Devers wanted a chance to get into action. He asked General Marshall to consider him for command of the new Army Group. His immediate superior, Field Marshall Wilson, recommended him as the best man for the job, too. Knowing he would eventually come under the command of General Eisenhower, Devers’ only reservation was Eisenhower’s approval. When General Marshall asked Eisenhower for his views, Eisenhower was quick to understand Marshall wanted to give Devers command. Always one to recognize discretion as the better part of valor, Eisenhower accepted Devers and kept his contempt masked.

16 Aug 44
Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander, Med. Theater, talking with 1st Lt. Michael A. McDonald of Frederickson, New Brunswick, Canada, a casualty of the new Allied landing in southern France.

From the Devers Collection, YCHC Library & Archives
A: What role did Devers play in the development and launching of Dragoon?

R: One of the most important roles General Devers performed in the development of Dragoon took place well before the operation was approved. When Operation Anvil was cancelled Devers ordered supplies to be held in reserve against the day when the plan might be revived. He selected General Alexander Patch as the commander of the U.S. Seventh Army and chose a number of officers serving in Italy to join the effort. Among these officers were General Lucian Truscott* and General Thomas Larkin, a brilliant logistics officer. He knew and trusted General Patch and made it a point to leave the tactical planning of the invasion to Patch and his staff. Much of his time was devoted to overseeing plans and ensuring paper work and red tape were not strangling initiative and action. He was one of the few American commanders who went out of his way to establish a sense of trust and confidence among the French officers with whom he would be working. Devers had gained great respect for the French in Italy at a time when many American and British officers had no confidence in their fighting potential. Field Marshall Wilson told Devers, directly, [that] he could not stand the French and refused to deal with them. Through his efforts, Devers gained the respect and admiration of these important allies, even General de Gaulle.

*Gen. Truscott developed Task Force Butler, a fully-mechanized ad-hoc unit that quickly exploited the German retreat after Dragoon and kept enemy forces from regrouping. Devers' forces were well led and well prepared.

A: What mark would you say Devers left on the operation?

R: One of the most important accomplishments of General Devers in the operation was his superior ability to work closely with the French. The rapid collapse of the French Army in 1940 and the establishment of [the] collaborationist government known as “Vichy” France, [caused] many American political leaders and officers [to be] suspicious of the motives of senior French generals who had fled France. In fact, French officers were suspicious of each other and in some cases refused to cooperate with one another.

Devers avoided these kinds of squabbles and intrigues. In Italy he had worked with several ranking French officers and admired them. He recognized how the professional pride of these French soldiers had been wounded by the German conquest of their nation [and] how much it meant to them to redeem their sense of sense of national honor. His attitude was simply put when he said, “I want the French to be successful.” This view would be put to the test when General de Gaulle selected the officer to command the French troops participating in Operation Dragoon. General de Lattre was well known as a flamboyant and temperamental commander. He was also ruthless and eager to fight. Despite their different personalities, Devers and de Lattre formed an effective alliance in the field.

A: How did Devers' handling of Dragoon compare with other senior commanders' efforts in similar major operations? (i.e. how was Devers' approach different and/or better?)

R: In Operation Dragoon, Jacob Devers assembled highly competent commanders and let them do their jobs with a minimum of interference. He had the ability to listen as well as command. His organization of headquarters staff was designed to keep soldiers and armies moving forward. He believed swift, aggressive action helped to keep...
enemies off balance. He always thought the best way to end the war was by killing or capturing Germans instead of creating stratagems and overly complicated strategic maneuvers.

Few American officers in Europe were capable of approaching the French with as much empathy, tact, and sensitivity as Devers in the run up to Operation Dragoon. Fewer still recognized the fighting qualities and spirit of French officers and soldiers as well as he.

In addition, Devers recognized the logistical challenges the Allies were facing and acted accordingly. He knew the Germans would try to destroy the port facilities of Marseilles and was prepared for this eventuality. Allied ships were unloading supplies in Marseilles within weeks of the invasion. French railroads had been the targets of Allied air strikes and would need to be repaired quickly. Devers brought in specially recruited crews to repair them once Allied forces began moving inland.

19 Aug 44
Seventh Army, Brignoles, France. Townspeople cheer as American tanks rumble through Brignoles.

*From the Devers Collection, YCHC Library & Archives*
A: Are there any anecdotes or revealing details you have run across in your research that shed light on Dragoon and Devers that have not made into the history books?

R: Looking at Operation Dragoon and the subsequent campaigns of the Sixth Army Group offer some insights into how General Devers organized and led in comparison to other Allied commanders. During the initial invasion of southern France, Devers was under the nominal command of Field Marshal Wilson and was able to operate without restrictions. The invasion achieved its objectives with a minimum of casualties. The ports of Marseille and Toulon were liberated in a matter of days and received Allied shipping in a matter of weeks. When German forces fell back troops of the Seventh Army pursued them despite a lack of fuel and supplies. The rapid advance of the Sixth Army Group forced the Germans out of southern France without giving them an opportunity to lay waste to French cities and towns.

When the Sixth Army Group was transferred from the Mediterranean to the European Theater of Operations, General Devers lost a significant degree of independence. He was no longer responsible to Field Marshall Wilson, but to General Eisenhower. It was common knowledge among American officers [that] Generals Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton did not think highly of General Devers. Eisenhower and Bradley may not have considered Devers to be their intellectual equal. Patton didn’t think anyone was on his level. As a result, Devers and the Sixth Army Group were not accorded the same respect and latitude for action as the Twelfth Army Group under Bradley. For all intents and purposes, General Eisenhower may have considered Devers and the Sixth Army as a flank guard. Eisenhower was particularly sensitive to flanking movements.

The best example of this disparity came in late November 1944, when troops of the Seventh Army had reached the Rhine River and were preparing to cross it. When Eisenhower learned of this proposed assault he stopped it. Instead the Sixth Army Group was ordered to turn north an assist Patton’s Third Army. Devers and Patch were stunned by this decision. Devers argued privately with Eisenhower and Bradley without result. An officer who heard the raised voices behind closed doors could not make out what was being said but compared what he heard to “fleas jumping on a hot rock.” The exchange of views did not improve relations between Eisenhower and Devers. Historians and students of the campaign in Western Europe continue to argue if Eisenhower’s decision was an example of wise restraint or a failure to seize a chance opportunity. No one will ever know. If Devers had been presented this kind of opening while still under Field Marshall Wilson’s command, it’s far more likely he would have been given the option to cross the Rhine.

In looking at the relationships of the generals involved I cannot help but wonder how General Eisenhower would have reacted if General Bradley had been the one with a chance to cross the Rhine instead of General Devers. Bradley might have [been allowed to] cross. Instead German forces were given a respite and used it to organize a massive attack in the Ardennes just a few weeks later. The other great “what if” question from this period of the campaign in Europe concerns Patton and the Third Army. At one point Patton wondered if he would have been better off serving under General Devers and the Sixth Army Group instead of General Bradley.
Postscript: Robinson is quick to mention that Devers did not achieve his successes alone. He particularly credits statesman and diplomat Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who resigned his Senate seat to keep his military commission on FDR’s orders. Lodge would serve on Devers’ staff as a liaison with the French. Regarding the much-debated decision to cross the Rhine in 1944, Robinson adds that Eisenhower was simply unprepared for the opportunity Devers saw in November and did not trust Devers to succeed. During their heated meeting with Eisenhower, Bradley suggested Devers would get “sandbagged” by tough German defenses, much as he had in the hedgerows of Normandy. Devers, with first-hand knowledge of the situation, countered that “there are no hedgerows, and no Germans.”