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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people over the years have expressed an interest in this project. I am fairly certain this reflects interest in the subject rather than my skill as a writer. A common question I have gotten is do I want to write screenplays. Having watched this process and studied a really good script, I have no doubt I could write in this venue. It would be an interesting challenge, but I was struck during my research at the similarities between book publishing and filmmaking. Historians do not use every document available to them. They cannot tell their readers everything that happened; they must be selective. This situation was the same in the making of Patton. The film was a fictional representation of two and a half years of George S. Patton Jr.’s life. The film could not and did not cover everything. Patton was innovative, and history also requires creativity. I will readily admit that originality of thought is a skill that one is far more likely to find in a screenwriter rather than a historian, but students of the past are well served in having that skill.

It is clear that filmmaking is a collaborative medium. So is book writing. That was one of the biggest surprises I learned in getting published. A good writer—and I try to be one—realizes this fact and uses it to advantage. As a result, they accumulate a lot of debts, and this is an opportunity to acknowledge those obligations. If the reader finds this book at all entertaining, it is because a number of people helped me along the way. The author’s name might go on the dust jacket, but others have input as well.

This book began by accident, but the seed was planted long ago. In 1995, I saw Carlo D’Este on the C-Span program Booknotes talking about his new book Patton: A Genius for War. I even accidentally happened to be at a book signing that he did at Borders bookstore near the Pentagon. I was a poor grad student at the time, busy writing my dissertation. I did not have the money to buy the book or the time to read it, but it intrigued me. I eventually bought a copy for my brother as a Christmas gift, and then, after listening to him talk about the book, I bought a copy for myself. There were several references to the film in the biography, and D’Este cited the papers of Frank McCarthy, the producer of the film Patton, which were at the Virginia Military Institute. I thought there might be an interesting article about the film and its historical accuracy.
I did nothing with that idea until 2000. That year I was busy doing research for a book on the end of World War II in the Pacific. It was published in 2009 as *Allies against the Rising Sun: The British Nations, the United States, and the Defeat of Imperial Japan*—buy a copy, it is brilliant! Work on that project took me to VMI to examine the papers of General of the Army George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff, U.S. Army. During a lull, I asked to look at the Frank McCarthy papers. I knew that McCarthy had been the producer of *MacArthur*, and I was looking for documents on that movie for a conference paper I was writing on film and the Korean War. I did not find the material I was looking for until I returned on another trip in 2010, but I found a treasure trove about Patton. I was amazed at what was in front of me, and I quickly decided to write an article on the making of that film. A one-day trip became a two-day trip became a three-day trip.

By the time I left, my project had grown from one to two articles, then finally a book project. I figured I had enough to write a book, but I visited Lexington three more times. Each visit was more enjoyable and profitable than the last.

Needless to say, I am grateful to D’Este for his Patton biography. I recommend that anyone interested in becoming a biographer read *Genius for War* to understand this art form. After finishing the book, I felt like I had actually met George S. Patton Jr. A year later, I stumbled upon D’Este when we were both at the U.S. Army Military History Institute in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and had an opportunity to thank him in person. Eight years later, in 2009, I was in California visiting my mother’s brother, Colonel David E. Thompson. At dinner, my uncle started a conversation about military history. He said there was a historian that he liked and the two had grown up together in Berkeley, California. There was an eight-year age difference between the two, so they had not been all that close. My uncle was eighteen and going off to college when he last saw this future historian. The next time he saw him was in Vietnam, when this neighbor from California jumped into his helicopter. Had I read anything, my uncle asked, by Carlo D’Este?

The world is a small place sometimes.

I am also indebted to Frank McCarthy. This book, and the quality of the research that has gone into it, was made possible because McCarthy saved almost every scrap of paper associated with the making of *Patton*. Despite Hollywood’s relative youth, the film industry has done—and continues to do—a horrible job of preserving its history. Studios are good about saving
the things that matter to them, like physical artifacts—props, costumes, and sets—but not the less-than-sexy written records that explain how decisions are made. McCarthy saved these documents—letters, telegrams, memos, focus group reports, film treatments, scripts—and they discussed all sorts of issues like casting, marketing, dramatic structure, public sentiment, and popular opinion. His material also included other items like oral histories, reviews from media outlets in every part of the country, and correspondence from people, be they influential or average. I also want to thank film historian Lawrence H. Suid for depositing his research files at Georgetown University. This material proved useful for reconstructing early efforts to make the film.

Research at other institutions proved useful. The McCarthy papers collection is so extensive that much of what it contains I had already seen at VMI, but while this collection is both deep and broad, no collection can ever have everything. I thank Christopher Raab, the archives and special collections librarian at Franklin & Marshall College, for his help in gaining access to material in the papers of Franklin Schaffner, the director of Patton, particularly audio recordings that were available only in antiquated media formats. May Haduong, public access coordinator of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Film Archive, was helpful in giving me access to the Pickford Center for Motion Picture Study. While there, I was able to watch a recording of the Oscar ceremonies for 1971. Watching the video was extremely useful in reconstructing that evening’s events.

I even had an opportunity to help other scholars. While at VMI, I found a letter that Ronald Reagan wrote McCarthy in which the governor of California discussed the film. I gave a copy of this letter to Martin Anderson, who was editing a volume of the former president’s letters. Anderson was acting in the role of historian as detective. He had found many letters that Reagan sent to people for which there was no copy in the Reagan Presidential Library. When I mentioned this letter to him while we were at the annual conference of the Organization of American History, he told me he wanted a copy. I got the document to him, and it ended up in Reagan: A Life in Letters. The letter also ended up being reproduced in full in the September 29, 2003, issue of Time magazine.

During the writing of this book, I had the opportunity to give several talks about Patton. At a research-in-progress seminar, the chair of my department, John Maurer, asked a particularly useful question about the influence of the film on the historical literature that I incorporated into this
account. During this session, I also learned about the consumer price index inflation adjustment website that the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the Department of Labor maintains. Since inflation changes the buying power of money, this website was useful for putting the dollar figures quoted here into context. Maurer also arranged for me to give talks to local civic groups, which was a lot of fun.

I want to thank several people for taking a look at early drafts of this book. They include Michael Creswell of Florida State University, David Kaiser of the Naval War College, and Galen Perras of the University of Ottawa.

My friend Mike Bell has been an important sounding board on this project. We have known each other since we were in the eighth grade and we both worked on the Grisham Grizzly, the school paper at Noel Grisham Middle School in Austin, Texas. Even back then he planned to pursue a career in film. I starred in one of his student films when we were at the University of Texas. Today Mike is a member of the Directors Guild of America and makes a good living in the entertainment industry. Conversations that the two of us have had over the years informed this book even while I was doing the research and writing.

I would also like to thank Frank McAdams of the USC film school for his commentary on earlier drafts of this study. They proved quite useful.

Laptop computers are wonderful because they allow writers to write even when they are traveling. I was really grateful for this tool because I got a chance to write while I was at the Philmont Scout Ranch—a place of special importance to me. I wrote in other places as well, and I hope these changing locales did not diminish the final product.

With all the assistance I have received along the way, whatever defects remain are mine and mine alone. It is an old saying, but it is true.

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ACRONYMS

The following terms and initials appear in the text. Many of them appear in the original documents, and instead of using punctuation that would make for troubling reading, they appear here for reference.

AFI American Film Institute
BEF British Expeditionary Force
CBS Columbia Broadcasting System
CP Command Post
DDE Dwight D. Eisenhower
DOD Department of Defense
DVD Digital video disc
DZ Darryl Zanuck
ESPN Entertainment and Sports Programming Network
G.C.M. George C. Marshall
G.I. Government Issue (nickname for U.S. soldiers)
GSP George S. Patton Jr.
LSU Louisiana State University
M Sir Bernard Montgomery (Viscount Montgomery of El Alamein)
MGM Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
NAACP National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NBC National Broadcasting Company
P George S. Patton Jr.
P The president of the United States
UCLA University of California at Los Angeles
USAA United Services Automobile Association
USAR United States Army Reserve
VC Victoria Cross (highest British military medal)
VCR Videocassette recorder
VMI Virginia Military Institute
Introduction

It was a warm summer's day in Madrid, Spain. The set was simple: a stage that stood in front of a giant but old version of the U.S. flag. (It had forty-eight stars instead of fifty.) The flag was painted on a backdrop. “It was as big as it looked on the screen—enormous,” Fred J. Koenekamp, the director of photography, explained. Two cameras were locked down so the stripes would not produce a strobe effect.

Ten months later, on March 7, 1970, a powerful collection of middle-aged men and women sat in a movie theater to watch the Washington, D.C., premiere of Patton. The audience was full of senators, admirals, and generals, men who had fought under or alongside the real George Smith Patton Jr. in World War II. They wore tuxedos and uniforms, displaying awards for bravery and merit that they had earned in the war and during the semipeace of the Cold War. The cinema went dark, and the huge flag appeared on screen. A voice bellowed, “Ten-hut,” and the audience watched the forty-one-year-old George Campbell Scott walk on to the stage from stairs directly behind the platform. “Reveille” played while Scott saluted. The camera cut in for a series of close-ups on the actor—his hands, his uniform, his helmet.

It was the last day of shooting on the film, and George C. Scott was less than happy. Early in his life, Scott had enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, earning the rank of sergeant. In Spain, though, he was wearing the uniform of an officer, a U.S. Army officer—a general, to be more exact. He was playing the role of Patton, the commanding general of the Third U.S. Army, and he was wearing a uniform that the actual Patton had worn only once. On display were reproductions of the medals—not the ribbons—of awards bestowed on the real Patton.
Scott was unhappy not with the uniform, the role, or even the speech that he was about to deliver, but with where the scene was scheduled to appear in the film. He had balked at using it as an introduction. He thought that it would start the film on such a high emotional level that it would be difficult to maintain. Studio executives, the producer, and the director disagreed and refused to change the film. Scott’s anger and frustration at not getting his way were evident to the crew on the set.

“Be seated,” Scott told the crew, repeating lines that screenwriter Francis Ford Coppola had penned four years before.

“Now, I want you to remember that no bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country. Men, all this stuff you’ve heard about America not wanting to fight, wanting to stay out of the war, is a lot of horse dung. Americans”—with those words, the camera cut into a tighter focus on Scott, giving his words more power—“traditionally, love to fight. All real Americans love the sting of battle.”

The introduction was the work of the film’s screenwriter. “That was all Coppola’s genius,” producer Frank McCarthy observed. According to Coppola, he designed the scene to show Patton’s character. He combined several speeches that Patton actually gave. Coppola also used two other events. The first was an occasion where Patton gave a talk in front of a giant U.S. flag. The second was a private moment when, as a four star general, he posed for a family picture wearing all his decorations and medals. The opening was in many ways a surreal moment in the film. “The idea was to see him at his zenith,” the writer explained, “show him at the very height of his career.”

McCarthy could vividly remember the enthusiasm Coppola showed when he suggested the scene. It was the first idea he brought to the producer. “The very first thing,” he recalled. “The very first day.”

Scott delivered his lines in his distinctive gravelly voice: “When you were kids, you all admired the champion marble shooter, the fastest runner, the big league ball players, the toughest boxers. Americans love a winner and
will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to win all the time. Now, I wouldn’t give a hoot in hell for a man who lost and laughed. That’s why Americans have never lost and will never lose a war. Because the very thought of losing is”—Scott paused briefly, and then said with a slightly slower pace—“hateful to Americans.

“Now, an army is a team. It lives, eats, sleeps, fights as a team. This individuality stuff is a bunch of crap. The bilious bastards who wrote that stuff about individuality for the Saturday Evening Post don’t know anything more about real battle than they do about fornicating.

“Now, we have the finest food and equipment, the best spirit, and the best men in the world. You know . . .” Director Franklin Schaffner then cut to a tighter focus on Scott’s face. The actor was smirking as he delivered his next lines: “. . . by God, I actually pity those poor bastards we’re going up against.” The smirk faded, but a lighthearted lilt entered his voice as his Patton showed a degree of compassion for the enemy. “By God, I do.”

All humor departed as Scott delivered the next lines with a combination of anger and disgust: “We’re not just going to shoot the bastards. We’re going to cut out their living guts and use them to grease the treads of our tanks. We’re going to murder those lousy Hun bastards by the bushel.” The camera cut back to an immediate focus. “Now, some of you boys, I know, are wondering whether or not you’ll chicken out under fire. Don’t worry about it. I can assure you that you will all do your duty.” Volume grew as he delivered the next lines: “The Nazis are the enemy. Wade into them. Spill their blood. Shoot them in the belly.”

The camera returned to a tight focus on the actor’s face and hands, giving more emphasis to the words he was about to deliver: “When you put your hand into a bunch of goo that a moment before was your best friend’s face”—his volume dropped instantly as he gestured with his hands—“you’ll know what to do.”

The emotion of Scott’s delivery ebbed, and he paused for a second. Schaffner cut back to a wide focus to show him pacing back and forth across the stage. “Now there’s another thing I want you to remember. I don’t want to get any messages saying that we are holding our position. We’re not holding anything. Let the Hun do that. We are advancing constantly and we’re not interested in holding onto anything . . .” Schaffner returned to a closer focus on Scott and the actor delivered his next lines with emotional force that grew with each word: “. . . except the enemy. We’re going to hold onto him by the nose, and we’re gonna kick him in
the ass. We’re gonna kick the hell out of him all the time, and we’re gonna go through him like crap through a goose!”

Scott paused again, and Schaffner moved to a tighter focus. “Now, there’s one thing that you men will be able to say when you get back home, and you may thank God for it. Thirty years from now when you’re sitting around your fireside with your grandson on your knee, and he asks you, ‘What did you do in the great World War II?’—You won’t have to say, ‘Well,’ he said with a sigh, ‘I shoveled shit in Louisiana.’”

In the tightest focus of the monologue, Scott said, his voice growing softer and softer, “All right now, you sons of bitches, you know how I feel.” The cinematic general glanced down for a brief moment, which emphasized the vulnerability and sincerity of his next words: “Oh, I will be proud to lead you wonderful guys into battle anytime.” He paused, and then added, “anywhere.”

He paused again, began turning, and said, “That’s all.”

The screen went black after Scott walked back down the steps. The audience in Washington broke out into applause. After five years of a confusing conflict in Southeast Asia, after years of social turmoil, after the public questioning of their leadership, here was a reminder of what made these generals, admirals, and politicians great. It felt good. The applause in the room was thunderous.

Those who knew the actual general had different reactions to this scene. “After the first sentences, I knew what was coming. I had heard that speech before,” Edwin H. Randle observed. A retired brigadier general himself, he had seen Patton deliver those remarks to the combat team that Randle commanded. The real speech, he reflected, was bloodier.

Omar Bradley, on the other hand, said his former colleague’s words were “never quite so dramatic as the galvanizing opening scene.” The language he used was more foul and “would not be suitable for a family film.”

Back in Spain, Schaffner wanted to shoot the scene from different camera angles. Scott was none too happy about delivering the lines again. He agreed, but he refused to pick it up in the middle. It was the entire scene or
nothing. After Schaffner moved the cameras, Scott began a second time, then a third time after another relocation of the cameras. “He never flubbed once. Never once!” Koenekamp declared. “We were done by the middle of the afternoon. It didn’t even take a full day.”

Coppola was pleased with how his idea had translated to film. “I am very proud that the director, Franklin Schaffner, was to take the screenplay literally in this case, it’s a very unusual scene, it’s a great performance of Mr. Scott, and it was really a very surrealistic idea. I love especially the way the director had his feet actually walk on the bottom of the floor as though we’re looking up at him on a stage before us.”

Schaffner, for his part, knew what he and the rest of the production owed Coppola: “It should go without saying that had it not been for your skilful and inventive work on the screenplay that the project might never have got off the ground.”

Why study this film? The simple answer is that the production and success of this film can tell us many things about American society. In Patton, students of history have before them a useful prism to examine the past, and a good place to start is with the introduction—it captures an interesting contradiction. The film appealed to simple but strong national myths—or perhaps they are better described as ideals—while exposing more complex truths about power. Neither is wrong, and both deserve consideration.

For many—be they the filmmakers or the audience—Patton contained a powerful statement about the importance of self-reliance and the providential mission of the United States, and at the same time it stressed the importance of strong leadership. These notions attracted people regardless of their politics because this fictional representation of a real historical figure spoke to the basic vision most Americans had of their nation and seemed to confirm what they believed about the republic. In examining this period, it is clear that there was little, if any, dreary resignation to a diminished lot in life or cynicism about the workings of power, which many associate with the 1970s.

The introduction captures well the film’s metaphors and the contradiction between complex truths and simple ideas. The words that Scott deliv-
ere—like the words that the real Patton had delivered—discussed the power of the team, but Schaffner’s use of visual imagery stresses the importance of the individual.

At the same time, this film is useful to the students of history as a means to examine the changes that took place in American society in the middle part of the twentieth century. The Japanese film critic Hazumi Tsuneko observed, “To comprehend America, one cannot cast one’s eyes away from American movies.” To Hazumi, Hollywood films reflected a society that blended different peoples and cultures into a democracy. He has a point. Far more people were involved with this film—in its production, or later as members of its audience—than in any of the social or political movements that have garnered attention in the literature of postwar America. In a real sense—to steal a phrase from the era—the whole world really was watching.

There is an important story to be told about this film, which also happens to be a fascinating one. This book is relevant to historians of both mass media and popular culture. As a film history, this book falls into both fields. Studies of film history usually fall into one of three camps. The first is material that entertainment journalists have written. These reporters are excellent at telling stories, but their research often rests on interviews that repeat unsubstantiated stories. The second comes from communication and film schools. The scholars writing these books are mostly interested in explaining what appears on the screen and in using cultural analysis and film theory to explain movies. Discussions of history and biography are normally absent, and clarity of expression often falls victim to cuteness with the tools of punctuation. The third group is made up of a few historians who have offered studies that get behind the production process. It is an exceptionally small group. Despite the importance of the motion pictures in modern American society, historians have largely ignored Hollywood, and for good reason. The film industry does a horrible job of preserving its own history. Studios may hold on to costumes and props for decades, but they show far less interest in organizing or preserving the documentation that historians require to do their jobs.

This book falls into that third category. This study is the product of research in studio archives, the records of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, oral
histories, the personal papers of the director and producer, and a number of films available in various media formats. Websites like Wikipedia and the Internet Movie Data Base have also been useful, offering up interesting facts while being more suspect when it comes to interpretative information. One site that has been used repeatedly is the U.S. Department of Labor’s Consumer Price Index inflation calculator. The adjusted figures appear in parenthesis after the historical figure.  

The purpose of this account is to offer the reader a well-rounded, clear study that explains the origins, production, marketing, reception, and legacy of Patton. What follows is both social and film history.

One last thing is worth noting: ultimately this film was a work of fiction. It should be judged as such, not as a work of nonfiction. As history, it is better than most theatrical films, but it is still rather poor. What is unique about this movie, though, is that given the amount of time that it took to turn the life of George S. Patton Jr. into a theatrical production, the film opens a window onto American society in the postwar era, which allows us to see ourselves as we were and how we wanted to be.
1. The General

Who was George S. Patton Jr.? When most Americans think of the general, the image that immediately comes to mind involve George C. Scott, a forty-one-year-old former Marine with a gravely voice, rather than the sixty-year-old general who spoke with a thin voice and a slight Southern accent. As a result, any study of the film bearing his name should take a moment to consider the real individual. The real Patton was a diligent military professional. His success—which was legendary—was no accident. Patton worked hard at his profession and had real intellectual gifts and leadership skills. He was no rebel against the system. The man behind the legend was an exceptionally interesting individual, and it was his larger-than-life personality that attracted filmmakers to the Patton project in the first place.

Despite his many intellectual abilities, Patton was dyslexic. Like many others with this learning disability, he saw words and letters backward, a problem that complicated his academic progress. His slowness in completing his education often obscured his intellect. One of his biographers remains skeptical, arguing that Patton’s scholastic problems resulted from laziness. ¹

There is, however, little doubt about his religious nature even if it was at odds with itself. Wounded in World War I, he contemplated the meaning of Scripture, convinced he was dying—which was almost the case. At the same time, he believed in reincarnation. In his first life, Patton was convinced that he had been a cave dweller who hunted for mammoth. Then he was at Troy, where he died in combat. Patton returned as a Greek hoplite and fought against the Persian emperor Cyrus’s invasion. He was also a Carthaginian soldier in the second century B.C. Mortal again a century later, he served as a Roman soldier in Gaius Julius Caesar’s Tenth Legion. Patton waited a millennium before becoming a Viking warrior, and he could recall the stench of Nordic ships. He returned as a Scottish Highlander and fought the desperate cause of the House of Stuart. He could
also recall riding a horse behind Napoleon during the march back from Moscow, his arm numb from the cold. Patton also fought in a New York regiment during the U.S. Civil War. At times, he could accurately take people to Roman ruins that he had never seen before. Patton also believed his ancestors were guiding him and directing him toward his ultimate mission. They, apparently, were not to be reincarnated.

Although Patton’s interest in religion was riddled with contradictions, it was serious. He read the Bhagavad-Gita, the key religious text of the Brahmans of India. While awaiting Operation Torch, he read the Koran to make sure that he and his men did not offend the Moroccans. In 1945, a German priest came upon Patton while the general was visiting a medieval church in Bad Wimpfen am Berg and found that he was sketching the stained-glass windows into a notebook.

Patton was also a living contradiction when it came to his personal behavior. He never made off-color remarks or told dirty stories, but he used profanity on a regular basis to make a point. James H. Polk, who later became a general himself, recalled one incident when they were playing polo at Fort Riley, Kansas. Polk missed a shot and began cursing. Patton rode up to him and said: “Lt. Polk, you will not use profanity on this polo field, but it’s a goddamned shame you can’t hit the ball.”

Patton understood the professional importance the army gave to socializing. During one of his assignments in Washington in the early 1930s, he became friends with Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson. They rode horses together, and the Stimsons attended the debutante party of Patton’s daughter, which was a social success for her parents. Patton, though, could make an odd impression. At one party, he grabbed a wine decanter and told Henry Cabot Lodge Jr.’s wife, “Did you know that a decanter, if properly used can be a lethal weapon? My grandfather killed the governor of the Bahamas with one.”

A study in inconsistencies, Patton knew early on in life that he wanted to be a military professional. The military ran in his blood. He was a direct descendent of Brigadier General Hugh Mercer, who was one of Major General George Washington’s main subordinates. Mercer was killed at the Battle of Princeton during the American Revolution. Another relative, his uncle, Waller Tazewell Patton, died at Gettysburg, fighting for the Confederacy. Patton’s goal was to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, but his dyslexia and poor education made achieving that ambition unrealistic. He enrolled instead at the Virginia
Military Institute. He was in Virginia for two years before he finally won an appointment to West Point. Despite the extra schooling, he still had a difficult time in New York. It took him five years to graduate. When he finally finished with the class of 1909, he entered the cavalry.  

Patton first made a name for himself in the army when he agreed to compete in the modern pentathlon at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics. The pentathlon was a contest that involved mastering a number of semimilitary skills: pistol shooting, fencing, swimming, the steeplechase, and cross-country running. Nervous about competing in the games, Patton did poorly at first, coming in twenty-first out of forty-two in pistol shooting. He recovered his composure and did well in the remaining events, eventually placing a respectable fifth in the overall contest.

Advancement in the U.S. Army during the Progressive Era was slow. Yet Patton stood out. After returning from Sweden, he set out to redesign the cavalry saber. Weight distribution had been a major problem in previous versions of this weapon, a flaw that made it tough to use. The saber was most effective when horse riders hacked at individuals who were standing and lower than them. Patton’s new design had a tapered sharp point, making the weapon an extension of the cavalryman’s arm. It was also lighter and easier to handle. Many in the cavalry branch objected to this new weapon, saying it was a sword rather than a saber. Patton, however, in a series of articles, used military history to argue that the point was more difficult to parry than the edge. The recent experiences of the U.S. Army in fighting the Moros in the Philippines and that of the British Army against the rebellions of the Scottish Highlanders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were perfect examples. The War Department agreed and adopted the Patton design in 1913.

Patton’s achievement was impressive, but the days of the horse soldier were numbered. The young officer quickly proved he could adapt to more modern technology. During the Mexican expedition of 1916–1917, he stood out from the other junior officers. “The most engaging personality of my Mexican service was my tent-mate, George Patton,” Hugh S. Johnson, head of the National Recovery Administration, stated in the mid-1930s when Patton was still an obscure, middle-ranking officer. Patton, according to Johnson, would practice both right- and left-handed trigger pulling with a pistol fitted with a spring and a rod. He also had a bit of the theatrical showman to him. He refused to use automatic weapons and instead carried two pearl-handled .45 revolvers.
It was in Mexico that Patton developed a close relationship with Brigadier General John “Black Jack” Pershing. When the raids of the bandit Pancho Villa finally provoked U.S. intervention in Mexico, Patton was determined to go even though his regiment had not been selected for this deployment. He lobbied friends whom he knew on the general’s staff for recommendations. When Pershing heard of these efforts, he called Patton to see if he was serious. The young lieutenant used that opening to appear at the general’s quarters, telling him he would take any position. The next morning, Pershing called to tell Patton he would be going. Expecting such a call, Patton had already packed his bags and said he was ready to go. Impressed, Pershing later told Patton that his efforts reminded him of the efforts he had had to make to get to the Philippines, and he made the young officer one of his aides-de-camp. Patton biographer Carlo D’Este also notes that the budding relationship with Patton’s sister probably played a role in his selection. The general’s wife and children had died in a fire, and his sorrow was still an open wound when Patton’s sister, Nita, visited her brother at Fort Bliss, Texas. Pershing was instantly captivated, as was she. That this relationship helped her brother there can be little doubt, but George S. Patton Sr., their father, also played a role. The senior Patton was back in California waging a tough and tight race for a seat in the U.S. Senate. Pershing’s previous father-in-law had been a U.S. senator who had helped advance his military career. Pershing knew the importance of having a political patron, and he thought that the elder Patton might fill that role. The relationship Patton had with Pershing was critical in the young officer’s professional development. “Pershing’s influence on young Patton cannot be overemphasized,” D’Este observes. “He was the very model of a military commander, whose ideas of duty and discipline meshed perfectly with Patton’s own conceptions.” While Pershing was mentoring Patton, his relationship with his protégé’s sister was becoming serious. He proposed, and Nita accepted. Despite his close relationship with the general, Patton was less than thrilled that Pershing was about to become his brother-in-law. He wanted to prove himself on his own and did not want others saying he owed his career to nepotism.

The First World War destroyed the romance between Nita and Pershing. The general went off to war, and the relationship never recovered from the separation. Her brother, on the other hand, thrived professionally during the conflict. When Pershing became the commander in chief of
the American Expeditionary Force, he took Captain George Patton with him. In Europe, Patton met a number of important people and made strong impressions on them as well. In one example, Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the commander in chief of the British Expeditionary Force, recorded in his diary after meeting Pershing: “The ADC is a fire eater, and longs for the fray.” Haig’s assessment of Patton was basically correct. The young American wanted to get into the fight and saw a real opportunity with the development of the tank. He had developed the best saber the U.S. Army ever had, but Patton was not attached to the past. He understood the opportunities this new technology offered in both an operational and a professional sense. He saw senior but less capable officers get promoted. Moving into tanks would allow him to set up the training school, which would also make him a likely candidate for assignment as one of the commanding officer of a new tank battalion that the school produced. Using his influence with Pershing, he became the first officer assigned to the U.S. Army Tank Corps. Although he was not the commander, he was a key figure. After consulting with British and French officers, he developed the organization, tactics, equipment, and training to be used in combat. It was testimony to his genius that he created workable, practical ideas and plans before he had the actual equipment on hand.  

In 1918, the army promoted Patton to major and then lieutenant colonel. He also became the commanding officer of the 1st Light Tank Battalion. The unit eventually became the 304th Tank Brigade. The U.S. Army spent most of World War I preparing for combat. Individual units fought under British and French commanders, but as a fighting force, it spent most of the year and a half between the U.S. declaration of war and the armistice preparing for combat. The Americans finally got into the fight in September 1918. Patton commanded the 304th during the Saint-Miheil offensive. During this operation, he briefly met the commanding officer of the 84th Brigade, Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur. They were standing on a little hill as a creeping artillery barrage approached. Patton wanted out of there, but was afraid to say so. He stood in front of MacArthur as the barrage walked over them, but “it was very thin and not dangerous.”

Saint-Miheil was an American victory, and the U.S. Army retook French territory the Germans had held since 1914, but Patton was disappointed. The power of his tanks had not been tested. Patton got that opportunity, though, in the Meuse-Argonne offensive that quickly followed. The attack
on the Germans took place in a fog, which, when combined with the
smoke from a rolling artillery barrage, made it easy to get lost. A body of
about 100 men accumulated in a railroad cut in front of Patton. Taking
command of this loose collection of soldiers, he held them together and
then led them in an infantry charge up a hill, but they ran into a German
machine gun nest and Patton was hit in the thigh. Only one of his men,
Private First Class Joseph Angelo, survived the engagement without being
wounded or killed. Angelo stayed with Patton, making sure he got medical
attention, and saving his life in the process. Patton spent the rest of the
war in the hospital. He, however, received the Distinguished Service
Medal, the Distinguished Service Cross—the second highest award in the
U.S. Army—and a promotion to colonel. He was thirty-three years old.¹⁴

After the war, Patton retained command of the 304th Tank Brigade.
During this time, he met and became friends with one Dwight D. Eisen-
hower. Patton and Eisenhower were stationed together at Camp Meade,
Maryland. Although Eisenhower was an infantry officer and Patton cav-
alty, both men believed the tank was the weapon of the future. They spent
much of their time together, developing ideas on how to use the speed,
maneuverability, and firepower of the tank in ground operations.

This effort was dangerous personally and professionally. On one occa-
sion, a cable stretched taut between two tanks snapped and came within a
few inches of their heads as it cut through the nearby brush. “We were too
startled at the moment to realize what had happened but then we looked
at each other,” Eisenhower later wrote. “I’m sure I was just as pale as
George.” Another time a .30-caliber machine gun they were testing
“cooked off.” The heat caused the weapon to advance on its own, firing
the bullets in the feed. The two future legends decided that discretion was
the better part of valor and ran off for safety.¹⁵

Such results are understandable—weapons are dangerous—but they
were attempting to develop new methods and procedures on how to use
mechanization. “These were the beginnings of a comprehensive tank doc-
trine that in George Patton’s case would make him a legend,” Eisenhower
explained. “Naturally, as enthusiasts, we tried to win converts. This wasn’t
easy but George and I had the enthusiasm of zealots.” One of the reasons
it was not easy was that this effort challenged the institutional interests of
the existing branches. Each wrote articles that appeared in military publi-
cations that managed to anger higher-ranking officers. In 1920, Eisen-
hower received instructions to go to Washington, D.C., where the chief of
infantry told him that his ideas “were not only wrong but dangerous and henceforth I would keep them to myself.” If he did not, there would be repercussions to his career. “George, I think was given the same message. This was a blow. One effect was to bring George and me even closer.”

Although Patton and Eisenhower were genuine friends, they disagreed fundamentally on the issue of leadership. Patton believed it was the key, the vital element, whereas Eisenhower thought it was significant, but just one of many elements, along with alliance management and logistics.

Despite this difference, they understood how the U.S. Army worked as a bureaucracy. When Congress—based on the recommendations of Pershing—reorganized the service and decided to fold the tank corps into the infantry, both realized that there was little professional future in tanks. In 1920, Patton reverted to his Regular Army rank of captain but was promoted to major the next day. These actions were part of the downsizing taking place in the army after World War I, but it was also a message to the two men. If Patton wanted to get promoted, he had to become a horse soldier again. Eisenhower would have to go back to the infantry. Tanks would simply not get the appropriations, equipment, or manpower necessary to do any meaningful training. Patton was no rebel, and looking to the future, he rejoined the cavalry.

This decision was the right one professionally. After a period of slow advancement during the interwar period, Patton became a brigadier general in 1940, beating his friend Eisenhower to that rank. At the time of Pearl Harbor, he was wearing the two stars of a major general. A major element in his command style was his war face. To motivate his men, he often delivered outlandish remarks on purpose. Before departing the Desert Training Center in Indio, California, to take his troops to North Africa, he told them: “And where we can do the most good is where we can fight those damn Germans or the yellow-bellied Eyetalians. And when we do, by God, we’re going to go right in and kill the dirty bastards. We won’t just shoot the sonsabitches. We’re going to cut out their living guts—and use them to grease the treads of our tanks. We’re going to murder those lousy Hun bastards by the bushel.”

This fiery language was an act. When Richard N. Jensen, his aide, died, Patton was distraught. He had known Jensen’s mother growing up, and they had briefly dated. “Had Dick been my own son I could hardly feel worse,” he wrote Echo Jensen, his aide’s mother. “You should not so much feel regret that he died as give thanks that you are the mother of
such a gallant Christian soldier.” He sent her a lock of her son’s hair and kissed him on temple in lieu of his mother. “Truly Echo it is just awful. I can’t realize it. Words fail me when I try to express to you my sorrow and sympathy.” For days afterward, his staff found him weeping without reservation in his office.20

This sentiment was hardly reserved for those he personally knew. Patton had a strong attachment to the men serving under him: “I don’t give a damn who the man is. He can be a nigger or a Jew, but if he has the stuff and does his duty, he can have anything I’ve got. By God! I love him. You’ve got to love them. You’ve got to be proud of them. You’ve got to give them loyalty when they give you loyalty.”21

That type of speech earned Patton the nickname “Old Blood and Guts.” It was as accurate as it was misleading. It was in response to the language he used, and critics said it reflected his monumental ego and disregard for those that served under him. When the nickname made it into the newspapers, men who had served under him objected, saying it obscured the real man. His troops could not have asked for a better commander to take care of them and lead them wisely and well.22

Omar Bradley was not one of those admirers. The two were hardly as close as most people think. They first met when they lived across the street from one another in Hawaii. “Patton’s style did not at all appeal to me,” Bradley stated years later. He knew when Patton was putting on an act but was highly ambivalent about these theatrics. In North Africa, the general told his staff: “Gentlemen, tomorrow we attack. If we are not victorious, let no one come back alive.” Patton then retired to his room to pray. Bradley said these actions were “hammy” and “bewildering” to others. “I still could not accustom myself, however, to the vulgarity with which Patton skinned offenders for relatively minor infractions in discipline,” Bradley observed. “Patton believed that profanity was the most convincing medium of communication with his troops.” Bradley clearly disapproved of these methods, as he made abundantly clear, but he did concede that they were effective, which to him was their only saving grace. “Patton chose to drive his subordinates by bombast and by threats. Those mannerisms achieved spectacular results. But they were not calculated to win affection among his officers or men.”23

In North Africa, Patton reunited with Eisenhower. The two had kept in touch over the years. In fact, just before Patton became the commanding officer of the 2nd Armored Division, he offered Lieutenant Colonel
Dwight Eisenhower the position of division chief of staff or the command of a regiment. “It would be great to be in tanks once more, and even better to be associated with you again,” his friend replied. Others in the army, however, noticed his talent as a staff officer, which eventually led to his promotion to general officer. As it was, Eisenhower pinned Patton’s third star on him. Even though the two were close, Patton often was critical of his friend’s leadership style. “I was disappointed in him. He talked of trivial things,” he observed. He worried that Eisenhower was pandering to the British, and he noticed that his friend was using the king’s English. “I truly fear that London has conquered Abilene.” Eisenhower, for his part, had equally mixed feelings about his old friend. The two had frank conversations about matters that Eisenhower could not share with others. While Eisenhower needed a friend to talk with, Patton was often long-winded and wanted to talk more than his friend did.

One of Eisenhower’s main goals in the war was ensuring that the U.S.–British coalition functioned effectively. Many Americans, particularly veterans of World War I, feared that the British were going to manipulate the United States into pursuing objectives that serviced British foreign policy interests, much the same way many believed they had done in the 1910s. The British, on the other hand, welcomed American assistance but also believed that their experience fighting the Germans counted for something, and that their allies were ignoring their expertise out of misplaced nationalism. Patton, for his part, was less than impressed with his British allies. “All of us think that if there ever were any pretty women in England they must have died,” he wrote to his wife, Beatrice. “They are hideous with fat ankles.” He also had little regard for the likes of Winston Churchill. He found the prime minister “cunning rather than brilliant.” He also thought the politician was “easily flattered.” Eisenhower made it clear to Patton that he would brook no criticism of their allies. He gave this warning to many of his generals, but with his old friend, it was merited. Patton often vented in public about the British. Eisenhower privately conceded to Patton that his criticisms had a constructive impact. Patton, though, steadily grew to resent his friend’s treatment of him. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that at times Eisenhower unfairly directed anger toward his old friend when he was unable to do so against the British. It is also clear that Patton often deserved these tongue-lashings.

Patton took command of II Corps immediately after its humbling defeat at the hands of the Germans under Field Marshall Erwin “The Desert
Fox” Rommel. He made immediate changes in the organization. He wanted discipline. Breakfast had been served at 9 A.M. Under Patton, that changed. The mess hall closed at 6 A.M.26

Omar N. Bradley came with the job. He was in II Corps to act as an observer for Eisenhower. Bradley had mixed views of the new corps commander. “As a soldier, a professional officer, Patton was the most fiercely ambitious man and the strangest duck I have ever known,” the general reflected many years later. “Although he could be the epitome of grace and charm at social or official functions, he was at the same time the most earthily profane man I ever knew.”27

Bradley was impressed with Patton’s results. He realized that the strange duck had been put into a bad situation, assigned individuals with whom he had little familiarity or knowledge. “He had restored discipline to the corps and to a large extent its self-confidence.”28

A major problem that Patton faced in Tunisia had nothing to do with II Corps itself, but rather the relationship he had with the American and British air forces. Neither wanted to provide close air support to ground units, preferring instead to wage strategic bombing campaigns. Patton complained instantly, and Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, the commanding officer of the Northwest Africa Tactical Air Force, objected to his use of the “discredited action of using Air Force as an alibi for lack of success on ground.” The feud grew quickly, and it got so serious that Eisenhower considered resigning his command. Fearing that Patton and Coningham were about to do serious damage to the U.S.–British alliance, Lieutenant General Carl Spaatz and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder met with Patton to convince him to contain his anger. During the meeting, as Patton listened to what he considered empty rhetoric about air superiority, three or four German Focke-Wulf 109s strafed the street outside of the office wall, dropping small bombs. Plaster flaked from the roof, and the concussion from a bomb jammed shut the door to the room. Spaatz turned to Patton and, shaking his head in disbelief, asked, “Now how in hell did you ever manage to stage that?” Grinning, Patton replied, “I’ll be damned if I know, but if I could find the sonsabitches who flew those planes I’d mail them each a medal.”29

Coningham and Patton met again the next day. The delay had done nothing to soothe tempers. The two were yelling at one another before they each realized that the disagreement was getting out of hand. Coningham apologized, saying he had many cables that day and had let the stress
of the moment get to him. Patton accepted this explanation, but he also asked him to apologize in writing. Coningham agreed and did so. Both men ended up respecting one another. “I like him very much,” Coningham wrote. “He is a gentleman and a gallant warrior.” Patton later stated, “Personally, while I regret the misunderstanding, for which I was partially responsible, I cannot but take comfort and satisfaction from the fact that it gave me an opportunity of becoming better acquainted with you, but to me you exemplify in the most perfect form all the characteristics of a fighting gentleman.”

General Sir Alan Brooke, chief of the Imperial General Staff—the title accorded the head of the British Army—met Patton about this time. “A real fire-eater and definite character,” he wrote in his diary. He had been looking forward to meeting Patton—the American’s reputation had preceded him. After the war, the caustic Lord Alanbrooke added to this entry: “His swash-buckling personality exceeded my expectation. I did not form any high opinion of him, nor had I any reason to alter this view at a later date. A dashing, courageous, wild and unbalanced leader, good for operations requiring thrust and push but at a loss in operations requiring skill and judgment.”

In North Africa and Sicily, Patton developed a one-sided rivalry with General Sir Bernard Montgomery—one-sided in that the British general did not realize that he was in any competition with the American. Montgomery could be—and often was—arrogant, but he was not one to waste the lives of his men. He had seen too much of that in World War I. In Sicily, it was clear to him that there was no way his units could get to Messina, so he made way for Patton’s. Later in the war, when they were in France, Montgomery was quite pleased with the success Patton was having. As the overall ground commander, he had far bigger issues to worry about than the fame and accolades that went to any one general. There are indications that Montgomery thought Omar Bradley was inexperienced, and he was unusually diplomatic with the American. The problem was that Bradley harbored a grudge against Montgomery that had begun in Sicily. Uncomfortable around these men of independence and creativity, Bradley frequently enjoyed advancing the rivalry between the two, neither of whom he particularly liked.

The invasion of Sicily followed the campaign in North Africa. Patton became the commanding general of the Seventh U.S. Army on July 6, 1943. The Sicilian campaign did little for the reputations of the allied generals.
Patton and Montgomery pursued widely divergent courses of action thanks to the weak leadership of General The Honourable Sir Harold Alexander, general officer commander in chief, 15th Army Group. Patton’s main goal was to take Messina, a legitimate strategic objective. Alexander’s weak control made the drive to Messina a race between Montgomery and Patton. The American pushed his men to take the city, but Major General Lucian Truscott, commanding general of the 3rd Infantry Division, objected. Patton had a stormy meeting with Truscott at the division’s command post. According to Patton’s account:

I said, “General Truscott, if your conscience will not let you conduct this operation I will relieve you and put someone in command who will.” He replied, “General, it is your privilege to reduce me whenever you want to.” I said, “I don’t want to. I got you your DSM and recommended you for Major General, but your own ability really gained both honors. You are too old an athlete to believe it is possible to postpone a match.” He said, “You are an old enough athlete to know that sometimes they are postponed.” I said, “This one won’t be.”

The operation went forward. Another incident showing Patton’s drive occurred on a small bridge when a farmer was unable to move two mules blocking a column of Americans. The general walked up to the animals, shot them in the head, and had their bodies dumped over the side of the bridge. With the two allied armies pursuing different objectives, there was little concentrated pressure on the Germans. As a result, the defenders managed to extract all their men and equipment before surrendering the island to the allies. Patton, though, did reach Messina on August 17, before Montgomery.34

Despite this success, things had already started to go wrong for Patton. On August 3, 1943, when he was visiting the 15th Evacuation Hospital outside of Nicosia, he encountered Private Charles H. Kuhl, Company L, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division. Kuhl had no visible wounds. When Patton learned that the private was suffering from shell shock, the general exploded. He swore at Kuhl, called him a coward, and ordered him out of the tent. The private did not move, which only angered Patton more. He slapped Kuhl with a glove, grabbed him by the collar, pulled him to his feet, shoved him out of the tent, and kicked him in the rear.35

A week later, Patton visited the 93rd Evacuation Hospital and went
from cot to cot, talking briefly with each man. The fourth man he visited with was Private Paul G. Bennett of the 13th Field Artillery Brigade. Bennett was shaking and told Patton he could not take the stress of combat anymore. Patton began yelling and demanded that the soldier repeat himself. Bennett said, “It’s my nerves, I can’t stand the shelling any more.”

“Your nerves, Hell, your [sic] just a goddamned coward, you yellow son of a bitch,” Patton replied in his high-pitched voice. “Shut up that goddamned crying. I won’t have these brave men here who have been shot seeing a yellow bastard sitting here crying.”

After telling one of the officers assigned to the hospital to get rid of Bennett, he turned to the artilleryman and continued his rant: “You’re a disgrace to the Army and you’re going back to the front to fight, although that’s too good for you. You ought to be lined up against a wall and shot. In fact, I ought to shoot you myself right now, God damn you!” He then pulled his pistol out from his holster.

The commanding officer of the hospital arrived at the scene, and Patton told him: “I want you to get that man out of here right away. I won’t have these brave boys seeing such a bastard babied.” He then slapped Bennett and cursed him.

Patton turned to leave. Just before he departed, he looked back and saw Bennett still quivering and in tears. The general walked back to the man and hit him a second time, with such strength that Bennett’s helmet fell to the ground. After leaving the hospital, he bragged about the incident to Bradley.

After word of these two incidents spread through Sicily, Eisenhower wrote a letter of censure to Patton. He required that Patton apologize to the individuals involved in the incident. Patton did so, including both men and the hospital staff members. On the advice of Major General John P. Lucas, Eisenhower’s deputy commander, Patton apologized to the entire Seventh Army.

There the incident might have stayed, if not for the efforts of syndicated newspaper columnist Drew Pearson. Eisenhower had worked out an agreement with war correspondents not to publish word of “l’affaire Patton.” Pearson, however, had his own agenda. He had claimed earlier that the United States was delaying a second front in Europe in order to bleed Russia dry. He specifically blamed Secretary of State Cordell Hull for this policy, but Hull had about as much influence on U.S. strategy as Pearson.
Angry at these accusations because they fed Soviet paranoia about the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt lashed out at Pearson, calling him a liar at a press conference. Someone had leaked word of Patton’s actions to the columnist, and with Pearson’s own patriotism under attack, he reported the incident on his radio show. Other journalists who had known about the event began adding details. Eisenhower, Stimson (who was now secretary of war), and George C. Marshall, the U.S. Army chief of staff, were all determined to keep Patton because he was too valuable to the war effort to lose. Eisenhower explained why:

His emotional tenseness and his impulsiveness were the very qualities that made him, in open situations, such a remarkable leader of an army. In pursuit and exploitation there is need for a commander who sees nothing but the necessity of getting ahead; the more he drives his men the more he will save their lives. He must be indifferent to fatigue and ruthless in demanding the last atom of physical strength. All this I well understood, and could explain the matter to myself in spite of my indignation at the act. I felt that Patton should be saved for service in the great battles still facing us in Europe.

The important point to note, though, is that Patton needed the help of all three to survive. As it was, the incident ended his relationship with Pershing. The old general refused to reply to any of the letters Patton mailed to him.42

After this incident, the U.S. Army moved Patton and his headquarters to duties of marginal importance. As Patton’s biographer, Carlo D’Este, points out, this incident had enormous ramifications. There were only a few candidates for the position of ground forces commander for D-Day with the experience of fighting Germans. Basically, the choice came down to Patton or Bradley, but the slapping incidents cost Patton any chance at that command. He would spend four months in exile before Eisenhower ordered him to Britain to take command of the Third U.S. Army. At his first public appearance afterward, he said, “I thought I’d stand here and let you fellows see if I am as big a son-of-a-bitch as you think I am.” The assembled troops cheered.43

In England, Patton prepared the Third Army to be a follow on unit to the Normandy invasion. He was also involved in a deception campaign.
aimed at convincing the Germans that the invasion would come at the Pas de Calais, the closest point in France to England. Patton was supposedly the commander of the fictional First U.S. Army Group. No effort was made to hide the fact that Patton was in Britain, just that he was actually in command of Third Army. While in England, Patton got a dog, a bull terrier he named Willy. The dog had once belonged to a deceased Royal Air Force pilot who had taken the animal with him on six bombing missions over Germany. As a result, Willy loved to fly, but he hated loud noises. He was rather smelly and, by canine standards, a bit of a coward.44

During this time, Patton managed to get himself into more trouble, this time in Knutsford, England. He made a few comments at the opening of a Welcome Club. The part that created an uproar: “I feel that such clubs as this are a very real value, because I believe with Mr. Bernard Shaw, I think it was he, that the British and Americans are two people separated by a common language, and since it is the evident destiny of the British and Americans, and, of course, the Russians to rule the world, the better we know each other, the better job we will do.” The statement was fairly benign, but it came at a time when Republicans were looking for an issue to use in the 1944 elections. It also did not help that the Roosevelt administration had just sent Patton’s name to Congress for promotion to the four-star rank of general.45

Eisenhower told Marshall he intended to relieve Patton. The chief of staff told him the decision was his. “My view, and it is merely that, is that you should not weaken your hand for Overlord. If you think that Patton’s removal does weaken your prospect, you should continue him in command.” A few lines later, he added, “Consider only Overlord and your own heavy burden of responsibility for its success. Everything else is of minor importance.”46 Marshall’s cable swayed the balance; it was something of a gentle rebuke to Eisenhower.

Patton and Eisenhower met, and each left very different accounts of their conversation. Patton was unsure if he would be kept, while Eisenhower recorded that he made it clear he would stay. The official documentary record shows that Eisenhower cabled his old friend two days later and informed him he would be staying. Patton was grateful, to a degree. “Sometimes I am very fond of him and this is one of the times,” he observed of his old friend. He told his wife, “Everything is O.K. because divine destiny [Patton’s less than complimentary nickname for Eisenhower] came through in a big way.”47
When Patton arrived in France after the allies had established a beachhead in Normandy, Patton’s Third Army scored impressive victory after impressive victory and led the breakout out of this confined position. On the eve of battle—Operation Cobra, in which Patton’s field army would be Bradley’s strategic reserve—the general delivered a pep talk to his staff. “I don’t want to get any messages saying that, ‘We are holding our position.’ We’re not holding anything! Let the Hun do that. We are advancing constantly and we’re not interested in holding on to anything except the enemy. We’re going to hold on to him by the nose and we’re going to kick him in the ass; we’re going to kick the hell out of him all the time and we’re going to go through him like crap through a goose.”

The Third Army was at a pivot point where it could attack to the east into southern Normandy or turn south, or even west into Brittany. It did all three. Patton conducted these operations at Bradley’s direction. He insisted on them because of the logistical importance of the ports in Brittany. That was the plan, and Bradley was sticking to the plan, but in doing so, he passed on a fleeting opportunity. The German army was cracking under the stress of the allied advance, and a focused drive east could have forced it out of France entirely. The rampage was in the wrong direction. To his credit, Patton did not think much of this conservative plan, but in the wake of the slapping incidents and Knutsford, he was reluctant to challenge authority. After a failed German offensive, the Third Army turned to the east and began its advance into Normandy. Using the XIX Tactical Air Force to cover his flanks, Patton’s command made a rapid advance in an effort to close the Falaise Gap, in which thousands of Germans were still located. It was too rapid for Bradley. After some hesitation, he ordered a halt, fearing that the U.S. Army could not sustain its positions against a German counteroffensive. This move was typical of Bradley’s indecisive and conservative leadership. Patton thought Bradley had lost his nerve.

Despite this hiccup, Third Army continued its mad dash across northwestern France towards the German Reich itself. Then a fuel shortage developed, which was the product of Eisenhower’s broad-front strategy and a logistical system that lacked the resources to sustain the advance at the pace Patton was setting. “Damnit, Brad, just give me 400,000 gallons of gasoline and I’ll put you inside Germany in two days,” he begged of Bradley. In frustration, he ordered the Third Army Chaplin, Monsignor (Colonel) James H. O’Neil, to write a prayer for good weather so his army could advance. There are two very different versions of this incident, but
the version that takes place in Patton is faithful to the account that one of Patton’s staff officers, Paul Harkins, provided.\textsuperscript{50}

The high point of Patton’s military career came during the Battle of the Bulge. In December 1944, Adolf Hitler made a reckless operational gamble. In a vain effort to repeat the success his armies had enjoyed in 1940, he ordered an offensive through the Ardennes. The goal of this operation was to split the allied advance, reach the vital port of Antwerp, and force his opponents to sue for peace. It is testimony to the skill of the German fighting man that this offensive came as close to working as it did. Other factors in their initial success included weak U.S. Army intelligence and no allied reserve forces. Early German success made mid-December a grim time for Eisenhower. He held a conference with his subordinate unit commanders in a French army stone barracks on December 19 in Verdun. The atmosphere was somber, and the cold of the room only added to the tension. Patton was prepared for the meeting, though. While others at the command conference had vague ideas on what to do, his staff had come up with three plans.\textsuperscript{51}

“When can you attack?” Eisenhower asked.

“The morning of December 21, with three divisions,” Patton said without any hesitation. His old friend misread the response, thinking he was being boastful and theatrical. The time was not right for such antics.\textsuperscript{52}

“Don’t be fatuous, George,” Eisenhower replied. “If you try to go that early, you won’t have all three divisions ready and you’ll go piecemeal. You will start on the twenty-second, and I want your initial blow to be a strong one! I’d even settle for the twenty-third if it takes that long to get three full divisions.”\textsuperscript{53}

Patton responded calmly with a map, showing the plans that he and his staff had developed. He gave rehearsed answers to questions he had expected. His presentation took roughly an hour. When he was finished, it was clear to Eisenhower and the rest of the men in the room that he and his men were ready to go.\textsuperscript{54}

The Third Army pivoted to the north from its westward advance and raced to relieve the 101st Airborne Division, which the Germans had surrounded. Bradley called the move “brilliant.” He went even further, describing it as “one of the most astonishing feats of generalship of our campaign in the West.” Patton made this turn because of the high caliber of his staff organization. These men made the advances of the Third Army
possible. Bradley, though, thought they were a below-average lot. After the advance into the Ardennes, he did not abandon this view, but grudgingly conceded, “Patton can get more good work out of a mediocre bunch of staff officers than anyone I ever saw.”

When the war ended, Patton became the military governor of Bavaria, a duty that suited him poorly. Keeping the economy going, repairing roads, bridges, sewers, and waterlines, caring for refugees, and arresting Nazi war criminals were important jobs, but Patton was far better at preparing for and conducting kinetic operations than he was in helping the conquered lands recover from the devastation of war. During a brief encounter with reporters, one asked the general a loaded question about the retention of Nazis in governmental positions. Patton responded: “The way I see it, this Nazi question is very much like a Democratic and Republican election fight. To get things done in Bavaria, after the complete disorganization and disruption of four years of war, we had to compromise with the devil a little. We had no alternative but to run to the people who knew what to do and how to do it. So, for the time being we are compromising with the devil.” After that statement, there was no saving Patton. Six days later, Eisenhower called him to his headquarters—seven and a half hours away by car—and relieved him of command of Third Army. He made Patton the commanding general of the Fifteenth U.S. Army, but this unit existed only on paper. Its only mission was to write a history of the war in Europe. No one was fooled. PATTON FIRED was the headline in Stars and Stripes.

Eisenhower might not even have bothered. Three months later, Patton was in an auto accident that proved fatal. The accident was due to the reckless driving of the general’s driver, Private First Class Horace Woodring, who thought the four-star flag on the car’s bumper absolved him from obeying the laws of the road, and the other driver, Technician Fifth Grade Robert L. Thompson, who was still hung over from a night of drinking. Thompson was behind the wheel of a two-and-a-half-ton truck and turned left onto the road that Patton and his party were taking. Woodring took his eyes off the road for a second in response to a comment from Patton. Returning to the road, he had just enough time to realize they were going to hit the truck. The car hit the truck at a 90-degree angle. Patton flew forward. His forehead struck the steel frame of the partition separating the front and rear seats, driving his head back and snapping his neck. He was the only person seriously injured in the wreck. Neither driver nor Major
General Hobart Gay, who was in the car with Patton, had more than cuts and bruises. Patton lingered for twelve days before dying in his sleep on December 21, 1945.  

Such was the life of General George S. Patton Jr., United States Army. It was also enough to inspire the efforts of some men who were middle-tier officers during the war to make a theatrical production about his life.