

General George Smith Patton

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INTRODUCTION

Noted by the German High Command as the “most modern general” and the “best commander of armored and infantry troops,” General George Smith Patton Jr. was widely known for commanding the Seventh United States Army and the Third United States Army. The first officer assigned to the Tank Corps in World War I (WWI), Patton and his army liberated France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Bavaria, Austria and Czechoslovakia.¹

EARLY LIFE

George Smith Patton Jr. was born on 11 November 1885 in San Gabriel, California.² He suffered from dyslexia as a child, thus his parents tutored him until he was 11 years old.³ His family background contained many ancestors who had fought in the Revolutionary War, the Mexican War and the Civil War.⁴ He was determined to follow in his their footsteps, attending the Virginia Military Institute in 1904 after high school and then the United States (US) Military Academy at West Point, graduating on 11 June 1909.⁵ He received a commission in the 15th Cavalry Regiment.⁶ In 1910, Patton married his childhood friend Beatrice Ayer.⁷

Patton participated in the first ever modern pentathlon at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics.⁸ He managed to achieve third place in the footrace and fourth place in fencing, skills which allowed him to be selected for the pentathlon,

placing him overall fifth and also the top non-Swedish finisher.⁹ Patton then headed to Saumur, France and improved his fencing techniques under the guidance of a French “master of arms,” Adjutant Charles Clery.¹⁰ With his newly gained knowledge, he designed a new sword, the Model 1913 Cavalry Saber, and redesigned saber combat doctrine for the US Cavalry.¹¹ He became the first Army officer to receive the title “Master of the Sword” for being the top instructor in the school where he was both a student and a teacher, the Mounted Service School in Kansas.¹²

Patton graduated in June 1915. His next task was to follow the 15th Cavalry to the Philippines, however he believed it would stifle his career, hence he went to Washington, D.C. and persuaded influential friends to reassign him to the 8th Cavalry at Fort Bliss, Texas, predicting that the instability in Mexico would lead to a civil war.¹³ Patton was chosen for the 1916 Summer Olympics, but it was cancelled due to WWI.¹⁴

With the 8th Cavalry based in Sierra Blanca, Patton decided to wear his Colt .45 pistol in his belt instead of a holster. Suffering an accidental discharge one night in a saloon, he changed it to a Single Action Army revolver with an ivory handle.¹⁵

In his interview to aid expedition commander General John J. Pershing, he was asked,

"many other boys want to go. Why should I choose you?" Patton's response was "Because I'm better than those other boys."¹⁶ With the 13th Calvary Regiment, Patton helped in the hunt for Pancho Villa and his men. His first combat experience was on 14 May 1916. He and his team caught Villa's men off guard during a foraging expedition, killing Julio Cardenas and two of his guards.¹⁷ Patton gained Pershing's appreciation and became known to the media as a "bandit killer."¹⁸ He was promoted to first lieutenant on 23 May 1916,¹⁹ and stayed in Mexico for the year, returning permanently in February 1917.²⁰

WORLD WAR I

At onset of WWI, Pershing became commander of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) and Patton was able to join him in Europe with a promotion to captain.²¹ Patton took charge of supervising the American soldiers in Paris until September where he was assigned as post adjutant in headquarters.²²

Patton's interest in tanks led to him being tasked to form the AEF Light Tank School in November 1917.²³ He went to the French Army's tank training school at Champlieu near Orrouy, where he took the Renault FT *char d'assaut* light tank for a test run.²⁴ While there, Patton also invested time to understand the manufacturing of

tanks in a Renault factory. He took in the first ten tanks at the Tank School at Langres, Haute-Marne department, driving seven of the ten out of the train.²⁵ In 1918 Patton was promoted to major early in January and lieutenant colonel in April, attending the course in the Army General Staff College in Langres.²⁶

Patton was tasked the logistics of US First Provisional Tank Brigade in August 1918, that being part of Colonel Samuel Rockenbach's Tank Corps of the First United States Army.²⁷ He also commanded the FT tanks at the Battle of Saint-Mihiel on 12 September 1918, leading from the front for most of their advance. Patton walked ahead of the tanks into Essey village while it was still under German control, and rode on top of the tank during the advance into Pannes in hopes of inspiring his men.²⁸

The tank brigade was shifted to support the Meuse-Argonne Offensive on 26 September 1918, personally led by Patton in bad visibility as they went 5 miles into German lines.²⁹ He was injured in the left thigh while leading an attack near the town of Cheppy,³⁰ saved by Private First Class Joe Angelo, who was later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.³¹ While recovering, Patton was promoted to colonel in the Tank Corps of the US National Army and awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Distinguished Service Medal

and later the Purple Heart after it was created in 1932.³²

WORLD WAR II

By 1938, Patton was promoted to colonel in the regular Army, eligible for command of a regiment.³³ The US military was mobilised after the outbreak of World War II (WWII), and he did his part as an umpire in maneuvers in 1940 until he met Adna R. Chafee, Jr., where they discussed the formation of an armored force.³⁴ Chafee became commander of the force and formed the US First Armored Division, US Second Armored Division and the first combined arms doctrine.³⁵ Patton became commander in charge of training for the Second Armored Brigade, Second Armored Division.³⁶ Patton was promoted to brigadier general on 2 October 1940, major general on 4 April 1941 and made division commander of the Second Armored Division.³⁷ Becoming the most prominent figure in US armor doctrine by staging a mass exercise in December 1940, he also qualified for a pilot's license in order to oversee vehicle movement with a bird's eye view.³⁸

In 1943, Patton used commendable offensive and defensive strategy to lead the Seventh US Army to victory during the invasion of Sicily.³⁹ On D-Day in 1944, after Normandy was invaded, President Eisenhower granted him command of the Third US Army.⁴⁰ Patton's natural predisposition for offensive advancement was characterized

in a 1944 press conference, where he responded to a question on whether the Third Army's rapid offensive across France should be slowed to reduce the number of US casualties. His reply was "whenever you slow anything down, you waste human lives."⁴¹ He gained nicknames such as "Old Blood and Guts" and "The Old Man."⁴²

In 1945, Patton's Third army were able to cross the Rhine and attack the heart of Germany, gaining 10,000 miles of enemy territory in the span of ten days, liberating Germany from the Nazis.⁴³ Appalled at the Holocaust, Patton personally made German civilians and troops visit concentration camps such as Buchenwald.⁴⁴

POSTWAR

Patton returned to the US in glory. However in a fatal motor accident near Mannheim, Germany, he fractured his neck on 9 December 1945 and died at the hospital in Heidelberg 12 days later.⁴⁵

Although possessing great personality, motivational leadership and success as a commander, Patton had made diplomatic missteps, creating a controversial image. A key aspect of his ability to inspire his troops was through his verbal skills.⁴⁶ Historian Terry Brighton concluded that Patton was "arrogant, publicity-seeking and personally flawed, but ... among the greatest generals of the war."⁴⁷ His cultivated image of a highly

polished helmet, riding pants, high cavalry boots and a flashy ivory-handled Smith & Wesson Model 27 .357 Magnum was a deliberate one, aimed at inspiring his troops with his personality and charisma.⁴⁸ 🌐

ENDNOTES

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