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GENERAL GEORGE S. PATTON: OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP PERSONIFIED

By
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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Maritime Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

“If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting, too...
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!”
--Rudyard Kipling, *If*

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Abstract This paper focuses on the critical yet often overlooked subject of operational leadership. Using a case study of General George S. Patton, Jr. and his command of the U.S. Third Army during World War II as the backdrop, I intend to offer lessons learned from Patton's time as a commander at the operational level for potential future operational leaders who aspire to such command. The scope of this paper is straightforward; this is a study of operational leadership as performed by perhaps its most skilled practitioner. A detailed analysis of Patton's tactical accomplishments is not contained herein. Nor is a study of his pre-Third Army actions conducted. There are more than enough volumes that describe all of those impressive actions. Further, this paper will not delve into the controversial actions that colored Patton's career; there are even more volumes addressing those topics. Rather, an analysis of applicable aspects of Patton's tenure as the Commander, U.S. Third Army as pertinent to the concept of operational leadership will be conducted with the purpose being to provide somewhat of a blueprint from which those vying for command at the operational level may draw critical lessons.		
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ABSTRACT

“Even so the Achaeans were still charging on in a body, using their swords and spears pointed at both ends, but when they saw Hector going about among his men they were afraid, and their hearts fell down into their feet.”

–Homer, *Iliad*, Book XV

This paper focuses on the critical yet often overlooked subject of operational leadership. Using a case study of General George S. Patton, Jr. and his command of the U.S. Third Army during World War II as the backdrop, I intend to offer insight for potential future operational leaders who aspire to such command.

The scope of this paper is straightforward; this is a study of operational leadership as performed by perhaps its most skilled practitioner. A detailed analysis of Patton's tactical accomplishments is not contained herein. Nor is a study of his pre-Third Army actions conducted. There are more than enough volumes that describe all of those impressive actions. Further, this paper will not delve into the controversial actions that colored Patton's career; there are even more volumes addressing those topics. Rather, an analysis of applicable aspects of Patton's tenure as the Commander, U.S. Third Army as pertinent to the concept of operational leadership will be conducted with the purpose being to provide somewhat of a blueprint from which those vying for command at the operational level may draw critical lessons.

Additionally, while this paper does not pretend to be a treatise about the entire spectrum of operational warfare, the basic premise of operational leadership implies that the fundamental components of that level of warfare be explored. Peppered throughout the examples and lessons described herein are analyses of some specific operational functions and concepts that Patton employed in his role as an operational leader. However, discussion of these operational functions and concepts occurs primarily to complement the more prevalent subject matter addressing his overall contributions to the tenets of operational leadership. Moreover, while commentary regarding general components of the overall operational art is naturally included, such exegesis occurs in this paper only insofar as it relates to the role of the operational leader in general and to Patton as the subject matter of that level of leadership specifically.

The common theme woven throughout this paper is the extent to which the subject thoroughly and meticulously applied various elements of operational art throughout his tenure as an operational commander. From Patton's earliest childhood years, his life was one of preparation for that defining moment when history would crown him the prototype of operational leadership as a result of the successes his Third Army achieved. Prospective operational commanders can learn a great deal from studying Patton's distinctive application of the art of operational warfare, particularly as he applied that art in 1944.

PREFACE

“Hector, in all his glory, rages like a maniac; confident that Jove is with him he fears neither god nor man, but is gone raving mad, and prays for the approach of day. He vows that he will hew the high sterns of our ships in pieces, set fire to their hulls, and make havoc of the Achaeans while they are dazed and smothered in smoke.”

-Ulysses as told by Homer, *Iliad*, Book IX

History is replete with examples of leadership performed at the tactical and strategic levels of warfare. Such brilliant strategists as Pericles, Otto von Bismarck and George C. Marshall provide classic models from the strategic end of the spectrum. Likewise, equally as accomplished leaders such as Hannibal, Nathaniel Greene, Lewis Puller, and Harold Moore fill up pages and pages of history's tactical memoirs. Unfortunately, this is not the case with the neglected yet equally vital category of operational leadership. This is due in large part to the operational level of warfare traditionally receiving scant analysis. Consequently, accounts of generalship tend to focus on the easier to grasp concepts inherent within the tactical and strategic domains. The result is a dearth of meaningful analysis regarding operational leadership. Therefore, one could easily ascertain that this lack of literature regarding operational leadership stems from an absence of any real prototypes that fit that distinction. Ironically, though, examples of operational leadership abound throughout history with equal occurrence as illustrations of strategic and tactical pictures do.

The Theban commander Epaminandos, the Corsican Napoleon Bonaparte, and the American General William T. Sherman all provide solid displays of what is today referred to as operational level leadership. Their exploits are often explained in the most basic, tactical definitions because the vast preponderance of writers are simply more comfortable operating within that domain. However, upon closer examination, one sees that those commanders' brilliant tactical evolutions were essentially microcosms of their more fundamental operational specialty. While their use of solid tactics garnered them battlefield success, their unique insight into the operational level of warfare made them great commanders.

Standing above all others in demonstrated abilities as an operational commander, though, is General George S. Patton, Jr. Possessed of virtually every trait required of operational leaders, Patton roared through the first half of the twentieth century essentially defining what leadership at that critical linchpin level entails. Accordingly, a study of Patton's life, and specifically his tenure as the Commander, U.S. Third Army, is critical for anyone aspiring to command at the operational level.

Patton came from a family steeped in military tradition. Romanticists frequently point to the exploits of his forefathers as providing validation of their insistence that Patton was essentially born to achieve greatness within the military. While it is true that the type of leadership he displayed required that he possess an innate personality type suitable to men of high rank, this preordained exalted status of which these hero-worshippers write neglects a much larger and more realistic reason for his success. Patton was an exceptionally driven man, and his family's military legacy, built up in his mind by his family's almost obsessive sense of ancestral worship throughout his upbringing, served to increase his drive exponentially. Many are born with potential, but without an accompanying drive unmatched by the vast majority, such potential is often wasted. Only those who combine that potential with ambition can truly achieve greatness. Patton may have been born with a personality conducive to leading men, but it was his drive, determination, unparalleled ambition, and intense self-preparation rather than some mythical predestined birthright that enabled him to achieve exalted rank.

INTRODUCTION: OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEFINED

“Wars may be fought with weapons, but they are won by men. It is the spirit of the men who follow and of the man who leads that gains the victory.”

General George S. Patton, Jr.

General George S. Patton, Jr. was the quintessential operational leader. He spent a lifetime working, studying, and preparing for the day when ultimately, he would be rewarded with command at the operational level. During World War II, he proved that among both Allied and Axis commanders, he was peerless when it came to the ability to, "...translate (sic) a given theater strategic objective into a series of operational objectives accomplished through a series of major operations as part of a single campaign."¹ This definition of the operational commander is important to understand because the role of operational commanders is indeed unique. Tactical commanders fight battles, strategic commanders wage wars, but the operational commanders are the ones who are charged with the responsibility of tying those two levels of warfare together.

Patton's success was due in large part to his ability throughout his career, and throughout his life for that matter, to discern the critical components of operational leadership. While during his early years he may not have known that the concepts to which he grasped were essentially key components of what is presently referred to as the operational level of warfare, he nonetheless understood the fundamental premise behind those concepts.

Not surprisingly, writers throughout the ages have consistently defined operational leadership without actually using the term "operational leadership." Rather, they have chosen instead to address characteristics of men whom they identify as "commanders" or "generals" but who certainly meet the criteria of today's definition of operational level commanders. Some valuable insight into the concept of operational leadership is gained by reflecting on the words of both practitioners and students of that level of warfare from history. Further, such thoughts provide the foundation from which an understanding of Patton as an operational leader can be clarified.

Sun Tzu, in his treatise, *The Art of War*, identifies the five virtues of a general as being wisdom, sincerity, humility, courage, and strictness. Conversely, he warns against possessing the traits of recklessness, cowardice, a quick temper, excessive compassion, and an overriding concern about one's reputation, citing those characteristics as being representative of the five worst faults of a commander.² Similarly, in his most renowned work, noted Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz offers superior intellect and boldness as essential attributes of the operational commander. While many of Patton's contemporaries described him as impetuous, Clausewitz would have embraced Patton's ways. To Clausewitz, "...Boldness, which is a quality of temperament, will tend to be held in check. This explains why it is so rare in the higher ranks, and why it is all the more admirable when found there."³

Jomini emphasized the requirement for operational commanders to possess courage. While he professed the value of physical courage, he held more tightly to the benefit of moral courage supplemented with deep, strong resolution.⁴ Several centuries prior to Jomini, though, Machiavelli outlined several components that when assimilated combine to create successful commanders. Choosing wise subordinates from whom insight and knowledge can be drawn was among those elements. Further, Machiavelli believed that commanders were obligated to encourage subordinates to speak their mind. However, while he affirmed that an ability to solicit and listen to the opinions of subordinates was essential toward achieving success, he also advised that, in the end, commanders alone possess the great responsibility of ultimate decision-making. Accordingly, commanders must also possess the fortitude to make the tough decisions. Finally, Machiavelli's works encourage commanders to possess ambition and drive, asserting that such attributes serve to inspire subordinates.⁵

Several centuries later, Soviet Marshall Zhukov reiterated the requirement for operational commanders to be ambitious. In his memoirs, he states that successful commanders should always strive to obtain military glory. Not surprisingly, Patton was hailed by his supporters and assailed by his critics repeatedly for his boundless ambition. Zhukov expounds upon his estimation of the required components of operational commanders when he advocates ferocity within such leaders. Further, he asserts throughout his writings that even when circumstances pose great risk, operational commanders must not be afraid to fight. Risk is inherent in command and warfare, and as such, those who understand and accept that point will be rewarded with success in a theater.⁶

General William T. Sherman, one of America's greatest operational commanders and a commander whom Patton was known to admire greatly, stated in his autobiographical *Memoirs* that:

"Some men think that modern armies may be so regulated that a general can sit in an office and play on his several columns as on the keys of a piano; this is a fearful mistake. The directing mind must be at the very head of the army--must be seen there, and the effect of his mind and personal energy must be felt by every officer and man present with it, to secure the best results. Every attempt to make war easy and safe will result in humiliation and disaster."⁷

Patton took these words as the basis of his overall leadership style, and he recognized them as providing sound advice for all three levels of warfare. Accordingly, as Patton's career unfolded, he applied Sherman's admonition to his own actions. His habit of inspecting frequently, moving about the battlefield, visiting his subordinates, and being seen by all within his command enabled him to place his imprint solidly on whatever unit he commanded. Once his units began to take on his persona, his ability to affect overall operations was greatly enhanced through the unit's improved ability to more quickly and easily understand Patton's intent.

However, there was another statement within Sherman's *Memoirs* that had an even more profound effect on Patton's psyche and proved to dominate his overall leadership style. "There is a soul to an army as well as to the individual man, and no general can accomplish the full work of his army unless he commands the soul of his men, as well as their bodies and legs."⁸ Accordingly, Patton designed his training to hone not only the bodies of his men, but also to develop the mind and soul of his forces.

While on the surface such actions might appear to be isolated to the tactical domain of warfare, they are more reflective of the operational realm. Once possessed of their commander's soul, a unit will become far more successful in discerning their commander's desired end state and in meeting the existing requirements that determine success of not only an immediate battle, but of the entire operation.

Moreover, operational leaders must possess and be able to provide to subordinates a unique astuteness known as "operational vision." This vision enables commanders to piece together elements of a proposed major operation or campaign into a series of actions that will ultimately achieve the theater strategic objective.⁹ As will be seen later in this paper, Patton's unique, unparalleled, almost intrinsic operational vision enabled him to achieve heights of success that were denied a great many others. During the chaos of battle, Patton seemed to flourish where others seemed to stumble.

His belief in and commitment to the concept of perpetual preparation appears to have dominated every aspect of Patton's professional life. Patton clearly embraced all of these and innumerable other ideals that combined to build him into a master of operational leadership.¹⁰ By the time he assumed the mantle of his penultimate of commands, he was poised to show the world first-hand just how the art of operational leadership was meant to be conducted.

THE BLUEPRINT FOR OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

“I really believe that...was the most brilliant operation ever performed, and was due wholly to my staff and to the tremendous efficiency of the veteran American soldiers who now compose our armies.”

Lieutenant General George S. Patton, Jr. commenting on Third Army's performance in Ardennes

Patton's command of the Third Army represented his most brilliant performance as an operational leader. Years of intense preparation, rigorous self-study, meticulous experimentation, and previous command assignments had been conducted so that he would be able to grasp the opportunity that he so desperately desired: operational command in a wartime situation. Granted, his time as the commander of I and II Armored Corps had provided him with a taste of such a situation. Similarly, his elevated status as the Seventh Army Commander during Operation Husky enabled him to experience command at the operational level of warfare. However, the crowning achievement whereby all of his preparation was rewarded occurred when he assumed command of the Third Army and took that force on a meteoric route through northern France, cutting a swath right through the rest of northwestern Europe into the heart of Germany.

The months of August and December of 1944 proved to be the culmination of Patton's operational preparations. His actions in stimulating the Allied breakout from Normandy and later as the savior of the Allies during the German counteroffensive at Ardennes serve as the focus of this chapter.

Patton had always preached the superiority inherent in the offensive, and it was this virtual single-mindedness regarding the offensive that colored Patton's command during his movements east through northwestern Europe. While certainly not entitled to sole credit for affecting the

Allied breakout from the confines of Normandy, his Third Army did spearhead the action, and thus, undoubtedly accelerated Allied actions.

His insistence that his Third Army continually move and stay on the offensive resulted in his command post being forced to relocate virtually every night of August, 1944.¹¹ This feat takes on added significance when one considers that prior to the Third Army's official activation on 1 August 1944, Allied forces had remained in a virtual stalemate in the Normandy region for almost two full months. Once Patton's forces became engaged, though, Allied fortunes altered drastically. Almost overnight, the tenuous impasse being experienced by the Allies was transformed into a monumental reversal as Allied offensive actions began replacing their previous stagnation.

In yet another invaluable lesson passed on to prospective operational leaders, Patton embraced the new, innovative, and at the time, widely misunderstood concept of combined arms warfare. During Patton's tenure as the Third Army Commander he continued to pioneer the use of combining tactical fires with operational maneuver to create highly potent operational fires, thereby securing his place as a master of the art of operational fires.

While his Army peers were almost completely ground-focused, Patton integrated aviation fires into his unit so thoroughly that the XIX Tactical Air Force assigned to support his forces was essentially a bona fide member of his Third Army. Granted, other field commanders used air power to augment their respective fire support capabilities, but the vast majority of those within the Army at that time looked at aviation support as strictly an augmentation to their means of delivering fires. Patton, on the other hand, used his assigned aviation to shape future operations, relying extensively on their interdiction capabilities.

In a portend of the future, Patton's handling and use of aviation support during the latter half of 1944 greatly influenced and may have even inspired the U.S. Army's AirLand doctrine and the U.S. Marine Corps' Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) and maneuver warfare concepts developed some 40 years later. Instead of using air power as simply a fire support tool, as his less imaginative contemporaries did, Patton envisioned an entirely new, almost revolutionary role for aviation at that time. He was one of the earliest proponents and practitioners of the concept of aviation components being used as separate but integrated maneuver elements within a field army.

Patton firmly believed that the speed of aviation provided an ideal complement to the speed inherent in mechanized ground units. Patton employed his air power as critical components of his armored column spearheads throughout the war, using them to destroy both advancing and retreating German armor. In other words, instead of using air power as a single dimensional platform for delivering fires, Patton chose to exploit the maneuver potential inherent in aviation. This methodology, coupled with the speed of advance possessed by his mechanized forces, freed Patton from the overly strict concern with his flanks that all but paralyzed many of his peers.

Patton's focus was always on defeating the enemy, not on seizing territory. While this point is in complete concurrence with sound principles of strategy and war, it appears to have been lost on most of the other members of the Allied leadership throughout the war as many consistently chased terrain instead of the enemy. By focusing on destruction of the enemy, he relieved himself of the burden of unnecessarily worrying about grabbing terrain to augment his security.

While his actions in the late summer and early autumn of 1944 were indeed spectacular, undoubtedly, he displayed his most illustrious and impressive operational leadership prowess during the Allied response to the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes in December of that

same year. The Battle of the Bulge solidified Patton's place as a legendary commander in the annals of United States and probably world military history. From the beginning of that classic battle, his actions served to provide the blueprint for aspiring operational commanders to emulate.

As 1944 was drawing to a close, Patton's operational leader's intuition, fueled by his arduous and ceaseless analyses of the enemy, proved to be fortuitous for the rest of the Allied forces operating in northwest Europe. The Third Army Commander was notorious for his insistence on detailed, daily intelligence.¹² As previously stated, other commanders certainly relied on their respective intelligence officers. Where Patton differed from others, though, was the degree to which he was personally involved in the overall operational intelligence actions of his army—and of the Allied forces as a whole.

Fully aware that operational intelligence in particular is perishable, he developed several innovative procedures within his army to eliminate the common time delays inherent in the communication of intelligence up to his higher headquarters and thus ensured that the intelligence he received was current. One such clever initiative was his attachment of 3d Cavalry Group forces to each of his divisions and corps in order to augment his intelligence gathering capabilities.¹³ This appreciation for intelligence served him well, particularly as events in the Ardennes during mid-December, 1944, were unfolding. Although the German counteroffensive did not occur until 16 December 1944, Patton sensed developments occurring in that region as early as 25 November as a result of his operational intelligence actions.¹⁴

While planning for a separate offensive through the Saar region, he detected a distressing weakness in the U.S. First Army's southern flank lines that bordered his Third Army's northern flank. Exacerbating his concern, his Intelligence Officer asserted that at least thirteen enemy

divisions, including six Panzer or SS Panzer divisions and four parachute divisions, were massing for an assault in the Ardennes region.¹⁵ Alone among Allied commanders in expressing his concern for this perceived weakness, and essentially ignored by his seniors when he warned of the potential liability, Patton displayed an exceptionally fortunate degree of foresight indicative of superior operational leadership.

The Third Army Commander directed his staff, who at the time were fully immersed in their staff planning for their expected eastward Saar offensive, to prepare plans to assist the First Army in the event that the German counteroffensive that the Allied commanders refused to believe was possible actually developed. The result of his prescient thinking was that when the German counteroffensive did occur on 16 December, the Third Army staff was fully prepared and ready to conduct the necessary relief operations that they had predicted would be ordered by Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF). While the Allied commanders were struggling to decipher the extent of the German actions, the Third Army staff was busy readying their forces for what they considered an impending cancellation of their Saar offensive in response to the problems encountered by the First Army forces.

Despite Patton's preparations in response to what he deemed a viable and obvious threat, the German counteroffensive in Ardennes was a greatly unexpected event to General Eisenhower and his SHAEF staff. Shortly after the Germans initiated their attacks, Eisenhower called an emergency meeting of his SHAEF subordinate commanders and principal staff on 19 December in Verdun. That meeting provided a poignant display of just how far ahead of the other Allied commanders Patton was regarding the degree of vision required of an operational leader.

During that meeting, it was apparent that the German actions caught virtually every Allied commander unprepared. Accordingly, apprehension and even doubt seemed to have filled the

room. When Eisenhower asked Patton how long it would take for Third Army to send three divisions up to assist the First Army, Patton responded that he could affect such a move within 72 hours.¹⁶ An already tense meeting turned even more so when Eisenhower, visibly irritated, regarded Patton's claim as simply boast with little substance. After reminding Patton that he would have to disengage three full divisions completely from their current combat operations and redeploy those same forces over 150 miles in unseasonably harsh, wintry conditions, the Supreme Allied Commander posed the same question again. To emphasize his skepticism regarding Patton's previous response, Eisenhower admonished his Third Army Commander of the gravity regarding the Allies' current situation. Unhesitatingly, Patton reiterated his claim. While the rest of the members appeared dumbfounded, Patton calmly explained that he and his staff had been planning to execute just such a mission for over three weeks.¹⁷

This degree of operational vision was obviously rare, even among such a distinguished group of military minds, and once again set Patton above the rest in the area of operational leadership. Moreover, it gave Patton the ability to execute a truly extraordinary act that proved to be, "...a maneuver that would make Stonewall Jackson's peregrinations in the valley campaign in Virginia and Gallieni's shift of troops in taxicabs to save Paris from the Kaiser look pale by comparison..."¹⁸ Patton essentially accomplished in just a few days what had taken the Germans several months to put together when he transferred an entire army from one assigned sector to another. The chief distinguishing characteristics between the two, though, were that Patton's forces had no real advance warning of an impending reassigned mission, and the Third Army conducted their operational redeployment while under attack.

Throughout the Third Army's actions, Patton displayed virtually every trait essential for successful operational leaders to possess. Certainly, his tremendous foresight and visionary

qualities stand at the fore of Patton's arsenal of personal operational weapons. However, such operational vision entails far more than simply predicting events. Rather, true operational vision enables one not only to see but actually to analyze potential events and their most likely repercussions. One of Patton's biographers asserts that Patton's greatest strength was his, "...ability to anticipate and react with impeccable foresight to an enemy move or countermove."¹⁹ In other words, not only must an operational leader be prescient, but he has to be able to predict accurately several simultaneous and sequential enemy moves while determining his own forces' best courses of action. Such ability is the essence of operational leadership.²⁰ By the time Third Army operations concluded in 1945, Patton's command provided a plethora of lessons learned for prospective future operational leaders.

**PATTON'S LEGACY TO FUTURE OPERATIONAL LEADERS:
LESSONS LEARNED**

**“My military reactions are correct. Many people do not agree with me...they are wrong...I’ve been studying war for 40 odd years and my decisions are based on knowledge, experience, and training.”
General George S. Patton, Jr.**

Undoubtedly, Patton left a sizable legacy full of lessons learned for future operational leaders. This paper has identified many of those lessons throughout the events examined. The purpose of this chapter is to expound upon some of the more critical lessons from the zenith of Patton’s operational leadership experience. While certainly not all-inclusive, the lessons identified in the following pages demonstrate areas to which prospective operational commanders must focus if they are to attain success in their respective areas.

One of the most difficult transitions commanders are forced to make is the progression from tactical command to the operational command level. History is sated with examples of commanders who were known to be quite extraordinary within the tactical realm, but once assigned to make the leap into the more demanding, nebulous realm of operational command, their previous extraordinary actions became rather ordinary. Throughout such examples of failed operational command, a common pervasive theme is the leader's preoccupation with the minutia rather than training and trusting their staffs to work such issues. Invariably, such commanders lost sight of the overall operational picture, and as such, failed in their new assignments.

Patton was not such a commander, noting that a key component of successful operational commanders is the ability to build and develop solid staffs. He personally trained his staffs in such a way that he was free to concentrate on the greater operational functions assigned to him. Rather than attempt to play every instrument within the orchestra of his command, Patton knew intrinsically that his role was that of overall army conductor. His staff members played the

individual instruments, and if he wanted his staff to produce a melodic composition, he understood that he must step back and listen to his orchestra in total. If he gave in to the temptation to play each instrument himself, a less than dulcet and flowing composition would result. By giving his staff the freedom to act on their own once possessed with their commander's intent, he fostered innovation and ingenuity that in the long run ensured the best possible solutions to complex situations. Patton's philosophy of command was, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."²¹

During the Third Army's brilliant actions in the Battle of the Bulge, General Bradley begrudgingly conceded that, "Patton can get more good work out of a mediocre bunch of staff officers than anyone I ever saw."²² This comment outwardly appears as a slight to the members of the Third Army staff under Patton, but in reality, it speaks volumes of Patton's abilities as a teacher and trainer. His staff consistently understood their commander's intent, and because of their almost innate connection with Patton, a connection that the Third Army Commander spent long, arduous hours developing and perfecting, they were able to serve exactly as a staff is supposed to serve—completely for their assigned commander. Patton's leadership style created a situation whereby the whole of his staff became greater than the sum of the individual staff member parts, and "mediocre staff" in another commander's hands were transformed into highly capable and successful soldiers. Moreover, he was widely recognized as a commander who was averse to the temptation of micromanagement, and such an aversion provided yet another critical element to his overall success.²³

In fact, Patton disparagingly stated of Bradley and Lieutenant General Hodges, the 1st Army Commander during the Allied northwest European operations, that those two commanders were

far too immersed in tactical details. Bluntly (and correctly) declaring that tactical details are the domain of battalion commanders, he also asserted that generals have no requirement to know tactics. His belief is summed up by his statement that, “If Generals (sic) knew less tactics, they would interfere less.”²⁴

Patton also made it a point not to relieve subordinate commanders unless absolutely necessary. He believed that commanders such as Bradley and Major General Collins, VII Corps Commander, were far too trigger happy when it came to the relief of their respective subordinate commanders.²⁵ While commanders such as they believed their actions instilled a healthy dose of fear within their subordinates, Patton believed that such fear was anything but healthy. He asserted that those with a penchant for relieving commanders received nothing in return but unimaginative, overly cautious, and uninspired subordinate commanders. In contrast to the atmosphere of fear, Patton encouraged his commanders to innovate and resisted the temptation to overreact to mistakes. The Allied High Command and others often criticized him for his keeping commanders whom they felt had no business being in command. Patton’s position, though, was that he would train any subordinate under his charge and accept full responsibility for his subordinates’ errors. Such an attitude did wonders toward fostering loyalty throughout his commands. More importantly, though, was that Patton’s command philosophy in this regard created aggressive, innovative, and offense-minded units whose tactical victories combined to create overall operational success.²⁶

Patton's actions as the Third Army Commander enabled him to display yet another key component of success for an operational commander: the ability to think several moves ahead in campaign and strategy development. Analogous to a reputable chess player, operational commanders must be thinking in terms of two and even three subsequent operations as opposed

to merely focusing on the immediate operation. Of the Allied commanders during WWII, Patton was renowned for his ability to plan on a three-dimensional plane. Three campaigns were always resident within his mind and as such always dominated planning within his assigned staffs. These campaigns included the one he was currently fighting, the follow-on campaign to that initial campaign, and the one subsequent to that follow-on campaign.²⁷

One of the most essential traits of an operational leader is the ability to learn from mistakes of the past. Patton's actions as Commander, Third Army during the Allied actions in northwestern Europe clearly indicate that he must have recognized the mistakes he made during Operation Husky.²⁸ Although he had technically achieved victory during operations he led earlier as the Seventh Army Commander in Sicily, his focus on capturing the port of Messina rather than on destroying his adversary was an error that he would not repeat in his subsequent actions in northwestern Europe. While the commanders within SHAEF, from Eisenhower to Montgomery to Bradley, all seemingly possessed an utter disregard for Napoleon's maxim that actions must always focus on the destruction of the enemy, Patton adhered to that principle virtually unfailingly in his 1944 drive across France. Patton quite clearly understood that the Allied command's consistent proclivity to plan campaigns and battles that focused solely on the capture of enemy terrain was an egregious error. Of the senior Allied commanders operating in Normandy in 1944, Patton appears to have been alone in possessing the sense to realize that the overall Allied aim during that campaign had to focus exclusively on the destruction of German forces. Any seizing of terrain should have been viewed as simply a by-product and enabling feature toward achieving that ultimate aim. Ironically, the theater strategic commanders had a difficult time reconciling the critical difference between focusing on terrain and focusing on the enemy. On the other hand, Patton, although an operational level commander, consistently kept

the overall (and correct) strategic objective in mind when developing his subordinate operational objectives.

Operational commanders must obviously possess a solid appreciation for the physical features of terrain and theater geometry, and Patton was noted as perhaps the foremost authority concerning those areas. Prior to the commencement of any invasion, Patton routinely analyzed and studied maps of the areas in which he would be operating. This practice in and of itself is obviously not unique to Patton; map studies are an essential task of any commander. However, Patton's map studies consisted of more than survey type analyses. Rather, he augmented those functions by also predicting precise areas in which he believed he would wage certain types of battles.

During WWII, such prognostications were uncannily accurate. In Sicily, he correctly predicted the locations of virtually every significant battle that was waged—all before the landings had even occurred. Further, prior to his Third Army's commitment to operations, he outlined the path that he projected his forces would cut across France. While preparing for post-Normandy breakout operations, Patton annotated on his personal map the site where he believed one of the first major battles would find his forces committed. Events later validated Patton's forecast when his subordinate VIII Corps and 4th Armored Division forces engaged German Seventh Army forces near the town of Rennes less than four days after the Third Army had been activated.²⁹

Patton once stated that, "If the greatest study of mankind is man, surely the greatest study of war is the road net."³⁰ To that end, Patton analyzed every road map of France that he could find in an attempt to commit to memory potential avenues of approach and axes of advance for his armored forces. Once again, his acknowledgment of history's invaluable lessons led him to read

The Norman Conquest prior to launching his Third Army into the attack. His rationale was that the roads used centuries previously by William the Conqueror would be overlooked by the enemy because of their simplicity and rudimentary nature. However, for precisely those reasons, Patton deemed those routes attractive for his forces to use. Additionally, Patton realized that roads during the days of William the Conqueror had to be constructed across passable terrain. Following those same roads meant that his armor would be presented with relatively trafficable terrain with which he could acquaint them prior to their actual assaults.

Patton possessed by far the most combat experience of the American commanders during WWII. As such, his many previous battlefield experiences forged deep lessons within him that he constantly sought to impart upon his peers. Patton's seniors consistently berated him for what they inaccurately deemed his penchant for reckless behavior. However, their version of recklessness was actually Patton's rendition of boldness and audacity. Patton was emotionally scarred from his trench warfare experiences of WWI, and as such, he realized that an army that was constantly mobile presented a considerably more difficult target to the enemy. Ironically, the popular media portraits of Bradley and Eisenhower as representative of the type of caring and compassionate commanders America needed caused those men consistently to exhibit timidity and cautiousness at Falaise, the Seine, the Lorraine, and Ardennes.³¹ Such actions in turn resulted in far more Allied death, destruction, and suffering than the bombastic yet decisive Patton ever elicited.³²

His indirect approach to warfare whereby he advocated superior speed concentrated through enemy gaps in attempts to surprise, confuse, and shock the enemy into submission was often ridiculed by his seniors. However, the Patton brand of warfare resulted in by far the greatest ratio of damage inflicted versus damage incurred in the entire Allied force. The Third Army

killed over 144,500 Germans--more than five times as many as they themselves experienced. In terms of total casualties exacted, the Third Army delivered ten times as many enemy casualties as was inflicted upon themselves. Further, the Third Army captured over one million Germans, providing further evidence of Patton's preference to envelop the enemy instead of engaging in head-on assaults.³³

A study of Patton's actions as a commander at the operational level of warfare provides a tremendous resource for prospective future operational leaders. He clearly demonstrates the obvious point that one cannot simply land in an operational command position and expect to perform well. Such a command requires a tremendous amount of preparation, experience, self-study, and rigorous application of lessons learned from innumerable sources. When all of those elements are combined appropriately, as they certainly were in Patton's case, then the chances of achieving success at the operational leadership level are substantially enhanced.

NOTES

¹ Milan Vego, *Operational Warfare* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2000), 21.

² Sun Tzu. *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 65, 114-115

³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, 1984), 105-112, 191-192. Clausewitz seemed to rank boldness as perhaps the most critical trait for successful commanders at the operational level to possess, asserting that while many believe boldness to be more important at the tactical level of warfare, it is actually far more critical to possess that trait at the operational level. His rationale was that boldness can best be exploited with a seasoned and reflective mind. (p. 190)

⁴ Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. Charles Messenger (London: Greenhill Books, 1838, 1992), 52.

⁵ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Portable Machiavelli*. Contains *The Prince* and *The Discourse*, ed. and trans. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 155-156, 407-409. Machiavelli's "commander" is referred to throughout his books as a "prince"; however, the context in which his prince operates essentially mirrors our concept of the modern-day operational commander.

⁶ Gregory C. Gardner, "Generalship in War: The Principles of Operational Command" (Thesis, School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1987), 14.

⁷ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman*. (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc., 1990), 898.

⁸ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 879.

⁹ Vego, *Operational Warfare*, 569.

¹⁰ Vego's *Operational Warfare* identifies additional critical leadership components that all serve to describe Patton's leadership style. All of these traits, found on pages 562-569, were common characteristics of Patton. Among these, though, the most applicable to Patton included:

- Strength of character
- Strength of will—impose his will on the enemy, his subordinate commanders, and his own staff
- High intellect including imagination, sound judgment, and flexibility of mind to change one's mind easily but without confusion.
- Keen understanding of human nature and psychology
- Creativity—enables element of surprise to be reached
- Boldness
- Resist unfounded prejudices regarding potential enemy actions and instead focus on knowledge coupled with instinct
- Possess indisputable integrity—serves as a model to juniors, peers, and seniors alike
- Moral leader who enforces the highest standards, punishes those who stray from those standards, and rewards those who adhere to them—Patton lived this ideal
- Loyal both up and down the chain of command
- Patton's frequent visits to those under his command who were wounded, and his insistence that his subordinate commanders do the same, reinforced his ideal of loyalty up and down the chain of command.
- Physical and moral courage
- Resoluteness to stand by his decisions and act even when specific orders have not been given and thus exploit opportunities presented to him by the enemy
- Demonstrate faith in subordinate commanders through the issuing of task-oriented orders and refusal to micro-manage
- Courage to endure hardships alongside his personnel. Patton's frequent visits to the front lines, and his insistence that his subordinate commanders lead from the front and relief of commanders who did not comply with that order did more than simply provide him with invaluable insight into both the enemy's mind and that of his unit; it also greatly raised the esteem with which he was held by his subordinates.
- Fearless without being foolhardy. Patton always went wherever he felt his presence was required, regardless of the amount of enemy activity that was occurring at his desired vantage point. He

was consistently found wherever the fighting was heaviest or wherever a new attack was developing. (Wallace, *Patton's Third Army*, 198 also delves into this area)

- Articulate—In his quest to save time, practically all of Patton's orders at the front were given orally, and he encouraged his subordinate commanders to do the same. Sometimes these orders were followed up in writing for recording purposes, but not always. This point clearly illustrates the importance of clear, concise, and articulately delivered orders. (Wallace, 94)
- Continual pursuit of personal betterment and self-education
- Possess knowledge of fundamental cultural, political, religious, and ethnicity of enemy forces so that insight can be provided for battling the enemy

¹¹Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 626.

¹²Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1993), 50, 157, 252-255.; Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 675.

¹³Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 676.

¹⁴Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1993), 50, 157; Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 676.

¹⁵Charles B. MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets: The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985), 68-69.

¹⁶Victor Davis Hanson, *The Soul of Battle* (New York: The Free Press, A Division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1999), 307, 309.; Brenton G. Wallace, *Patton and His Third Army* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1946), 150. H. Essame, *Military Commanders: Patton*. (Conshohocken: Combined Publishing, 1974, 1998), 220-221.; Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 680.; Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1993), 486-488.; Charles B. MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets: The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985), 515.

¹⁷Brenton G. Wallace, *Patton and His Third Army* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1946), 150. H. Essame, *Military Commanders: Patton*. (Conshohocken: Combined Publishing, 1974, 1998), 220-221.; ¹⁷Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers: 1885-1940 (Volume II)* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 595-598.

¹⁸Charles B. MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets: The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985), 421.

¹⁹Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 702.

²⁰Patton continued to exhibit his great visionary gift even as his role as an operational commander was concluding. Patton was virtually alone among the Allied leadership in his prediction of what was ultimately referred to as the Cold War. While the rest of western civilization (Churchill being the most notable exception) were dizzying themselves with post-WWII victory celebrations, Patton warned of the impending struggle between the western nations and the Soviet Union. His experiences in dealing with the Soviet senior military leadership immediately following the cessation of hostilities in eastern Europe left Patton with the distinct impression that the Soviets were a force to be feared and reckoned with in the international arena. Additionally, recognizing America's historical propensity to affect considerable demobilization actions upon the cessation of hostilities, Patton implored then Undersecretary of War, Robert Patterson, to keep a large American military presence in central Europe in order to oppose what Patton believed was an inevitable future challenge from the Soviet Union. Further, he predicted that the conflict about which he prognosticated would be far more lengthy, dangerous, and deadly than the recently completed war against Nazism. "Let's keep our boots polished, bayonets sharpened, and present a picture of force and strength to these people. This is the only language they understand and respect. If you fail to do this, then I would like to say to you that we have had a victory over the Germans and have disarmed them, but have lost the war." (Quote from Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 735-736). Later, after the Allied-imposed de-Nazification was taking place, Patton asserted that, "I believe Germany should not be destroyed, but rather rebuilt as a buffer against the real danger which is Bolshevism from Russia." (Quote from Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 771). While a politically incorrect statement at the time, it was, nonetheless, accurate in its forecast. Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 735-739, 771.

²¹Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 577.

²² Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 572.; and H. Essame, *Military Commanders: Patton*. (Conshohocken: Combined Publishing, 1974, 1998), 122.

²³ Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 575, 576. D'Este expounds nicely in this section, addressing Patton's personal touch regarding his staff and the role he played as a developer of that staff.

²⁴ Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 616.

²⁵ Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 611.

²⁶ Patton consistently insisted that his units continually move forward. His standing orders to his division commanders included the admonition to them not to dig in but to keep moving forward toward the enemy. "Dig in and you are dead! You will be a perfect target for the enemy mortars. If you keep moving forward, you will be a more difficult target for the enemy, and he will be more nervous and unsteady in his aim, because you are getting closer and closer to him for the kill." (Quote from Brenton G. Wallace, *Patton and His Third Army* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1946), 204).

²⁷ Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 577.

²⁸ Perhaps Patton's most significant flaw during Operation Husky (the landings and subsequent operations in Sicily) was shared by all of the Allied commanders associated with the campaign. The Allied theater strategic objective was stated to be the capture of the Sicilian port of Messina. According to one of Patton's biographers, that objective had been promulgated from the 15th Army Group Commander himself. (Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 513, 515.) However, the stated theater strategic objective appears to have been misidentified. Although Patton cannot be held culpable for erroneously identifying the Allied theater strategic objective—only Alexander as the theater commander can actually formally be held accountable for that decision—the Seventh Army Commander, as the lead American operational commander in the theater, nonetheless failed by accepting the incorrect objective. Certainly Messina provided the Allies with a valuable aiming point, but the port in and of itself was most likely the incorrect theater strategic objective. This error on Patton's part is especially confounding because Patton consistently regarded the enemy forces as the enemy center of gravity. He believed that destroying the enemy field armies would automatically result in the fall of enemy cities and capture of enemy territory. This point is critical because it demonstrates Patton's focus on the enemy as opposed to focusing on the conquering of territory that may ostensibly prove valuable to his own or other Allied forces. Successful commanders always focus their actions on gaining leverage against the enemy. Every decision is based on how that decision's execution will adversely impact the enemy. Patton, more than any other Allied commander, grasped that rudimentary yet elusive concept. Unfortunately, during Operation Husky, he committed the identical error in this regard that his Allied counterparts committed.

²⁹ Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*. (Washing D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1986), 347-349; Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 612.

³⁰ Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), 612.

³¹ Patton was accused of possessing many faults during his career, but timidity was never one of them. The following quote encapsulates Patton's unwavering adherence to the offensive: "When you have an adversary staggering and hanging on the ropes, don't let up on him. Keep smashing, keep him off balance and on the run until you have knocked him out completely. That is the way to get this dirty business over quickly and at the smallest cost." (Quote from Brenton G. Wallace, *Patton and His Third Army* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1946), 64).

³² Victor Davis Hanson, *The Soul of Battle* (New York: The Free Press, A Division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1999), 334.

³³ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Soul of Battle* (New York: The Free Press, A Division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1999), 303.

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