

# New Biography Offers Fresh Insights on Patton

**Patton: A Genius for War**, by Carl D'Este. Harper Collins Publishers, New York. 1995, 992 pp. with maps, bibliography, and notes. \$35.

For more than half a century after his death, General George S. Patton Jr. remains one of the most colorful, complex, charismatic, and controversial figures in the annals of military history. The author focuses on a general who was — in all his moods: cantankerous, charming, arrogant, sensitive, and humble — a military genius who spent his entire life in preparation for what he passionately believed was his destiny, to lead a great army triumphantly in battle.

Patton's outlandish public image was a contrived, self-centered ploy which hid the true character of a man of many contradictions. He was extremely religious, but his profanity was legendary. Moreover, he believed that God had ordained him to achieve honor and victory on the battlefield, just as his ancestors, whom he worshipped, had done. Life-long preparation, intelligence, and an intense desire to achieve his destiny provided Patton with an extraordinary knowledge of history, war, and the profession of arms. This separated him from his contemporaries, none of whom could match his record in combat.

Patton has been perceived as the brash, profane, impetuous show-off who wore ivory-handled pistols and loved war so much he was nicknamed "Old Blood and Guts," a name he abhorred. The author, a military historian, penetrates the perceived image held by the general public, as well as the one cultivated by Patton. Although short on fresh discoveries, no other narrative account of the general's life has filled in the gaps left by other studies as fully as this superbly crafted work. This scholarly tome reflects extensive research in its detailed bibliography and meticulously documented array of primary and secondary sources.

D'Este describes the ancestors who haunted Patton's mind, some real, some imagined, the models on whom he would seek to pattern his life. He was immersed in ancestor worship. Born to a patrician California family with a

strong military heritage, Patton trained for greatness with resolute determination. Unfortunately, he had to struggle during his entire life to overcome dyslexia. Tutored at home, the youngster could not read until age eleven, the year he attended a formal school for the first time. The disfunctional reading aspect of dyslexia is only part of the disorder. There is a strong tendency to boast, and to undergo mood swings and feelings of inferiority, which may both help to account for his erratic behavior and contribute to his overwhelming desire to achieve. While a struggling cadet at West Point, he wrote his parents, "I would be willing to live in torture, die tomorrow, if for one day I could be really great." He devoted a lifetime of painful study to the effort.

D'Este recounts Patton's exploits under General Pershing's command, both in Mexico and in World War I, and culminates with his unparalleled but controversial World War II campaigns. He also explores some of Patton's less distinguished adventures. Patton's impetuous drive to succeed against perceived obstacles had occasional setbacks. His slapping of two soldiers after accusing them of cowardice in the Sicilian campaign, and his politically troubling remarks about the Soviet Union, then an ally, nearly resulted in his relief. Fortunately, his faults were exceeded by his matchless ability. "Patton is indispensable," said Eisenhower.

Patton justified such confidence — from Normandy, through the Battle of the Bulge, and on to Germany's defeat — by his remarkable willingness to take risks and to make crucial life-and-death decisions no one else would have dared to make. He seemed to have a sixth sense of what had to be done in the heat of battle.

To a far greater extent than earlier biographers, the author explores a side of Patton that few outside the circle of his close friends and immediate family even knew existed. Contrary to the public perception, a lack of compassion was not a part of Patton's personality. He was deeply affected by the carnage of war. He was an emotional and often humble man who could weep one minute and turn the air blue with his swearing the next. He was an intellec-



Patton in 1944

tual who could quote scripture and verse for hours at a time, a voracious reader with a prodigious memory. Patton's prolific writings included scores of essays, poems, notes, lectures, and diaries. To his family, he was a spell-binding storyteller whose tales were usually based on the lives of ancient heroes.

D'Este correctly emphasizes the Army's perfunctory investigation of Patton's fatal automobile accident, calling the failure to thoroughly investigate incomprehensible and inexcusable. Despite its significant strengths, the author's argument concerning the accident would have benefitted from consulting with Horace Woodring, Patton's driver, who is still alive, and Robert L. Thompson, the driver of the 2-1/2-ton truck, who died in June, 1994. Woodring's account of the accident has remained essentially unchanged for the past 50 years. Thompson did not "drop out of sight," as some said, but returned home like thousands of other soldiers. Eyewitness accounts of two of the four participants in the accident would have produced a more complete portrait of the accident.

This outstanding biography succeeds in what the author attempted to do. *A Genius for War* is a discerning work that refuses to allow faults and failings to obscure the strengths of the most unique American soldier of this, or any other, century.

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*(The reviewer's article on the accident that led to Patton's death appeared in the November-December 1995 issue of ARMOR. - Ed.)*