

Old Soldiers Never Die



Packer—N. Y. Daily Mirror

Gen. George S. Patton Jr. wanted to die in battle—to be blown to pieces while riding in his beloved tank at the head of a victorious attack. But although he courted death many times, in tanks, in racing jeeps, and under machine-gun fire, the two-gun general rode bloody but unbowed through all the military and political crises his vaunted guts and violent tongue seemed to attract.

Patton was made for a soldier and a man of action. The son of a wealthy old Virginia family, he decided on a military career at the age of 7. At 11 he was already an impetuous polo player. In later years his opponents commented: "He hits hard—often upon the head."

The Gift of Courage: When he was 18 Patton entered Virginia Military Institute and a year later went to West Point. He became one of the few five-year men in the academy's history. Although he flunked in his first year he was not dismissed because he already had the makings in him of an excellent soldier. "Do you know what that damn fool of a son of mine did the other day?" his father once stormed. "They were having rapid-fire practice . . . The damn fool stood up between the targets. He said he wanted to see what it was like to be under fire." After graduation he entered the cavalry.

During the last war the cavalry took quickly to tanks. "The only difference between tanks and horses," he explained, "is the feed you give 'em." In 1917 Patton established an American tank school at Langres, France. But he wanted action and, as commander of the 304th tank brigade, fought in the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives, where he was seriously wounded. Legend has it that he rode astride his tank as if on a horse, spurs scraping and saber swinging.

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The 1945 portrait by Boleslaw Jan Czedekowski (1885 - 1969)

The interval between the wars was dull for Patton, although he rose in rank from captain to the temporary rank of major general in 1941. Militarily, he led a detachment to break up the Bonus Expeditionary Force in Washington in 1932. Diplomatically, he taught the Prince of Wales to shoot craps.

At the beginning of this war Patton, a devoted student of military history and tactics, was the most expert of American tank commanders. He trained the Second Armored Division in 1940 and was promoted to command of the First Armored Corps. On Nov. 8, 1942, he landed in French Morocco and led the Second Corps in the North African campaign. Cigar in mouth, the vitriolic, 6-foot general leaped ashore at Gela, Sicily, on July 10, 1943, with his Seventh Army, and drove the campaign to a 38-day conclusion, outblitzing the blitzkriegers. The Germans tagged him as a man to watch.

Who Was Caesar? In November 1943, the suppressed story of how Patton slapped a soldier suffering from battle fatigue came out. The slapping incident raised the greatest home-front furor of the war. The general publicly apologized, but the story left a bad taste. Patton disappeared from the military scene for months and the Germans wondered where he was. They found out soon after D Day. Patton turned up in Normandy to pour the Third Army he had been training since Sicily through the German lines at St. Lô. "We shall attack," he told his men, "and attack, until we are exhausted, and then we shall attack again." Patton's tanks attacked until they ran out of gas—before Metz on the Moselle River. The Germans put him down as extra-good.

Through the autumn months of 1944 Patton built up his army to strike again. The call came in December. It was ur-

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gent. The great German Ardennes offensive had broken through Allied lines in Belgium. The Wehrmacht was being checked momentarily. But the whole northern front might crumble unless it were dealt a hard blow. While British and American troops held on in the bitter Belgian snows Patton raced up from the south and sent the Germans reeling back toward the Rhine.

That was his style. As spectacular in his tactics as in his speech, he used his armor as Jeb Stuart employed his cavalry. Patton was the man the world looked to when the Allied front was stalled. Time after time his divisions broke through and slashed forward in drives which made military history. After the victory, German generals said they had feared him more than any other American field commander. And America found it easy to overlook his little faults and focus on his great achievements.

All told, Patton's Third Army had raced through six countries, crossed six major rivers into enemy territory, captured 750,000 Germans, and killed and wounded another 500,000. "Julius Caesar," Patton said, "wouldn't have been but a one-star general in the Third Army."

Then Fate at Mannheim: In October the general lost command of his beloved Third because of his compromising attitude on Nazis in his Bavarian occupation zone. His circle-A Third Army patch was replaced by that of the Fifteenth Army, a headquarters group writing a history of the war. Patton said: "Anyway, I wore it when it mattered, and nobody can take that from me."

Patton was scheduled to go home for a long leave in mid-December. On Dec. 9 he broke his neck in an auto crash near Mannheim, Germany (NEWSWEEK, Dec. 17). His wife rushed from the United States to his bedside. After 48 hours doctors pronounced him out of danger. Even as plans were made to fly him home, however, the 60-year-old general, lying in a plaster cast, developed lung trouble. The added strain in his paralyzed condition was too much for even his great vitality. He could not, for example, obtain relief by coughing. He died in his sleep of pulmonary congestion on Dec. 21 in a Seventh Army hospital in Heidelberg. As messages of condolence came in from all over the world, Gen. Joseph T. McNarney, commander of United States forces in Europe, paid the final tribute: "He went down fighting." This week he was buried at Hamm, Luxembourg, in the midst of the area where he won his greatest fame and where his achievements will be remembered forever.

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