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Remembering Gen. Patton



Gen. George Patton Jr. was the commanding general of the U.S. Third Army in World War II.

(cont'd over)

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RADFORD — The history of our country is replete with stories of the personalities of many of our great military leaders, and perhaps none is more colorful nor more controversial than that of General George S. Patton of World War II fame.

Having served under his command of the U.S. Third Army in Europe as a part of the 26th Infantry Division in Europe, I have always been interested in books about him.

A few years ago at a large area flea market, I came across a real find in a book entitled "The Patton Papers," a large book with some 900 pages, including a few pictures. It took me several years before I finally tackled reading it because of its size, but when I finally started, I could hardly put it down.

The writer of "The Patton Papers" is Martin Blumenson, who did a great job of compiling it from General Patton's letters to his wife, to General Eisenhower and to other military leaders in World War II. Blumenson was a senior historian with Patton's Third Army and a noted writer on war-related stories.

In the "Patton Papers," he did a super job of describing the course of the war, as well as quoting from General Patton and identifying him into conflict with his superiors.

There is, it seems to me, no doubt that General Patton was a great combat leader and military tactician, but his impatience and flair for the unusual brought him into conflict with his superiors at times.

The slapping of a soldier during the Sicily Campaign and his encounter with the Russians at the end of WW II and his frankness of expression at times were

difficult for his superiors to deal with.

Only his unusual military ability and judgment enabled him to maintain his leadership role.

As a member of a mortar squad in Company I, 328th Regiment in the 26th Infantry Division, we joined General Patton's Third Army on Oct. 2, 1944. I recall that as we detrucked at the base of a long hill and the trucks that brought us headed back to the rear, we began a long walk in the direction of the artillery going off in the distance. I remarked to myself that if I ever saw Radford again, I would never leave it for long.

That was 57 years ago, and I have kept my word.

When we arrived at the top of the mountain, we were told to unroll our packs and prepare to spend the night. In just a few minutes, the word came down to I Company that we were going to be put on line that night. At about 10 p.m., we relieved a company of men from the 80th (Blue Ridge) Division (Virginia National Guard).

The following afternoon, we were heavily shelled by enemy artillery, and just a few yards from where we were located, two of my very best friends - Ray Conley and Paul Foley - were killed in their foxhole by shrapnel.

Both had been with us in college at Providence, R.I. It was, for all of us, an awakening that the play was over and that combat was now the real thing. In the seven months to follow, some 63 boys lost their lives in our company in combat, and more than 163 of us were wounded.

Ray Conley was my best friend, and he had attended Virginia Tech in 1942-43.

He was from Belvidere, Ill., and his name is listed on Tech's memorial on campus.

After our initial introduction to combat, we assembled as the rest of the division arrived and stood in our area alongside the road as General Patton's half track came down the road on his way to speak to all the officers and first sergeants.

He stood alongside his driver with his pearl-handled revolvers and his helmet with the three stars on it gleaming in the bright sunshine. He really was an imposing figure, and it remained my only time to see him personally.

He was a man who defied description. One of the radio broadcasters recalled, "A fiction writer couldn't create him. He's colorful, fabulous and dynamite. On a battlefield, he is a warring, roaring comet." The world recalls him as a brilliant man of battle, but General George Patton was a devotee of Kipling, Service and Burns, and a writer and a lover of poetry.

He was a man of many facets, brilliant and daring, resourceful, and his ability to lead in combat was unquestioned. But, like many others, he had trouble adjusting to peacetime practices, and in the end, it complicated his place in history.

Perhaps his epitaph might be summed up in a small plaque I discovered in a large flea market in Florida and which hangs on my office wall. The 9 x 12 plaque reads: "War might be fought by weapons, but they are won by men. It is the spirit of the men who follow and the man who leads that gains the victory." — Gen. George S. Patton

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