



AMERICAN LIVES **George S. Patton**

Bold Leader, Undisciplined Follower

Section 2

"This man would be invaluable in time of war, but is a disturbing element in time of peace."—General W. R. Smith on George S. Patton (1927)

George S. Patton was ideally suited to command an army. He was a bold strategist and a good administrator who knew how to motivate his troops. However, his boldness also led him to words and actions that caused political difficulties.

Patton (1885–1945) was born to a family with an army tradition; his grandfather had been killed in a Civil War battle. After graduating from West Point in 1909, Patton immediately entered the army. During World War I, he watched the British use the first tanks in combat. He quickly saw the advantages of the new weapon and helped organize an American tank force. When the United States entered the war, he led his unit into combat and fought well. By staying in the field despite a serious wound, he earned two medals.

Between the two world wars, Patton held various posts while pursuing his hobbies—riding and hunting, boating, and military history. In 1940, as war raged in Europe, Patton was given command of part of an armored division at a base in Georgia, which included tanks in its equipment. He got an ill-trained, ill-equipped unit into shape.

After the United States entered World War II, Patton played a vital role—and repeatedly got in trouble. He was given command of one of the Allied armies invading North Africa. There they faced troops of a fascist French government that—after the fall of France—had joined itself with Nazi Germany. Patton's armored force moved quickly through their defenses. Afterward, though, Patton's reputation was hurt by charges that he had entertained people with pro-Nazi sentiments at his North African villa. Patton was saved when General Dwight Eisenhower removed him and put him in charge of another combat unit.

The American soldiers had just lost their first North African battle with the Germans. British commanders complained that the U.S. II Armored Corps was unfit to fight. Patton took charge, removing officers who were not aggressive and using discipline and colorful speeches to raise morale. His corps won a number of battles, helping force the Germans to leave North Africa.

Next Patton was given command of the American troops invading Sicily. He landed and moved his force quickly around the western edge of the island—against orders. The American troops pushed the Germans off Sicily, gaining cheers from the Italians and headlines for Patton. His popularity fell almost as quickly, though. News reports revealed that he had slapped two soldiers who were suffering combat fatigue, believing that they were faking their condition. Many called for Patton's dismissal. Eisenhower did remove him from command, but refused to send him back to America. His new job now was to prepare to follow up the invasion of France planned for 1944.

Patton's Third Army reached France shortly after the Normandy invasion. It quickly drove the Germans out of northern France. Effectively using air support, ground troops, and tanks, Patton pushed across the north of France to the German border. Lack of supplies stalled the drive, and combat settled into a stalemate. In December of 1944, the Germans launched their last offensive, pushing deeply into the Allies' lines north of Patton. With remarkable speed, he changed his army's direction to counterattack and force a withdrawal. Experts call it one of the most brilliant moves in the war.

When the war in Europe ended, Patton got in trouble again. He greatly feared the power of the Soviet Union and proposed that U.S. forces join with the remaining German troops to drive the Russian army in Germany back to its national boundaries. After he made these statements publicly, he was assigned to a desk job. He died later that year in a car accident in Germany.

Questions

1. What details show Patton's skill as a commander?
2. Why do you think Eisenhower never removed Patton from command despite the problems he caused?
3. Why did Patton's comments on the Soviet Union cause difficulty?