

George S. Patton's Student Days at the Army War College¹

by

PROFESSOR MARTIN BLUMENSON

After a month of leave at home in Massachusetts, Major George S. Patton, Jr., sailed his yacht to the Chesapeake Bay and arrived in Washington as it was getting dark on 30 August 1931. He was about to enter the Army War College, a significant step in any soldier's career. A reward for professional proficiency and an acknowledgment of capability for continued professional growth, selection to attend the College offered an officer a period of study that would determine his fitness and eligibility for the ultimate exercise of high command. Instead of the shortness of breath or vague feeling of apprehension and malaise that afflicted Patton throughout his life on the eve of important decisions, battles, and other like events, he had an attack of hay fever.

He was somewhat older than his fellow students. For example, his friend Dwight D. Eisenhower had graduated from West Point eight years after Patton's class of 1909, yet had finished the Army War College three years earlier. But this only served to prod Patton's ambition and energy. Constantly laboring under the fear that he would fail to measure up to the demands of any situation, he always worked hard, driving himself to make good. His year at the Army War College was no exception. He applied himself to the requirements with characteristic vigor and determination.

Yet he found time too at the beginning of

the course to maneuver for an assignment. He had long wished to be the Commandant of Cadets at West Point, and he asked two distinguished friends to put in a good word for him. General James G. Harbord, Pershing's former chief of staff and the godfather of Patton's son, as well as General Hugh Drum, who then commanded the Fifth Corps Area, wrote letters of recommendation but in vain.

Patton took the time also to lobby sympathetically on behalf of his old boss, General Guy Henry, Chief of Cavalry, who feared that he had reached the end of the line and would have no further promotion. Patton's letter to General Malin Craig, commander of the Ninth Corps Area who tried to help, was similarly in vain.

The death in November of his dear Aunt Nannie Wilson took Patton to California for the funeral. While he was staying with his sister in the family home at San Marino, Patton was overcome with nostalgia for the happy boyhood he had spent there. He sat down and wrote an emotional letter to his mother, who had been dead for three years. The paper he put into her trinket box read in part: "Darling Mama . . . I had always prayed to show my love by doing something famous for you, to justify what you called me when I got back from France, 'My hero son.' Perhaps I still may, but time grows short. I am 46."

During those years of his lifetime, although he thought that his achievements were mediocre, he had accomplished a great deal.

He had competed in the Olympic Games of 1912, studied fencing with the professional champion of Europe, designed a saber adopted by the US Cavalry, been the first in the US Army to hold the magnificent title "Master of the Sword," and was widely known as a horseman, polo player, sailor, amateur poet, and military historian.

From his point of view, his most valuable

experiences undoubtedly were his participation in Pershing's Punitive Expedition into Mexico, where Patton first practiced his profession of arms and learned to model himself after Pershing and his method of leadership; and his service in France during World War I, when he became the Army's foremost tank expert, trained the tankers of the American Expeditionary Force, and led his tank brigade successfully in combat. He gained an honorable wound, the Distinguished

Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the grade of Colonel. Since then he had performed in a variety of staff and command posts, all in flamboyant and outstanding manner.

His most recent duty was in the Office of the Chief of Cavalry. There for three years he wrestled with the problems of horses and machines. Should the Army, especially the Cavalry, be modernized, and if so, how? Some officers wanted to mechanize and motorize entirely; others argued that horses were still essential in areas of the world lacking roads. Patton's complete loyalty to his Chief, his intense love of horses, and his close identification with his branch, which was somewhat conservative and traditionally

oriented, came into conflict with his sense of the times, his recognition that the gasoline engine had come of age and to stay. Increasingly it was making animals obsolete for military operations. He and his contemporaries, at least those who were serious about preparing for what they called the "next war" sure to come, anticipated, if only vaguely, that the airplane, the tank, and

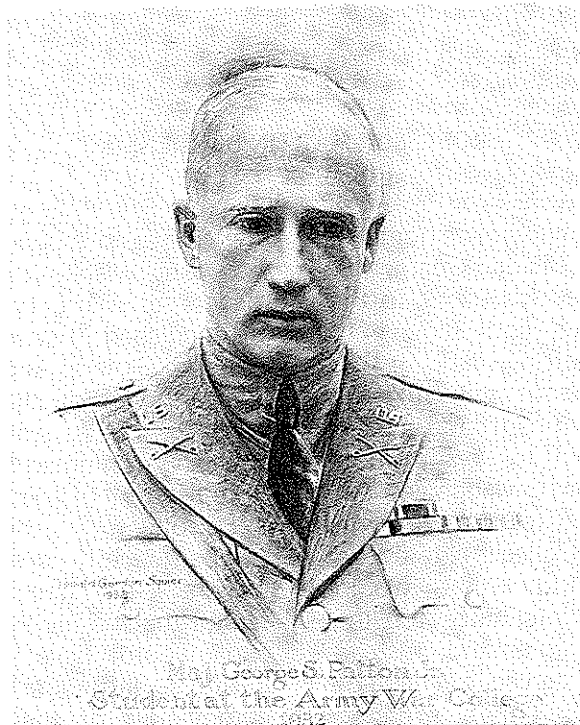
the truck would revolutionize warfare. Exactly how, of course, was the question.

More specifically, the static trench combat in France haunted Patton and all his thoughtful colleagues. How could they overcome in the next war the conditions that imposed the frightful and senseless casualties on the Western Front? How could victory be gained quickly and without the terrible expenditures in blood and treasure of the last war? The answers seemed to revolve

around the concept of mobility. How to restore maneuver to battle was the real issue.

Attendance at the Army War College gave Patton the chance to grapple, on a sustained basis, with the state of the art of war and with the immediate military problems of the day. Patton plunged into the work with the dedicated resolve to settle, at least for himself, some of the professional matters that troubled him and his generation.

Although the students at the College were the elite of the Army, they reflected in miniature the climate of opinion throughout the institution. The prevailing condition that affected and stultified all activity was the paucity of funds for the military. The country was in the depths of the great depression, and



the low levels of appropriations hovered as a constraint over every new idea, shackling the imaginations of Army thinkers and forcing them to operate within the limitations of practicality. If, for example, the Army was unable to afford new tanks and planes and experimental exercises and maneuvers to test them, it was necessary to remain within the area of the known and conventional.

If most military men are by nature practical and pragmatic, Patton was especially so. He continuously preached the philosophy of making do with the means at hand. Eschewing, in war and peace, what he would like to have to insure success in any given endeavor, sometimes pushing aside even what he deemed was necessary for success, he always fitted his solutions to what was available.

In large part, this outlook and attitude shaped the individual thesis he prepared and wrote. Six months after entering the College, on the last day of February, 1932, Patton submitted to the Assistant Commandant his paper.² It was 56 pages long and had 14 additional tables and photographs. Entitled "The Probable Characteristics of the Next War and the Organization, Tactics, and Equipment Necessary to Meet Them," it was an ambitious project. In it Patton drew together some of his cherished notions, a great deal of serious reflection, and the lessons of his lifetime of reading military history. His language was, as ever, exuberant, and the flair of his unique personality illuminated his words with unusual clarity and perception.

Direct and to the point, Patton used short sentences to present his line of thought. For example, analyzing the operations of the mass armies in the Great War, Patton concluded that "The outstanding characteristic . . . was its bloody and costly indecisiveness"; and because of the large size and consequently poor quality of the forces involved, "maneuver was at first slow and then absent." This occurred because of the wide fronts required to employ the vast numbers of mobilized troops, the subsequent inertia arising out of these forces of unmanageable

proportions, and the need "to rest both flanks on unturnable obstacles." That being so, he wrote, "Without flanks, maneuver and . . . surprise are impossible. Without maneuver and surprise, decisive victories are unattainable."

After laying out in a 5-page memorandum the nature and thrust of his paper, the facts bearing on the study, his conclusions and recommendations—all forming a lucid and cogent analysis—he opened his discussion with a quotation: "All experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing its forms to which they are accustomed."

If that seemed obscure, he quickly explained:

In these flowing words the brilliant author of the Declaration of Independence gave expression to the fact that the human mind prefers to remember rather than to think, to endure rather than to adventure.

Due to this habit we tend to an excessive admiration for the past, and frequently carry our veneration to the point of believing that it also depicts the future.

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The widespread opinion that the World War—waged, as it was, in complete accord with the principle of 'The Nation in Arms'—is a new development and the sealed pattern for future wars, is a case in point. As a matter of fact, the principle of 'The Nation in Arms,' the Mass Army, is older than history.

During the forty-four hundred years which separate the Syrian invasion of Egypt from the German invasion of France there have been countless wars waged on the mass system; and a practically equal number conducted, on the diametrically opposed principle, inherent in the use of professional armies.

Now, while there is a strong school of military thought which holds that all historical study prior to 1870 is futile, the apparently inexorable recurrence of the cycles of history is so impressive as to merit investigation. Without perspective a painting is valueless; so it is with things military.

Unquestionably it is footless to copy ancient tactics, but we should familiarize ourselves with the causes which impelled their adoption, because in the four thousand odd years of recorded history man has changed but little. Save for appearances the hoplite and the rifleman are one, and the emotions and consequent reactions which affected one affect the other.

He then set out to investigate warfare through the ages to determine those wars fought by professional armies and those by mass armies. But first he defined his terms. Professional armies were composed of men "maintained, equipped, and trained over a period of years for the *sole* purpose of war." Mass armies were "composed of men, however maintained, equipped, and trained, who make war a secondary consideration." The "amount of time, training, and money necessary to produce an Egyptian Bowman of 1500 B.C., a Roman Legionary of 45 B.C., a French Grenadier of 1796, or a British Regular of 1914" differed. But any group of these soldiers "was superior to an equally

numerous group of contemporaneous amateurs." The point was, the basic difference between professional and mass armies was the difference between quality and quantity. The lesson was, "these attributes can not be combined."

His inquiry started in 2500 B.C., when:

One of the earliest wars of which there is authentic record occurred between Egypt and Syria during the Sixth Dynasty. A force of unknown character from Syria attacked Egypt. To meet this, the Egyptians raised a levee in mass, calling on each province . . . to furnish its quota.

Lesson. A short campaign of home defense can be conducted with a mass army. At this period tools and weapons were simple and often identical.

Patton proceeded in this way through more than 40 examples, of which 17 were in the period of antiquity before the birth of Christ. In a few lines he gave thumbnail sketches of conflicts waged by Egyptians, Syrians, Greeks, Macedonians, Persians, Romans, Africans, Goths, Byzantines, Franks, Vikings, Mongols, Swiss, Turks, British, French, Spanish, Dutch, Germans, Americans, and Boers. In each case he cited the historical source, usually by indicating the name of the author. He also extracted what seemed to be the meaning of the lesson of these clashes.

For example, in 1400 B.C.:

Thotmes III invaded Syria with an army of 15,000 men. This force marched from the present site of the Suez Canal to Mount Carmel, 250 miles in twenty-two days. From this fact and from the account of the battle fought at Armageddon, it is believed that the force was composed of professionals. (PETRIE)

Lesson. Distant wars and hard campaigning need quality rather than quantity.

Again, in 378 A.D.:

At the battle of Adrianople the last Roman army of the old type was utterly

defeated by the Gothic mass army. From this date onward, for 1,000 years, Cavalry replaced Infantry as the dominant arm of battle. (OMAN)

Lesson. Again mobility and enthusiasm more than compensated for lack of training. Also, the Roman army was decadent.

Another example, in 1642 A.D.:

The Civil War in England began with the royal forces consisting of untrained volunteers and a few mercenaries, and a parliamentary force of organized and untrained militia

In 1645, Cromwell commenced the organization of the New Model Army—a Professional Force.

Lesson. Triumph of professionals.

In a masterful and, to some extent, exhibitionist manner, Patton displayed the breadth and scope of his knowledge of military history. His offhand references to Sargon II, Cyrus and Cambyses, Philip and Alexander, Hannibal and Scipio, Belisarius and Baldwin, as well as numerous others, showed not only the magnitude of reading he had done in his lifetime but also the amount of reflection he had given to his constant study of war.

His presentation was more than a parade of facts, for he was essentially concerned with drawing meaning from history, with understanding both the appearance of events and the structures behind them. From time to time he stopped to summarize and explain, to analyze and conclude.

The gist of his thought was that mass armies had troops that were hastily raised and incompletely trained; their large numbers partially compensated for their relative lack of skill; but their use in war was costly of life, time consuming and sometimes ineffective. More effective instruments of warfare were professional armies—smaller, better trained, more mobile, capable of fighting short and decisive wars.

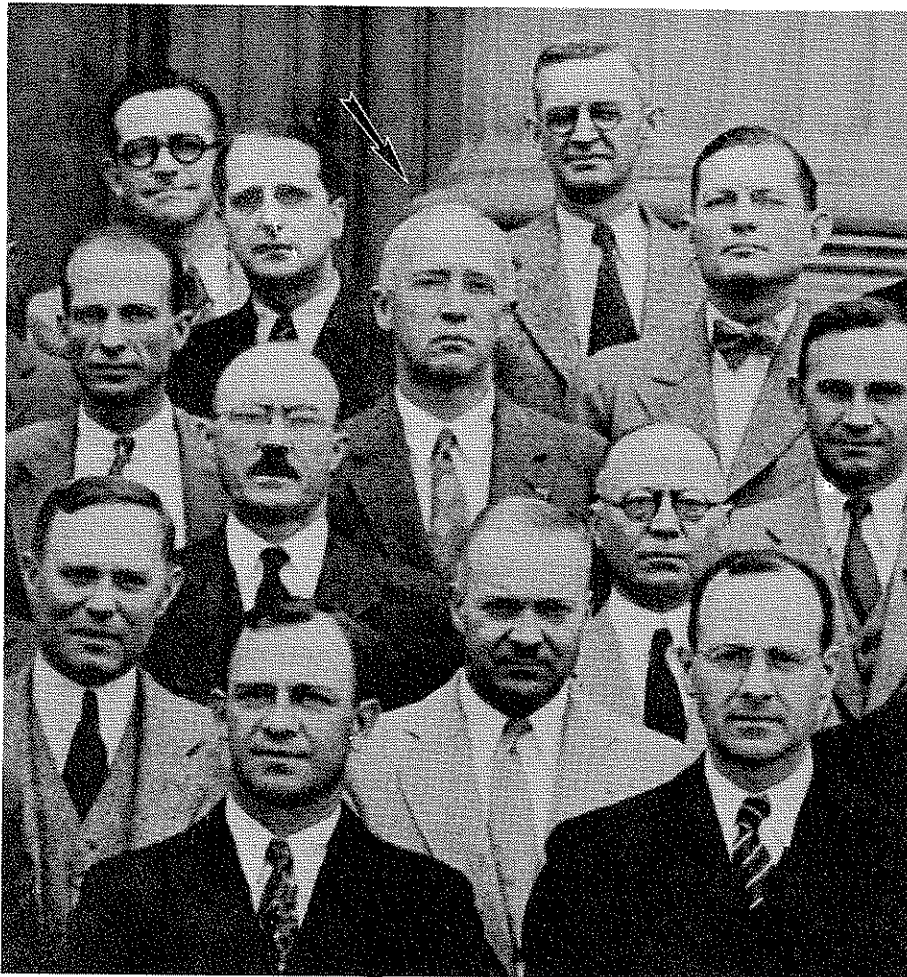
Size and strength, Patton said, were hardly synonymous. Small professional armies permitted thorough training of members and gave soldiers long associations together, service that enhanced solidarity and mutual confidence in the ranks. They knew how to maneuver and to fight. They were ready immediately for times of emergency. They could achieve quick and decisive victory.

Professional armies would be used in the next war, he predicted, not only for all these reasons but also because military equipment was becoming more complex and costly. Furnishing masses of men with the latest weapons was financially burdensome, if not entirely impossible, but smaller armies could be kept up to date.

This conclusion, of course, emerged directly out of the times. If funds were unavailable for large forces, smaller forces would have to do. Therefore, if that was what Regular officers would have to work with, they might just as well do so in good grace. Patton's argument, eminently reasonable and certainly sincere, took on the patina of a rationalization of reality.

Yet mass armies were the rage at the Army War College and elsewhere, and almost everyone believed or assumed that the Nation in Arms, in theory and practice, was an unalterable fact of life. Patton asked many officers, including instructors and students at the College, to explain why mass armies were generally regarded as being not only desirable but also the sine qua non of modern warfare. He received no answers that satisfied him.

After meditating on the advantages of large conscript armies, Patton decided that, so far as he could tell, armed forces numbering in the millions: gave the popular mind a sense of power and security; aroused popular enthusiasm and support by placing the burden of war on all alike; produced a homogeneity of national character among recruits; enabled political leaders to say, if things went wrong, that everything possible had been done to insure success; pandered to the widespread conviction that a national army provided the cheapest form of national security; allowed fighting on several fronts simultaneously; and followed the belief that big battalions were the same as strong battalions.



In this part of the 1932 class photograph, Patton is in the center of the fourth row. Others shown who also commanded combat units during WW II are: 1st row, left—James L. Bradley, commander of the 96th Division, Pacific theater; 1st row, right—Bradford G. Chynoweth, commander of the Visayan Force, Philippine Army, who was taken prisoner when the Philippines fell; 2d row, right—Wade H. Haislip, commander of the 85th Division and XV Corps, European theater. Later he was Vice Chief of Staff, US Army; 4th row, left—Alexander M. Patch, Jr., commander of the Americal Division and XIV Corps, Guadalcanal. Patch later commanded Seventh Army in Europe.

On the other hand, and far more to the point in the actual conditions, professional armies were more easily supplied, less tied to the road net, better disciplined. They could disperse on the battlefield and cope better with the airplane. They could maneuver to gain surprise and decisive victory. They were able, in short, to handle themselves in battle, which Patton characterized as "an orgy of organized disorder."

Small, mobile, largely self-contained units were therefore required for the next war. For the history of war was a history of warriors, few in number, mighty in personality. Leaders in small professional armies would often be killed, but high-ranking officers had the primary aim of winning, not of surviving. Furthermore—and this was pure Patton—their deaths would have great inspirational effect on their men.

In sum, small professional armies would restore mobility to the battlefield in the next war, which, as a consequence, would be shorter and more decisive than the World War. In detailed tables of organization submitted with his report, tables that revealed a vast amount of concentrated work, he suggested that the Infantry Division should have a total of 8,093 officers and men, a Cavalry Division 4,367—less than half of the older square divisions that had fought in France.

Interestingly enough, Patton's streamlined divisions foreshadowed General Lesley J. McNair's work to triangularize the division in World War II, an effort to provide increased mobility without lessening firepower and shock.

The sincerity of purpose and the hard work that went into Patton's paper were obvious, and in April the Commandant of the Army War College commended him "for work of exceptional merit." Since the thesis had "sufficient merit to warrant consideration by the War Department," it was being forwarded "by direction of the Chief of Staff."³

That was high honor indeed.

In addition to preparing his individual thesis, Patton was chairman of a student committee that presented a report on mechanized units.⁴ The committee had the task of assessing current progress in mechanization and of making direct and practical recommendations to the War Department General Staff on the subject.

The report was notable in two respects. First, it showed the Patton touch everywhere. For example: "The Austro-Prussia War of 1866 furnishes the only instance, in wars between two civilized opponents, where weapons played the decisive role." Only Patton could have written that sentence.

Secondly, the report defined several terms—mechanical warfare, mechanization, and motorization—that were often used loosely and interchangeably. To rectify the vague language, the committee distinguished between a mechanized force, which was not only transported in motor vehicles but also fought from them, and a motorized force, which was transported by vehicles to the

scene of battle where the troops dismounted to fight. These statements were so sharp and precise that the War Department accepted them the following year and made them part of the official doctrine.

As for the committee's conclusions, they resembled Patton's convictions. A large and independent mechanized force had no role in current warfare. The proper function of mechanized units was to assist the existing arms, infantry and cavalry. The committee recommended, therefore, that each existing arm should develop mechanized units according to its own missions and capabilities.

This represented a stand-pat attitude. It was no advance over the doctrine of 1918. Yet this was what Patton knew and was familiar with as a result of his wartime experience. Later in 1940, after the Germans had exhibited their proficiency in the use of tanks, Patton would admit his error and turn imaginatively and energetically to the development of new tactics and techniques, new concepts for integrating the several arms within an armed force.

Several years earlier, when working in the Office of the Chief of Cavalry, Patton had recommended that infantry and cavalry develop their own mechanized units independently of each other. That to him seemed to be the most feasible way to modernize the Army. General Douglas MacArthur, the Chief of Staff, had directed the Army to follow this course of action. Whether he was aware of Patton's recommendation or whether he reached the same conclusion coincidentally, his rationale stemmed in part from the low Congressional appropriations and the desperate lack of Army funds, and in part from the desire to avoid a war between the Infantry and Cavalry for control over the tanks and other mechanized forces.

Eight years later, in the summer of 1940 when the "next war" had come to Europe, after the panzers had demonstrated the terrifying effectiveness of blitzkrieg in Poland and in France and the Low Countries, General George C. Marshall, the Chief of Staff, would reverse the decision to develop mechanized units as adjuncts to infantry and cavalry. By

creating the Armored Force, he would establish, in essence, a large and independent mechanized force.

Patton was also wrong in his belief that professional armies would fight in World War II. Yet it was no accident that a then-obscure young officer in France, Charles de Gaulle, was advocating, like Patton, an *armée de métier* (professional army). They were both premature in perceiving modern armies in these terms.

But being wrong in part, at least at the Army War College, was unimportant for Patton. The significant matters were that he had used his time wisely to extend his knowledge of and to clarify his thoughts on his profession. He had impressed his colleagues and his instructors with his zealous and enthusiastic interest in the military, and with his intelligence, energy, and perception. They were convinced he would go far.

Rating Patton's performance as a student at the Army War College, the Commandant, General William D. Connor, judged him "superior." He was, Connor wrote:

An aggressive and capable officer of strong convictions. An untiring student. Proficiency in theoretical training for High Command: Superior. For War Department

General Staff: Superior. Special aptitude for any particular class of duty: Command. Qualified for duty with any civilian component. Academic rating: Superior.

No one could have wished for more.

Graduation from the Army War College meant that Patton had finished his formal military education. If there was to be a next war, and if it came before he was too old, he would be assured of an important and responsible place in it. Unless, of course, as he must surely have reflected sometime soon after receiving his diploma, he failed somehow to measure up to the high standards he had set for himself or failed somehow to meet the expectations of his superiors. Completing the course at the Army War College hardly signified the end of his continuing quest for excellence.

NOTES

1. This article is based in part on materials in *The Patton Papers, Vol. I, 1885-1940* (Houghton Mifflin, 1972).
2. This document is in the US Army War College Curricular Files, Archives Branch, US Army Military History Research Collection, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.
3. This may be found in the Library of Congress among the Patton papers on file there.
4. *Ibid.*

