

George S. Patton, Jr.
U.S. Army, 02605
1885 — 1945

by
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He's been called a number of things, including military genius, a legend, and a son-of-a-bitch. But, almost 50 years after his death, he's still considered to be the one U.S. Army General epitomizing the fighting soldier of World War II.

Patton was a man of contradictory characteristics. He was a noted horseman and polo player, a well-known champion swordsman, and a competent sailor and sportsman. He was an amateur poet. Sixteen of his analytical papers were published in military magazines, the trade journals of the military profession. While he was a rough and tough soldier, he was also a thoughtful and sentimental man. Unpredictable in his actions, he was always dependable. He was outgoing, yet introverted. History proves him to be a complex and paradoxical figure.

He's mostly remembered for his unique brand of leadership. It was a role he cultivated and fully exercised. He managed to obtain a supreme effort from his men. His charisma, symbolized by a flamboyant and well-publicized image, stimulated his troops to an incredible level. His unflagging efforts generated desire from his soldiers to fight and destroy the enemy.

He personified the offensive spirit, a ruthless drive, and an imperative **Will To Conquer**. Being the prominent champion of combat effectiveness, particularly with respect to the employment of armored forces, Patton elevated the *blitzkrieg* (lightning war) concept to a state of scientific precision.

His occasionally brutal methods were, for the most part, approved by his men. Patton's battle hardened soldiers understood and shrewdly sanctioned his actions. They were fully cognizant of war's demands. They also knew that if anyone could help them to get home alive, Patton was the one.

Patton understood that war means fighting and fighting means killing. He's the one soldier from the Second World War who stands apart from the rest, who best personifies that murderous concept, who embodies indispensable warlike virtues, and the **Will To Conquer**.

Patton, without deviation, exerted his full energies toward the pursuit of excellence. He fought the temptations to relax, to be lazy. He was harder on himself and more demanding of himself than he was of any subordinate.

Benjamin Davis Wilson was a remarkable man — a pioneer, trapper, adventurer, Indian trader and Indian fighter, and finally, a respectable man of means. Born in Tennessee, he worked his way across the American continent to southern California long before it was California. By marrying a daughter of a wealthy Mexican he gained vast landholdings. After the death of the first Mrs. Wilson, Benjamin married an American citizen. The second Mrs. Wilson gave birth to a daughter who would eventually meet and marry George S. Patton, Sr. Their union would produce the future general and World War II commander of the famous United States Third Army.

Don Benito Wilson, as he was called by the Mexicans and Indians of Old California, established orange industry in California, planted the first vineyards, and furnished the name for *Mount Wilson*. Twice elected to the state legislature, he was highly and widely respected. Don Benito was the future general's grandfather.

The Patton side of Patton's family regarded themselves as genteel Virginians. Their lineage was traced to George Washington and beyond that to a king of England and a King of France. The Pattons were reportedly related to at least 16 signers of England's *Magna Charta*. This is the heritage of General Patton

At age 11, Patton entered a private school in Pasadena, California. At 18 he entered the *Virginia Military Institute*, following in the tradition of his father and grandfather. Compiling a splendid record, he received no demerits in a full year's attendance.

He accepted an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point after a year at Virginia Military Institute. The principal reason for entrance to the Academy was because upon graduation he would automatically receive a commission in the United States Army.

In 1909, he graduated 46th in a class of 103. He had held the rank of Cadet Corporal, Sergeant Major, and Adjutant. He won his school letter by breaking a school record in the hurdles event. Upon graduation, he became a Cavalry officer and soon afterward, married a charming young lady from Massachusetts. Her family was immensely wealthy, her father owning the American Woolen Company.

In 1912, Patton attended the Olympics held at Stockholm, Sweden. That same year, a young Indian named Jim Thorpe made history by winning and dominating the games.

Patton competed in the modern military pentathlon. The events included pistol shooting, a 300 meter swim, fencing, a steeplechase, and a cross-country foot race. He finished a very respectable fifth place.

After the games, and at his own expense, Patton traveled to the *French Cavalry School* located at Saumer, France to take lessons from the fencing instructor there. He purposely cultivated his own reputation as a swordsman, and he later designed a saber that the United States Cavalry adopted; the *M-1913 Saber*. Long before he became known as Old Blood and Guts (a name he hated), he was known as *Saber George*. For a very young second lieutenant, it was a great distinction.

Upon assignment to the Cavalry School at Fort Riley, Kansas, he took over the instruction of the Cavalry Course where he instructed the men in the use of the new saber he had designed. His impressive title was *Master of the Sword*. He was the first to hold the newly create title and he was only a second lieutenant.

In March of 1916, Pancho Villa and several hundred of his bandits raided the town of Columbus, New Mexico, killing a total of 17 American citizens. Villa's reasoning for this barbaric butchery was that he was angry at the American government because it refused to assist him in his revolution and his attempted takeover of the Mexican government.

In response to the raid, General John J. Pershing organized a Punitive Expedition to pursue Villa into Mexico. Pershing's action was prompted by the Mexican government's inaction. They refused to do respond to Villa's criminal action.

Pershing took Patton along as an unofficial aide, giving him a variety of duties, most of which Patton considered dull and uninspiring. He longed for some action, some contact with the enemy. He finally got his chance in May of 1916.

During the month of May, Patton was in charge of a 15 man contingent traveling in three Dodge Touring Cars, for the purpose of buying corn from Mexican farmers. Relying purely on a hunch, Patton led a raid at a place called the Rubio Ranch, believing that one of Villa's men might be there. As it turned out, not one, but three of the enemy were there and during their attempted escape, Patton and his men engaged them in a lively skirmish resembling an old western movie gun fight. All three of the banditos were killed.

Patton triumphantly strapped the bodies to the cars, one on each hood. He took them directly to Pershing's headquarters for identification where he created quite a commotion. Later, he carved two notches in his **Ivory-Handled Colt .45** to commemorate his good fortune. After that, Pershing always referred to Patton as his bandit.

Because it was the only real action to come out of the entire expedition, young Lieutenant Patton immediately became a national hero. Newspapers in the United States carried stories about his exploits for a full week before the furor died down.

More importantly, Patton's actions signaled the inauguration of motorized warfare. It was the first time a United States Army contingent engaged an enemy using motor vehicles.

Although service in Mexico was monotonous, Patton took the opportunity to observe General Pershing closely, studying him assiduously. Patton learned how Pershing operated, how Pershing gave orders, trained his men, judged his subordinates, maintained troop morale, and carried out his command duties. Patton began to model himself after the General Pershing.

When Pershing assumed command of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), heading for France in World War I, he decided to take Patton with him.

While performing boring, tiresome office jobs the AEF headquarters, Patton became interested in a new contraption called a *tank*. They were not only new, they were also unreliable, unwieldy, and unproven instruments of warfare. There was a great deal of doubt as to whether or not tanks even had any function or value on the battlefield.

Patton was the first officer assigned to the *United States Tank Corps*. Throwing himself into his job with his usual enthusiasm, he quickly became the AEF's leading tank expert.

He almost single-handedly formed the American Tank School. He wrote the training manuals, devised the training doctrine and methodologies, wrote a seminal paper which became the basis for the United States Tank Corps. He taught and trained his tankers, and eventually led them into combat.

On the first day of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, Patton was very nearly killed. A bullet striking him in the upper leg, passed completely through him, finally ripping out a large piece of flesh. It tore a large hole in the rear of his lower cheek. In spite of his profuse bleeding, he kept advancing, until the loss of blood forced him to stop. He was luckily evacuated to a rear echelon hospital before he bled to death on the battlefield. It was the final combat that he would see in WWI. The armistice was signed on the day that he sneaked out of the hospital to return to his unit.

It was this wound that occasionally prompted Patton to refer to himself as a half-assed general.

After the armistice was signed, Patton returned to the United States as an officer of the Tank Corps, but shortly afterward, he returned to his first love; the Cavalry.

The major reason for his departure from the Tank Corps was the stinginess of the U.S. Congress. After Congress allotted a total of \$500 for a full year's worth research and development for the Tank Corps, Patton realized that during the years of peace there would be no American development of the tank because of the miserly Congress. He was correct.

The development of the tank and armored doctrine was stagnated in the United States. It took the events of the Second World War and the German blitzkrieg to open the eyes of the pacifistic Americans.

During the 1920's and 1930's, Patton served in a variety of assignments where he completed his military education. He was an honor graduate of the *Command and General Staff College* at Fort Leavenworth, and a distinguished graduate of the *Army War College*.

In the early 1930's, while stationed at Pearl Harbor, Patton wrote a highly prophetic discussion paper. Its subject matter dealt with the possibility of an air attack by the Japanese against the Hawaiian Islands. Patton held the firm opinion that Japan had explicit and definite ideas about domination of the Pacific Basin. His paper outlined almost exactly the plan used by the Japanese on December 7, 1941.

In 1939, Patton was assigned to the 2nd Armored Brigade stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. His skillful management of the 2nd Brigade soon prompted his being given command of the entire 2nd Armored Division. He was soon considered to be America's leading tank expert.

In 1942, Patton was assigned the task of creating the Desert Training Corps (DTC) in the Mojave Desert, which spans large parts of California, Nevada, and Arizona. It was at the DTC that U.S. Tank doctrine and tactics were created and perfected by Patton and his men.

The first contingent of trained tanker units deployed from the DTC was eventually designated as the Western Task Force. It was the first American force to land and fight on foreign soil during WWII. The landing operation was called Operation Torch and the objective was North Africa. Patton had been instrumental in the detailed planning of the entire amphibious operation. He was chosen for this operation because he was one of the very few amphibious landing experts in the U.S. Army, having studied the subject for years. The task force sailed from Norfolk, Virginia, landing on the shores of French Morocco in 1942.

In the spring of 1943, after the disastrous American defeat at Kasserine Pass in Tunisia, Patton was given command of the II Corps. In customary Patton fashion, he not only took command, he grabbed it by the throat.

Patton quickly straightened out the disorganized American units, led them to victory at El Guettar, and then turned over command of the Corps to his deputy commander, Omar Bradley.

During the Tunisian campaign's final stages, Patton's attempts to help plan for the invasion of Sicily were obstructed by General Bernard Montgomery, who attempted to take complete control of the entire operation.

As Commanding General of the Seventh Army, Patton and his soldiers stole the glory that General Montgomery so badly wanted. Hampered by higher echelon, sparse supplies, and forced to use secondary roads, Patton and his Seventh Army still managed to reach Messina first. Montgomery was surprised and embarrassed to march into the town and find Patton and his men sitting there, waiting for him.

In the spring of 1944, Patton sailed to England on the world famous *Queen Mary* ocean liner. The *Queen Mary*, built by the Cunard-White Star Company, was pressed into military service as a troop transport for most of WWII. His job was to assume command of the United States Third Army, his most remembered and victorious weapon.

Once disembarked on the continent, Patton and *Lucky Forward* (Third Army's code name) swept through Europe with a vengeance. Attacking in four directions at once, they drove west, south, east, and north across France, destroying everything in their path that was German.

In December, when the Germans launched the *Ardennes Offensive* (known to Americans as the Battle of the Bulge), Patton's army made a spectacular battle march to relieve the 101st Airborne's Screaming Eagles who were holding Bastogne against all odds.

In the spring of 1945, Patton's Army drove relentlessly into Germany, across the Rhine, and into Austria. At war's end, his soldiers were in Czechoslovakia.

Throughout the war, Patton and his warriors had given a magnificent performance. Third Army had gone farther, faster, conquered

more territory, killed, wounded, and captured more enemy soldiers than any other Army in the recorded history of war.

Patton died at the age of 60 in December, 1945 as a result of an automobile accident near Mannheim, Germany. The term *age of 60* is expressly used instead of *60 years old*. Patton was never *old*. Men half his age were hard pressed to keep up with him. He was always the most modern of warriors, always looking for a new, better way to do his job.

It has often been voiced by those who knew well him that perhaps it was a good thing for him to die when he did. He died at the peak of his success, known for the many great things he had accomplished. He would have been disgusted at the way the American politicians wasted and perverted the great victory American fighting men had won. The United States had destroyed the German Nazis only to replace them with what Patton called, "... the Mongolian savages known as Russians."

During his lifetime, Patton displayed so many different personalities that it seems difficult to know who the real person was. Of course, the most well known image was his war mask. His toughness, his profanity, his bluster and braggadocio were appurtenances that he assumed because he believed that only he-men stimulated other men to fight. In the same way the Indian War Cry, the Rebel Yell, and the paratrooper's shout of, "Geronimo," help men in battle to disguise their fear, Patton's fierce countenance helped him to disguise and overcome his fear.

Psychologists call these disguises reinforcing factors. They are the sights, sounds, and other stimuli that start adrenaline flowing. They spur men into action and help men act against one of their deepest intuitive drives, the urge for self-preservation.

The battle field is an frightening and eerie place, and the emotion most prevalent is fear; of disfigurement, disability, and ultimately, death. Cultivation of these reinforcing factors is only one of many ways used by men in battle to overcome their fear.

This is what Patton did so well. This was the total reasoning behind his acts, his demeanor, and his dress. His Ivory-Handled Revolvers, his oversized stars, his tough, and his blunt blue-flamed profanity were what he gave to his men in large doses to create the necessary warrior psychology, the will to confront and to destroy the enemy. These things gave his men the confidence to defeat the enemy. His gift to his men was the gift of *Leadership*.

Patton's ability to inspire his men were perhaps too visible at times. It often camouflaged a thoroughly competent and professional combat soldier.

Apart from the psychology involved in leading men, the military profession requires an immense technical competence, a knowledge of weapons and equipment, of tactics and operation, of maneuver and logistics. Scarcely appreciated today, is the fact that Patton, throughout his career, expended vast amounts of time and energy to learn the intricacies of his chosen profession. He read enormously, voraciously, endlessly in the literature of warfare and history. Not only was he conversant with the field and technical manuals of his time, he was also familiar with the pages of history. During his lifetime, he accumulated one of the best military libraries in the world. Today, that library is located at the Military Academy at West Point, New York. The library was a gift from his son, George S. Patton, III, a retired United States Army Major-General and West Point graduate (1946).

He studied the past to discover the great historical continuities. Patton felt that all of recorded history is one contiguous string of accomplishments.

Patton understood that history is not just a record of isolated, individual events non-related to each other. Every act of history is contiguous — totally dependent upon the previous act. Because *William the Conqueror* defeated *Harold of Hastings* in 1066, the whole future and history of England was changed. England took a vastly different path than it would have if Harold had been victorious. All of history was thusly changed. England would have followed a much different path in its context within the world community.

Patton recognized this historical cohesiveness and its contiguous correlation for what it is. *It's the basis for all cultural habit, tradition, custom, and the nature of man*. The main fascination for Patton in his search for the common elements of man's historical behavior was the significance and importance of military leadership. He continually sought those elusive factors that produce victory or defeat in battle. He was intrigued by the relationships of tactics and supply, maneuver and shock, weapons and will power.

He could easily lecture on such the subjects of scale, chain, and armor, on German mercenaries, the Italian Wars, Polish tactics and techniques, the Peninsular War, and so on, for hours at a time. He wasn't simply cognizant of history, he was familiar and intimate with it; Greek phalanx, Roman Legions, Napoleon's columns, Baron de Jomini, Marshal Saxe, Sun Tzu, Flavius Renatus, J.E.B. Stuart, Mosby's Rangers, Grant and Lee, Samson and his ass' jaw, all the way up to and including the mass armies used in World War I. He could subjectively compare the heavy cavalry of Belisarius with the modern armored vehicle. He discovered a certain craftiness in the 6th Century tactics of Belisarius that he actually applied to the use of modern tanks.

At the same time, he was thoughtful and contemplative. Unlike intellectuals, he believed that the ultimate virtue in warfare was *action*. His officers often received lectures on the value, advantage, and benefits of not only reading, but studying history. On numerous occasions, he reported to sick call for the treatment of conjunctivitis, an infection and inflammation of the eyes. It was caused by many nights of non-stop reading.

Nor was this casual reading. It was purposeful, intense study. He had a habit of making profuse notes in his books, easily and often filling the margins of a page with his own thoughts and concepts. In one particular instance, after finishing a book by General J.F.C. Fuller (the acknowledged father of tank doctrine) Patton's written reactions covered seven pages of single-spaced typed notes.

Neither was reading the only method in which Patton gained his military expertise. To him, training was the glue that held an army together. Proper training accustomed men to obey orders automatically. Patton knew full well that soldiers could only perform their duties during battlefield conditions when those duties were as second nature to them.

In the 1920's and 1930's, Patton was working hard and soldiering very seriously. In addition to reading and polo playing, he invented a machine gun sled that could give assault riflemen more direct fire support. He conceived and designed a new saddle pack to increase the range and striking power of Cavalry. He worked closely with J. Walter Christie to improve the silhouette, suspension, power, and weapons of tanks. He designed and constructed tank models. He originated plans to restructure infantry divisions into a triangular form, as opposed to the old square formation, to squeeze more maneuverability and firepower out of fewer men. This triangular division pre-dated the similar World War II reorganization formed by General Leslie McNair.

Patton continually sought ways to create more and better mobility in operations. He became an authority on amphibious landings. To better understand airplanes and the role of air power in war, he obtained a pilot's license. He was one of the first to see the importance and flexibility of employing a light airplane for communications and liaisons. He did all of this on his own before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Patton's unswerving dedication and focused attention to his chosen profession reaped exceptionally immense rewards during World War II. For example, although Patton is primarily remembered today as a tank general, hardly anyone remembers the fact that Patton was the leading American amphibious authority in the European Theater of Operations. His landings in Morocco were the only ones executed

by an All-American force; the other two simultaneous landings were conducted by Anglo-American forces.

His tactics in Sicily became the prototype for subsequent invasions of southern Italy, Anzio, Normandy, and southern France. Although Patton was not allowed to play a part in invasions following Sicily, he was the one who set the pattern. Although he wasn't often consulted officially, he was consulted on every invasion *unofficially* — and never given the credit he deserved.

Still another example of his professional expertise was Patton's use of close support aircraft. Throughout the European Campaign of World War II, the *XIX Tactical Air Command* supported Patton's Third Army. Patton encouraged and promoted the closest cooperation possible between the air and ground forces. He made sure his ground headquarters and air headquarters were physically located in close proximity. He encouraged a close knit working atmosphere between the two staffs, going so far as to have them eat their meals together. He constantly applauded the efforts of the airmen and continually directed the attention of newspaper correspondents to the value and importance of air support. He cultivated a feeling of camaraderie, mutual admiration, and cooperation that was beneficial to both the Third Army and the *XIX Tactical Air Command*.

Patton enjoyed shocking people. He liked to create the impression that he was impulsive in his decisions, acting as though everything he did was from instinct. Although it might *seem* that he did, indeed, have some sort of sixth sense regarding possible enemy action, the simple fact is that he was so imbued with military knowledge, history, and doctrine, that everything was already in his mind. All he had to do was to recall it.

As Patton explained it, "... by studying history from recorded time until today, when a situation occurs on the battlefield, somewhere in that knowledge there will be a similar example. All the general has to do is retrieve the information from his memory and use the current means at hand to inflict the maximum amount of wounds, death, and destruction on the enemy in the minimum of time."

It's exactly this type of knowledge and perception that enabled him to deploy his forces confidently, with pure audacity.

But, even for all of Patton's knowledge and leadership qualities, underneath his sharp and boldly announced course of action, he always displayed loyalty to and an immense appreciation of the solid, dependable, and reliable work performed by his staff. His staff planned well and left little to chance. His staff was always built of men he had personally hand picked — *Loyal Men*.

Very probably, the best example of his certain grasp on planning occurred in December, 1944, when the German's Ardennes Offensive drove a bulge into the lines of the First Army. Within 48 hours, Patton turned his entire Third Army 90 degrees to the left and started a drive that ultimately linked with the embattled defenders of Bastogne. He threatened the southern flank of the German bulge. The German attack was as good as contained.

Patton had no silly, romantic illusions about warfare. He knew how horrible and hateful war is. He once wrote, "Ever since man banded together with the laudable intention of killing his fellow man, war has been a dirty business."

Contrary to popular belief, *Patton did not like war*. He loathed the chaos, disorder, and destruction of the battlefield. He felt a personal and deep responsibility for the lives of the men in his command. He knew, however, that he must retain a certain detached attitude. The moment he allowed his personal feelings to get in the way, his effectiveness as a general was finished. A similar analogy would be the detachment of a doctor's feelings while performing surgery on a patient.

Patton's motivation and inclination toward the military life was the chance for glory, greatness, achievement, for fame and applause, no matter how fleeting it might be. He despised the misery, death, and horror of the battlefield, yet, *he loved the responsibility and excitement of the battlefield*.

Being exceptionally pragmatic, he viewed himself, his virtue and courage, as the ultimate weapon of war. In his words, "New weapons are useful in that they add to the repertoire of killing, but, be they tank or tomahawk, weapons are only weapons after all. Wars are fought with weapons, but they are won by *Men*."

In 1909, while a plebe at West Point, Patton wrote in his diary, "Do not regard what you do as only a preparation for doing the same thing more fully or better at some later time. *Nothing is ever done twice!* There is no next time! This is of special importance and application to war. There is but one time to win a battle or a campaign. It must be won the first time."

"In order for a man to become a great soldier, it is necessary for him to be so thoroughly conversant with all sorts of military possibilities that whenever an occasion arises, he has at hand, without effort on his part, a parallel. To attain this end, it is necessary for a man to begin to read military history in it's earliest and hence crudest form, and to follow it down in natural sequence, permitting his mind to grow with his subject until he can grasp without effort the most abstruse question of the science of war because he is already permeated with all of it's elements."

Ultimately, what made it possible for George S. Patton, Jr. to achieve greatness was not just his driving, obsessive will power. Patton believed in luck and he was lucky enough to have fate on his side. He was the right man, at the right time, and in the right place.

Luck was only a part of it, too. Patton firmly believed that he had been born for this purpose. As a believer in reincarnation, he felt that this was his fate — forever. He said as much in his poem, *Through A Glass, Darkly*

*So forever in the future,
Shall I battle as of yore,
Dying to be born a fighter,
But to die again, once more.*

Patton's luck, the needs of his nation, and fate all came together. When opportunity knocked Patton was ready, willing, and able. Patton was in many respects similar to a diamond. Hard, multi-faceted, and fascinating to watch. George Patton was a warrior—a man of action. He was also a man of wit, culture, and knowledge. America was lucky to have him.

A Courtesy Publication From
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