

Fifty Years in Patton's Shadow

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It has been well over 50 years since the combat leadership and the force of General George S. Patton Jr. has been felt on the battlefield, but today his memory stands tall worldwide. His legacy and his shadow solidly rest on a piece of land in north central Kentucky dedicated to his memory and the mounted warriors of the 20th century. Some fifty years ago, on April 30, 1948, the U.S. Army Armor Center at Fort Knox issued General Order Number 6, establishing a museum as a tribute to General Patton and the thousands of soldiers who fought for the freedom of their fellow Americans in WWII. A year later, on May 30, 1949, the post dedicated a WWII-era building on Old Ironsides Avenue, in the center of the Armor School, as the Patton Museum of Cavalry and Armor. This past May, the museum marked its golden anniversary.

Originally, the museum was to be a place to house and display a few pieces of WWII armor equipment that General Patton had sent back to Fort Knox before his death in late 1945, along with some of the General's personal memorabilia. By 1962, the museum had become an integral part of the Armor School and a long range plan was prepared to develop a program of growth and improvement for the future. A year later, the Department of Army approved the facility as an official Army museum. As fate would have it, the building on Old Ironsides soon became too small for all of the tanks, artifacts, armor, and cavalry memorabilia that arrived at Fort Knox. It had become obvious that a world-class museum of Armor and Cavalry was developing, one that needed a new location and much larger accommodations to house the extensive and growing collection.

The Army provided the land, adjacent to Keyes Park, and private donations generated enough funds to build, dedicate, and open the first phase of the museum building on 11 November 1972 — the 87th anniversary of General Patton's birth. Since then, the museum added four additional exhibit wings and the 300-seat Abrams Auditorium, and also a Memorial Park commemorating U.S. Army and USMC Armor units from WWII, Korea,

Vietnam, and Desert Storm. The building and the Memorial Park represent the Patton Museum complex, which is visited by over 400,000 annually.

This is quite an achievement, considering that the total complex was constructed and paid for by privately donated funds at no cost to the U.S. Government. Those funds were raised over the years by the dedicated efforts of the trustees of the private Patton Museum Development Fund/Cavalry-Armor Foundation.

The U.S. Army owns the museum's land and buildings and pays for the general upkeep of the property and the salaries of the museum staff. Cutbacks since the end of the Cold War have impacted the museum by cutting personnel, which has limited the staff's ability to change and add exhibits and restore equipment for display. Unfortunately, there is no end in sight to the impact that this austerity has and will continue to have on the Patton Museum.

Today, the museum is housed in a building which includes an auditorium, a small and crowded reference library, a gift shop, and extensive exhibit halls tracing the history of mounted warfare from the earliest cavalry days through Desert Storm. Also featured is the Patton Hall, with the General's famous pistols, the sedan in which he was fatally injured, his life-like statue, and many items of personal memorabilia. Over the years, the Patton family has been more than generous in supporting the museum and in sharing with it the General's personal artifacts, both on loan and as outright gifts. The result is the finest public collection of Patton memorabilia in the world.

Several years ago, it was decided to honor the world's great armor commanders with their portraits on a Commanders Wall near the museum entrance. Each portrait depicts the commander during a critical wartime action. Today there are four portraits, all by *ARMOR* Magazine's Jody Harmon, showing General Patton at the 1943 battle of El Guettar in North Africa; German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel at the 1942 siege of Tobruk in North Africa; General Creighton W.



On exhibit at the Museum is the Cadillac sedan in which General Patton was fatally injured following World War II.

Abrams as commander of the 37th Tank Battalion in the December 1944 relief of Bastogne; and Israeli Major General Israel Tal as commander of the Steel Division in the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six Day War. Many consider these four to be among the greatest mounted warriors and commanders of the 20th century, regardless of country. We know that there were other great armor commanders that should be recognized, and others will periodically be added to the Commanders Wall. (Nominations for additions to the Wall should be sent to the museum for consideration.)



Museum reenactments feature restored and working vehicles, like this Hetzer tank destroyer used by Germany in WWII.

In addition to all of this, the museum has another 100-plus combat vehicles in storage and waiting for restoration. These vehicles, which trace the history of the mechanized force from its inception, are in "as-received" condition and are in



cramped storage throughout Ft. Knox. The museum is now full, without room for additional displays and exhibits or the space for restoration. Only an expansion of the current museum building and an infusion of funds for vehicle restoration and new exhibits will solve the problem.

As a result, the Cavalry-Armor Foundation — the museum's private sector fundraising arm — is in the process of initiating a major fund-raising effort to support a threefold expansion of the museum from its current 50,000 sq. ft. to over 200,000 sq. ft. At the same time, the expansion will also give the museum the room it sorely needs to properly display the memorabilia and artifacts that trace the exploits of the great armor and cavalry units — divisions, regiments, battalions, and companies — whose WWII associations are beginning to close down due to the passing of their members. The Patton Museum sees itself as the ultimate repository of the history, heritage, and artifacts of those WWII units long after the sounds of their battles have faded into the pages of history. Such an expansion will allow for storage, restoration, and exhibition of all donated vehicles, as well

as the addition of new exhibits and interactive and computer-assisted displays. (In the interactive area, we hope to be able to put a visitor in the driver's, gunner's, or commander's seat of a tank, and through very realistic simulation, fight a tank battle, such as the 2nd Armored Cavalry's Battle of 73 Easting during Desert Storm and/or other battles from WWII, Korea, or Vietnam.) This expansion effort will also allow for the relocation and enlargement of the museum's library and

permit it to realize its full potential to be the premier mounted force warfare reference library in the world. The master plan to accomplish the total expansion is in hand, and a large three-dimensional scale model of the new museum complex is on display in the entrance of the museum. All we need now is the 15 or so million dollars to make it happen. The strategic planning for raising those funds is in process. In closing, it's obvious that the Foundation has bitten off a large chunk of the expansion elephant, but it feels that it can pull it off in a phased effort over the next five to ten years. The trustees of the Foundation, including many former distinguished leaders of Armor and Cavalry, are committed to this effort and each feels strongly that the Patton Museum must continue to grow well into the 21st century as the nation's repository of the history and heritage of yesterday's, today's, and tomorrow's mounted warriors. The Patton Museum today, ever standing proudly in Patton's shadow, is a true jewel in the crown of U.S. Army museums, and all Americans should visit this piece of history that so ably tells the heroic story of the 20th century's mounted warrior.



The Museum's "living history" exhibits give visitors and families a chance to closely inspect vehicles that have been painstakingly restored by the Museum's staff.