

Whence Patton's Military Genius?

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Of the many questions about the image of General George S. Patton, Jr., one appears salient: how did he achieve his famed prowess as a military commander when he served on the battlefield barely 13 months in his whole lifetime? In World War I the 32-year-old Lieutenant Colonel Patton was only in his fifth day of combat when, in foolhardy bravery he attacked—virtually alone, armed only with a pistol—what turned out to be a nest of some 25 German machine guns. He was carted off to the hospital and later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

In November 1942 his combat time in command of the Western Task Force was less than a week when Casablanca fell. His command of II Corps in March 1943 in Tunisia was less than 30 days. His Seventh Army command in Sicily was used up in 38 days. His Third Army leadership from Normandy on 16 July 1944 to war's end in Bavaria on 9 May 1945 brought his combat total to 391 days—barely 13 months.

The reputations of Alexander the Great and Napoleon were based on at least a decade of campaigning, and Grant and Lee had at least four years. But Patton sat out much of World War II in deep frustration—months in Casablanca, Palermo, and England, spent in planning and organizing while his superiors decided what to do with him. But what he did in his 13 months of combat was so impressive that even his detractors had to admire it. His best-known biographer, Martin Blumenson, decided he showed all the traits of a military genius. I agree. But that does not get to the question of this article: How did Patton acquire that genius?

Initially, we should appreciate that the wartime Patton was an extension of the peacetime Patton. The long periods of frustrating waiting during

World War II were also times for reading, for reflection, for prethinking the next phase of operations, and for writing a vast compendium of letters, diaries, speeches, and studies. It is this body of literature that reveals the mind of Patton the wartime leader, and shows how much he drew on the lifetime of professional study he took with him to the battlefield in 1942. The habits of diary-keeping and letter-writing to his wife Beatrice were accelerated as he took on his war-fighting stance. He supplemented this record with random memoranda to himself: Notes on Arabs, Notes on Combat, Notes on the Sicilian Operation, Notes on France.

The linkages to his prewar thinking were shown in his many letters of instruction to his commanders, particularly that of 6 March 1944 when he first advised his new Third Army subordinates how to command. Sententious advice peppered the letter: lead in person; visit the front daily; observe, don't meddle; praise is more valuable than blame; make personal reconnaissance; issuing orders is ten percent, execution is 90 percent; plans should be made by people who execute them; tell the troops what they are going to do and what they have done; visit the wounded personally; if you do not enforce discipline, you are potential murderers; *do not take counsel of your fears*. In the next month, four additional letters of instruction conveyed more and more of these familiar phrases.

The Patton method of warfare espoused in these letters could be capsuled in one word: *attack*. Here are typical nuggets from his 5 June 1943 letter of instruction to subordinates before the Sicilian operation: use the means at hand to inflict the maximum amount of wounds, death, and destruction on the enemy in the minimum time; casualties vary directly with the time you are exposed to effective fire—rapidity of attack shortens the time of exposure; if you cannot see the enemy, shoot at the place he is most likely to be; when mortars and artillery are silent, they are junk—see that they fire; fire from the rear is three times as effective as fire from the front. Patton's emphasis on rear attack was often phrased as, "Hold them by the nose and kick them in the rear."

Beginning a Lifetime of Professional Reading

To begin to explore the sources of Patton's military genius, we must start with the unusual boyhood that followed his birth in 1885 on an 1800-acre ranch in southern California's San Gabriel valley. Horses and guns, camping

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and fishing would always be a part of his life. Because various members of his family owned what is now Pasadena, Mount Wilson, and Catalina Island, he grew up accustomed to wealth and power. Because his lineage included a host of Virginians who had graduated from the Virginia Military Institute and died in the Civil War, he could believe in a military caste that was traced in his own bloodlines. His father, a VMI product, was also a lawyer and highly literate, often translating from the Greek.

It was Papa who first noticed Georgie's learning disabilities that caused his early failure to read usefully. Blumenson, in his 1985 book *Patton: The Man Behind the Legend, 1885-1945*, concluded that Patton suffered from "the dyslexic flaw" that made printed letters appear upside down or reversed. He also pointed out the psychological symptoms that accompany dyslexia, including feelings of inadequacy, problems of concentration, and the need to compensate for impairments in the learning process by accomplishments in other areas—sports and drama come to mind. Blumenson suggested that Patton acquired a strong determination to overcome his handicap, which he accomplished in his college years, except for a lifetime inability to spell words correctly.² Recent research has suggested that some persons with a history of dyslexia come away from the experience with certain positive advantages, such as an unusual way of perceiving problems and creating solutions, factors which could figure in Patton's inventive approaches to military operations and leadership.

Papa's solution was not to send Georgie to school, but to read to him, to coach him in reading, and to require him to memorize long passages of poetry. The fare was the classics—*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, the Bible, Thucydides, Julius Caesar's *The Gallic War*, and the muscular fiction of such writers as Sir Walter Scott and especially Rudyard Kipling. By the time he was 11, Patton had a mind stuffed with the valorous deeds of great war heroes and a detailed knowledge of great campaigns and battles. When he finally entered Mr. Clark's School for Boys, he could write his essays on Alexander and Epaminondas and Themistocles. And by the age of 16 he could announce to his father that he wanted only a military career and must therefore get an appointment to West Point. He would spend a year at VMI before his Academy appointment came through in 1903.

Only three years later, Cadet Patton wrote into a small lined notebook a "List of Books to Read." Among the 17 listed were "Oman—*History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages*; Napoleon—*Maxims de la Guerre*; Henderson—*Science of War*; Hohenlohe—*Letters on Infantry, Cavalry, and Artillery*; Upton—*Armies of Europe and Asia*; and Jomini—*Life of Napoleon*." Twenty years later the record would show that he had, indeed, read most of the 17 books.

His notebooks also indicated that he was reading Oman in December 1906, although in the following year he wrote his father that there was no time

to read or do anything but study and play football. In a composition entitled "The Necessity of a Good Library at West Point," he wrote: "We are sorry to say that there are comparatively few men in the Corps who realize the importance of military study which is, as Napoleon says, the only school of war."

Support for his reading came more from home than from the Academy. He acquired C. W. Robinson's *Wellington's Campaigns, Peninsula-Waterloo, 1808-1815* in 1907 when family members visited West Point. In September 1908 he wrote to his mother, "I am awfully glad Aunt Nannie got those books . . . they are very good books . . . and convinced me of the value of book knowledge of war. It is the whole show and there are surprisingly few men who seem to realize its importance." In the same year his father inscribed to Cadet Patton a volume of Major General Henry Lloyd's *The History of the Late War between the King of Prussia and the Empress of Germany and Her Allies*, printed in London in the 18th century. This became the foundation for his lifetime study of Frederick the Great and for his collection of antique military treatises.

Other aspects of the Patton persona were beginning to appear in his cadet notebooks. A year before graduating he wrote:

Remember that you have placed all on war. Therefore you must never fail. Hence if you attack—and you must never do anything else—put in every man and win or mark the high tide of the charge with your body. The world has no use for a defeated soldier and nothing too good for a victor. . . . If you die not a soldier and having had a chance to be one I pray God to damn you George Patton. . . . Never Never Never stop being ambitious. You have but one life. Live it to the full of glory and be willing to pay.

In January 1909 he wrote to his parents: "I have got to—do you understand got to—be great—it is no foolish dream—it is me as I ever will be. I am different from other men my age. All they want to do is to live happily and die old. I would be willing to live in torture, die tomorrow if for one day I could be really great."

As graduation neared, Patton's letters to Beatrice Ayer, whom he would later marry, conveyed more and more of his plans for professional reading. In a letter of 25 March 1909: "It has been raining all day so there was no drill and having nothing to do I read for about four hours until I could hardly see." In April: "I have been reading a German translation on tactics tonight and it is a most saddening work, for to be a good soldier one has to know so much and they seem to know it all and I know so little. How can I ever learn enough to fight with them, yet I must." Finally, in May: "I hope that after I get out of here I shall find plenty to do, for so many officers get into that awful habit of [make work] and not doing anything. . . . I am going

to try . . . to read war for a certain number of hours each day and hope to have time to read other things too.”

While on summer leave in 1915, Lieutenant Patton acquired a little-known book which may have set him on the path of developing the flamboyant public personality for which he became famous in World War II. Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* was published in London in 1896, and Patton inscribed a ninth edition in July 1915. In the early pages of this book Patton read that individuals act abnormally when in crowds because they get a feeling of invincible power, they are subject to the contagion of a collective will over the individual will, and they lose their inhibitions before the suggestions of a few leaders with hypnotic messages. Lieutenant Patton wrote in the margin of page 35, “The will to victory thus affects soldiers. It must be inculcated. G.”

At the end of the first chapter Patton scribbled, “The individual [leader] may dream greatly or otherwise, but he must infect the crowd with the idea [in order] to carry it out.” On page 57 he put three sidelines opposite these words: “Given to exaggeration in its feelings, a crowd is only impressed by excessive sentiments. An orator wishing to move a crowd must make an abusive use of violent affirmations. To exaggerate, to affirm, to resort to repetitions, and never to attempt to prove anything by reasoning are methods of argument well known to speakers at public meetings.” Echoes of this advice were to appear in the Patton oratory in years to come.

In the same work, three sidelines also appeared next to: “Crowds exhibit a docile respect for force, and are but slightly impressed by kindness, which for them is scarcely other than a form of weakness. Their sympathies have never been bestowed on easygoing masters, but on tyrants who vigorously oppressed them.” While Patton could not be accused of being an easygoing master in his speeches as a senior officer, he drew respect for his forceful manner of demanding discipline and hard training. As for his spectacular uniforms whenever addressing large crowds, Patton wrote in the margin of page 84 of Le Bon: “Advantage of a peculiar dress.”

On Courage and Fear, Déjà Vu and Memory

Let us jump ahead now to 1918. Having been treated for his leg and buttock wounds, Patton left the hospital in France and wrote his father: “An officer is paid to attack, not direct after the battle starts. You know I have always feared I was a coward at heart but I am beginning to doubt it. Our education is at fault in picturing death as such a terrible thing. It is nothing and very easy to get. That does not mean I hunt for it but the fear of it does not—at least has not—deterred me from doing what appeared to be my duty.” After he returned home he wrote a poem entitled “Fear,” which Beatrice labeled “one of my favorites.”

FEAR

I am that dreadful, blighting thing,
Like ratholes to the flood,
Like rust that gnaws the faultless blade,
Like microbes to the blood.

I know no mercy and no truth,
The young I blight, the old I slay.
Regret stalks darkly in my wake,
And ignominy dogs my way.

Sometimes, in virtuous garb I rove,
With facile talk of easier way;
Seducing where I dare not rape
Young manhood, from its honor's way.

Again, in awesome guise I rush,
Stupendous, through the ranks of war,
Turning to water, with my gaze,
Hearts that, before, no foe could awe.

The maiden, who has strayed from right,
To me must pay the mead of shame.
The patriot who betrays his trust,
To me must own his tarnished name.

I spare no class, nor cult nor creed,
My course is endless through the year,
I bow all heads and break all hearts,
All owe me homage—I am FEAR.

G. 26 Apr. '20.

Patton's focus on the control of fear dictated his views about officer training. After the war, when he learned that Army Chief of Staff General Peyton C. March wanted to reduce the West Point course to three years in order to graduate more classes, Patton wrote his former commander John J. Pershing: "What West Point makes is a soul. We the graduates are efficient because we can't help it. We don't run away because we are a lot more afraid of our conscience than we are of the enemy. The soul cannot be built in one or two years. It would be better to have several West Points."

Patton typed on a note card:

Japan and Germany and to a large degree England only give commissions to gentlemen. Washington is reported to have said that only gentlemen should have commissions. The idea in all this is to give command to a class who have a tradition to live up to, that which is stronger than the fear of death. In our country for obvious reasons we cannot so discriminate. Hence we must evolve in one lifetime a tradition which shall be stronger than fear or fatigue.

All officers should go through West Point or new West Points. We have many splendid officers who have not done so; this does not affect the issue. We want a higher average, not splendid individuals. Cadets at such institutions should be lectured on the traditions of the service. They should be made to memorize and recite on the many citations for courage in our army. By constant reiteration they should be taught that the sole purpose of an officer is to serve his country; if such service requires death, it is but a great chance for immortality. . . . [They should know of] the deathless deeds of the great who have passed to Valhalla, which is death but not oblivion.

Valhalla? The word appears in the Patton correspondence when Cadet Patton wrote his father in June 1905 of his unhappiness at losing a hurdles race. Papa answered back,

The real victor is he who strives bravely and deserves to win. There is even a sort of glory that crowns defeat—when it comes from no fault of the contestant . . . you remember when we first read Kipling's poem "The Destroyers"—there was a line we could not understand—"The choosers of the slain." Well the other night I was reading one of Carlyle's essays—and he explained the meaning of the term—It seems that in the Norse mythology—that of our ancestors the Vikings—the warriors who died in battle were accounted the real heroes—above those who survived—and before every battle the Valkyrie—or Valkyrs chose those who were adjudged worthy of death—& entrance into Valhalla—and these Valkyrs were thus called the "choosers of the slain," as the slain were called and esteemed "The Chosen." So in all of life's battles you can find the real heroes among the apparently defeated.

The legend further described how the warriors continue to train in Valhalla to fight for the god Oden in the coming battle with the giants.

Sometime before World War I, Patton began to wed this idea of warrior immortality to the concept that occasionally the warrior would leave Valhalla to return to earth and fight in selected battles in mankind's history. In a 1917 poem, "Memories Roused by a Roman Theater," he portrayed himself sitting in a tank in the Roman ruins at Langres, France. He wrote, "More than once I have seen these walls . . . now again I am here for war/ Where as Roman and knight I have been/ Again I practice to fight the Hun/ And attack him by machine."

It is difficult to find Patton's belief in reincarnation in his prose writings or lectures, but one poem indicates the range and depth of this feeling. "Through a Glass Darkly" (see next page) was composed in 1922 when he was at Fort Myer, Virginia; the title was taken from the Bible's First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians (13.11). In this poem Patton wrote that he may have initiated his many lives as a caveman hunting for meat, and he may have been a soldier who stabbed Christ on the cross. He fought alongside Alexander at Tyre, the Greeks, and the Roman legionnaires. He was once a pirate, a cavalryman with

THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

Through the travail of the ages,
Midst the pomp and toil of war
Have I fought and strove and perished
Countless times upon this star.

In the forms of many peoples
In all panoplies of time
Have I seen the luring vision
Of the victory Maid, sublime.

I have battled for fresh mammoth
I have warred for pastures new,
I have listened to the whispers³
When the race trek instinct grew.⁴

I have known the call to battle
In each changeless changing shape
From the high souled voice of conscience
To the beastly lust for rape.

I have sinned and I have suffered,
Played the hero and the knave;
Fought for belly, shame or country
And for each have found a grave.

I cannot name my battles
For the visions are not clear,
Yet I see the twisted faces
And I feel the rending spear.

Perhaps I stabbed our Savior
In His sacred helpless side.
Yet I've called His name in blessing
When in after times I died.

In the dimness of the shadows
Where we hairy heathens warred,
I can taste in thought the life blood—
We used teeth before the sword.

While in later clearer vision
I can sense the coppery sweat
Feel the pikes grow wet and slippery
When our phalanx Cyrus met.

Hear the rattle on the harness
Where the Persian darts bounced clear,
See their chariots wheel in panic
From the hoplites leveled spear.

See the goal grow monthly longer,
Reaching for the walls of Tyre.
Hear the crash of tons of granite,
Smell the quenchless eastern fire.

Still more clearly as a Roman,
Can I see the legion close,
As our third rank moved in forward
And the short sword found our foes.

Once again I feel the anguish
Of that blistering treeless plain
When the Parthan showered death bolts,
And our discipline was vain.

I remember all the suffering
Of those arrows in my neck.
Yet I stabbed a grinning savage
As I died upon my back.

Once again I smell the heat sparks
When my Flemish plate gave way
And the lance ripped through my entrails
As on Crecy's field I lay.

In the windless blinding stillness
Of the glittering tropic sea
I can see the bubbles rising
Where we set the captives free.

Midst the spume of half a tempest
I have heard the bulwarks go
When the crashing, point-blank round shot
Sent destruction to our foe.

I have fought with gun and cutlass
On the red and slippery deck
With all Hell aflame within me
And a rope around my neck.

And still later as a general
Have I galloped with Murat
When we laughed at death and numbers
Trusting in the Emperor's star.

Till at last our star had faded,
And we shouted to our doom
Where the sunken road of Ohein
Closed us in its quivering gloom.

So but now with tanks a clatter
Have I waddled on the foe
Belching death at twenty paces,
By the starshell's ghastly glow.

So as through a glass and darkly
The age long strife I see
Where I fought in many guises,
Many names—but always me.

And I see not in my blindness
What the objects were I wrought.
But as God rules o'er our bickerings
It was through His will I fought.

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

G. S. P.
May 27, 1922

Napoleon, and finally a tanker in the Great War. He always suffered horrible deaths. God determined when he should return and fight again. All of this, then, is behind Patton's near mystical conception of the warrior soul or warrior spirit that he referred to in so many of his speeches and writings. Few in his audience may have realized how much these simple terms were bound to concepts of eternity and reincarnation in his complex mind. But these ideas were undoubtedly the means by which he controlled his fear in battle.

In August 1990, Ruth Ellen Patton Totten, the second daughter of G.S.P., Jr., retold this story. She was a youngster when the family drove from Washington to visit one of the Civil War battlefields, taking along military attaché Friedrich von Boetticher in the full regalia of a German army officer. As usual the family was deployed to represent key figures in the battle ("mother always had to play the North"). Major Patton said he would play General Jubal Early and therefore would be located "right here" on the map. Von Boetticher protested that his book indicated that Early was located "over there." As the argument went on, a very old man in muttonchop whiskers hobbled up and listened; they thought he was attracted by the German uniform. But in time he said very firmly, "The major is right. General Early was right here. I was at this battle as a boy." Patton looked at the German and said, "Yes. I was here too." Von Boetticher changed Early's location on his map and the play continued.

Ruth Ellen recalled other instances when her father told of his experiences with déjà vu, often in after-dinner talk around the dining table in the 1920s and 30s. One was his "memory" of being carried on a shield by four Vikings. Asked why there were no books on reincarnation or Buddhism in the Patton library that had been accumulated over decades, she replied that her father's "I was there" was born into him, not induced by listening or reading, although those activities might have provided some rationale for what was innate. When asked to recall her father's earliest experiences with déjà vu, she told of the night when her father recalled "playing war" in California with his boyhood cousins, the Browns. He loaded them in a wagon, had them cover themselves with their barrelhead shields, and told them to fire arrows out between the shields when they reached the enemy. Then he pushed the wagon off the brow of the hill and it hurtled its way down and through a flock of turkeys at the bottom. The Pattons would eat turkey for days. Asked how he got the crazy idea, Georgie said that in Bohemia centuries ago, John-the-Blind had done just that and won a great victory. Where had he heard about this? "Oh," he told them, "I was there." As Major Patton elaborated the story, the wagon in Bohemia was the first instrument of modern armored warfare.

The sessions around the dining table often included recitations of poetry that Major Patton had required the children to memorize. Ruth Ellen gave an example, starting with the first stanza of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The *Revenge: A Ballad of the Fleet*":

At Flores in the Azores Sir Richard
 Grenville lay,
 And a pinnacle, like a fluttered bird,
 came flying from far away:
 "Spanish ships of war at sea! we have
 sighted fifty-three!"
 Then swore Lord Thomas Howard:
 "Fore God I am no coward;
 But I cannot meet them here, for my
 ships are out of gear,
 And half my men are sick. I must fly,
 but follow quick.
 We are six ships of the line; can we
 fight with fifty-three?"

Her brother George joined her, and together they continued reciting many of the 14 stanzas, telling how Sir Richard attacked the 53 galleons with his *Revenge*: "God of battles, was ever a battle like this in the world before?/For he said 'Fight on! Fight on!'/Though his vessel was all but a wreck." The poem concluded: "And the little *Revenge* herself went down by the island crags/To be lost evermore in the main."

Ruth Ellen suggested that the Patton family's ability to remember that which had been learned in youth was more than just a matter of training. She found the funeral eulogy of a Patton killed in the Civil War which noted particularly the man's prodigious memory. She also set about to type four pages of her father's favorite poems and sayings as she remembered them generations later. One was Sir Edwin Arnold's "After Death," taken from his translation from the Arabic of the 1883 *Pearls of the Faith*. Ruth Ellen noted, "When our grandfather died GSPJr. made my sister Bea and me memorize this poem." In it, the everlasting soul announces from afar that the temporary body has been abandoned but that the separation from those left behind will not be long. This may be one of the few indications of the effect of oriental religion on Patton's thinking and probably derived from his father's vast reading. Most remarkable was Ruth Ellen's losing only a few words and lines from her memory of the poem some 60 years later.

She also typed out a fragment of an ode that had been a Patton favorite. Again, the theme was the everlasting soul; it was the fifth stanza of William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," written between 1803 and 1806, and called by Ralph Waldo Emerson "the high water mark reached by intellect in this age." Ruth Ellen's memory of this was without flaw, except for reciting "his vision" rather than "the vision" in the 16th line.

Another Patton favorite was from *The Iliad*, Achilles' prayer at Troy, probably translated for him from the Greek by Papa. As Ruth Ellen remembered it: "O Father Zeus, save us from this fog and give us a clear sky so that

we can use our eyes. Kill us in daylight if you must.” She also recalled this snippet from *The Island Race* by Sir Henry Newbolt:

To set the cause above renown,
To love the game beyond the prize,
To honor, while you strike him down,
The foe that comes with fearless eyes;
To count the life of battle good
And dear the land that gave you birth,
And dearer yet, the brotherhood
That binds the brave to all the earth.

Patton later finished his career praying to his God for better weather in which to fight the enemy he honored.

Ruth Ellen also remembered her father’s love for a prayer from Socrates: “All-knowing Zeus, give me what is best for me. Avert evil from me though it be the thing I prayed for; and give me the good, for which, from ignorance, I did not ask.”

The life of the mind that Patton took into his career and eventually passed on to his children was spawned in the house of his childhood, Lake Vineyard, near San Gabriel in California. It meant that once his formal education was finished he would take up the day-to-day study of an ever-growing personal library, accompanied by a torrent of writing. Both activities closely wove together his beliefs about his everlasting soul and fated destiny with his fixed star of the battle hero and military gentleman. All were necessary to account for the military genius that he became.

Between the wars Patton broadened his reading of the Prussians, to include most of the Great War memoirs of German officers such as Hindenburg and Falkenhayn, as they became available in English. In 1930 he wrote into Lieutenant Ernst Jünger’s *Storm of Steel*, “A fine account of a fighting man with none of the usual moral bunk to detract from its stark manhood and grim virtues.” In 1930 he also mined General von Seeckt’s *Thoughts of a Soldier*, as he had *Ludendorff’s Own Story*, on how the Germans organized their staffs. When Von Seeckt wrote that the commander “must leave the wearisome daily routine to the Chief of Staff in order to keep his own mind fresh and free for great decisions,” Patton wrote “Bull” in the margin. But when Von Seeckt wrote that if the Chief of Staff disagrees with his commander on an important decision, he must resign his position, Patton underlined it in red. One of the marks of Patton’s military genius in World War II was his staff’s handling of intelligence, planning, operations, and logistics—these were officers trained and orchestrated by Patton.

Why was Patton so intent on reading anything in English by or about the Germans? His nephew Frederick Ayer, Jr., suggested two connections in his *Before the Colors Fade*, published in 1964. He wrote that as a boy he had

received a photograph from Uncle George from Hawaii, with this note: "This is my war face which I have been practicing before a mirror all my life. I am going to use it again to scare hell out of the Germans." Ayer added that Uncle George felt strongly "that we had left things unbalanced by Versailles, that disarmament was dangerous, and that certainly there would be another war."

Ayer also reported a second connection between Patton and the German military philosophers of war. As a lieutenant colonel in charge of Federal Bureau of Investigation personnel in the European theater in World War II, he had visited his Uncle George in his Third Army headquarters in Nancy, France, in September 1944. He later reconstructed Patton's talk to staff members in this manner:

I have studied the German all my life. I have read the memoirs of his generals and political leaders. I have even read his philosophers and listened to his music. I have studied in detail the accounts of every damned one of his battles. I know exactly how he will react under any given set of circumstances. He hasn't the slightest idea what I'm going to do. Therefore, when the day comes, I'm going to whip hell out of him.

The Bellicose Warrior as Cultured Man of Learning

Warrior Patton was at his most bellicose when he extolled man's participating in war as an edifying experience that brought out the best in man's nature—sacrifice, loyalty, a hope for immortality. In a speech to Seventh Army troops before the invasion of Sicily he said, "Battle is the most magnificent competition in which a human being can engage. . . . It brings out all that is best; it removes all that is base." Much of this came from his reading of John Ruskin's *The Crown of Wild Olive*, a gift from Beatrice in 1909.

When he said that he had a love for war he knew he was reciting the words of past warriors, including Robert E. Lee, who had said, "It is well that war is so terrible—we would grow too fond of it." Patton sensed in World War I what other soldiers sensed—the awe of the spectacle of war, of being present at world-shaking events, and of the binding camaraderie that was the wartime experience of countless soldiers throughout the centuries. It became the most important activity of their lives. He knew it was also present in the soldiers of World War II, as later described by J. Glenn Gray in *The Warriors*.

Patton was thus a bellicose man who trained himself to meet the needs of the bellicose times in which he lived. Those who later interpreted him as a medieval knight, hopelessly out of date in the 20th century, should pause to reflect on his effectiveness in the century of total warfare. They should investigate the sources of his popularity among vast populations just as bellicose as he in the middle and late 20th century.

What the public did not see was his quiet commentary opposing the bombing of population centers. In his "Account of Capture of Palermo" he



General Patton during a visit to Stockholm in November 1945, a few weeks before his death.

wrote, "I called off the air bombardment and naval bombardment which we had arranged, because I felt enough people had been killed, and felt that with the drive of the 2d Armored Division we could take the place without inflicting unproductive losses on the enemy." In his diary he wrote of Messina, "The town is horribly destroyed—the worst I have seen. . . . I do not believe that this indiscriminate bombing of towns is worth the ammunition, and it is unnecessarily cruel to civilians." Patton could have read many of these same words in the several biographies of the Duke of Wellington in his library. On 8 August 1944 he wrote Beatrice that he had regrettably had to order the destruction of St. Malo in Brittany: "I hate to do it, but war is war. Usually I have not bombed cities."

In early April 1945, Patton accompanied Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy on a drive through Frankfurt, which was in ruins. He later wrote in his diary that he had

called Mr. McCloy's attention to the wanton and unnecessary bombing of civilian cities. He agreed with me and later stated that he had mentioned this to Generals Devers and Patch, who had the same opinion. We all feel that indiscriminate bombing has no military value and is cruel and wasteful, and that all

such efforts should always be on purely military targets and on selected commodities which are scarce. In the case of Germany it would be oil.

He added on 9 April, "McCloy . . . said he intended to make a public statement to the effect that I am not only a great military commander but probably the best instructor general in the army. He said that there had been efforts to make it appear that I could do nothing but attack in a heedless manner." Patton's zealous pursuit of continuous attack and destruction of enemy forces obscured his belief in the proper limits of military power—a belief that had its roots in the moral precepts of the prewar officer corps.

Patton died of injuries from an automobile accident on 21 December 1945 and was buried with his soldiers at Hamm, Luxembourg. A half century later civil society remains beset by violence, whether in the streets or in the arts. War rages constantly, despite the nuclear umbrella, among countless factions across the planet's surface.

Patton's expertise lay in his effective use of military force to stop fighting as quickly as possible. The Patton mind also placed limits on the amount of violence to be visited on the innocent bystander. One would be greatly challenged to name world leaders today possessing Patton's rich blend of cultural sensitivity and insight. Far from being an anachronism in the 20th century, Patton brought the trained, cultured mind to the scene of man's catastrophe called World War II—no role could have been more timely or appropriate.

Whence Patton's military genius? Perhaps the surprisingly unconventional source was best suggested in a brief story told in 1990 by General John R. Galvin, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. A few years earlier, General Galvin had paused in a medieval church in Bad Wimpfen, Germany, one that had survived almost intact the World War II destruction. An old churchman came to him and remarked that, as a young priest, he had found General Patton standing in the same place in 1945. Then he added that Patton was doing a most unusual thing for a man of such a martial reputation. He had a notebook and pencil, and he was sketching the stained glass windows.

NOTES

1. The present article was adapted from Colonel Nye's book *The Patton Mind: The Professional Development of an Extraordinary Leader*, forthcoming. The work is based on some 400 annotated books from the personal holdings of General George S. Patton, Jr., most of which have been donated to West Point by his son Major General George S. Patton, USA Ret. Colonel Nye has also drawn extensively from Martin Blumenson's *The Patton Papers*, the Patton collection in the Library of Congress, and Nye's own book *The Challenge of Command* (Avery, 1986). A version of the present article appeared in the Friends of the West Point Library newsletter in March 1991 under the title "Why Patton?"

2. In all quotations from Patton's writings in this article, spelling has been silently corrected and punctuation has been added on occasion for clarity.

3. In Patton's original, the verb was "listed."

4. In the original, the spelling is "race treck," emended here to read "race trek," meaning presumably a racial migration. Conceivably, Patton could have intended "race track."