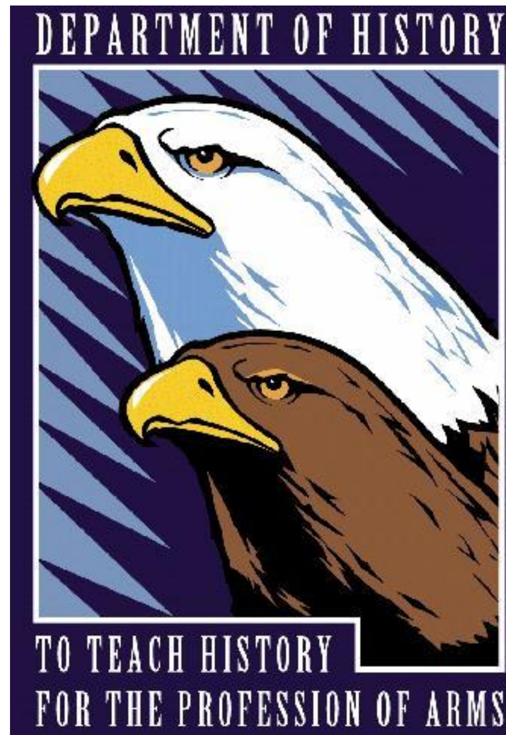
THE FORTY-EIGHTH HARMON MEMORIAL LECTURE IN MILITARY HISTORY



Patton and Rommel: Men of War in the 20th Century

Dennis Showalter
United States Air Force Academy

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PATTON AND ROMMEL: MEN OF WAR IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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The oldest and most prestigious lecture series at the Air Force Academy, the Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History originated with Lieutenant General Hubert R. Harmon, the Academy's first superintendent (1954-1956) and a serious student of military history. General Harmon believed that history should play a vital role in the new Air Force Academy curriculum. Meeting with the History Department on one occasion, he described General George S. Patton, Jr.'s visit to the West Point library before departing for the North African campaign. In a flurry of activity Patton and the librarians combed the West Point holdings for historical works that might be useful to him in the coming months. Impressed by Patton's regard for history and personally convinced of history's great value, General Harmon believed that cadets should study the subject during each of their four years at the Academy.

General Harmon fell ill with cancer soon after launching the Air Force Academy at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver in 1954. He died in February 1957. He had completed a monumental task over the preceding decade as the chief planner for the new service academy and as its first superintendent. Because of his leadership and the tensions of the cold war, Congress strongly supported the development of a first-rate school and allotted generous appropriations to build and staff the institution.

The Academy's leadership felt greatly indebted to General Harmon and sought to honor his accomplishments in some way. The Department of History considered launching a lecture series to commemorate his efforts, and in 1959 the Harmon Memorial Lecture Series in Military History was born.

The Harmon Lecture series supports two goals: to encourage the interest in contemporary military history and to stimulate in cadets a lifelong interest in the study of the history of the military profession. The lectures are published and distributed to interested individuals and organizations throughout the world and many are used in courses at the Academy. In this way, we continue to honor the memory of General Harmon, who during his lifetime developed a keen interest in military history and greatly contributed to establishing the United States Air Force Academy.

LIEUTENANT GENERAL HUBERT REILLY HARMON

Lieutenant General Hubert R. Harmon was one of several distinguished Army officers to come from the Harmon family. His father graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1880 and later served as Commandant of Cadets at the Pennsylvania Military Academy. Two older brothers, Kenneth and Millard, were members of the West Point class of 1910 and 1912, respectively. The former served as Chief of the San Francisco Ordnance District during World War II; the latter reached flag rank and was lost over the Pacific during World War II while serving as Commander of the Pacific Area Army Air Forces. Hubert Harmon, born on April 3, 1882, in Chester, Pennsylvania, followed in their footsteps and graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1915. Dwight D. Eisenhower also graduated in this class, and nearly forty years later the two worked together to create the new United States Air Force Academy.

Harmon left West Point with a commission in the Coast Artillery Corps, but he was able to enter the new Army air branch the following year. He won his pilot's wings in 1917 at the Army flying school in San Diego. After several training assignments, he went to France in September 1918 as a pursuit pilot. Between World Wars I and II, Harmon, who was a Major during most of this time, was among that small group of Army air officers who urged Americans to develop a modern, strong air arm.

At the outbreak of World War II, Brigadier General Hubert Harmon was commanding the Gulf Coast Training Center at Randolph Field, Texas. In late 1942 he became a Major General and head of the 6th Air Force in the Caribbean. The following year General Harmon was appointed Deputy Commander for Air in the South Pacific under General Douglas MacArthur, and in January 1944 he assumed command of the 13th Air Force fighting in that theater. After the war General Harmon held several top positions with the Air Force and was promoted to Lieutenant General in 1948.

In December 1949 the Air Force established the Office of Special Assistant for Air Force Academy Matters and appointed General Harmon its head. For more than four years Harmon directed all efforts at securing legislative approval for a U.S. Air Force Academy, planned its building and operation, and served on two commissions that finally selected Colorado Springs, Colorado, as the site for the new institution. On August 14, 1954, he was appointed first Superintendent of the Air Force Academy.

Upon General Harmon's retirement on July 31, 1956, the Secretary of the Air Force presented him with his third Distinguished Service Medal for his work in planning and launching the new service academy and setting its high standards. In a moving, informal talk to the cadets before leaving the Academy, General Harmon told the young airmen that the most important requirements for success in their military careers are integrity and loyalty to subordinates and superiors. "Take your duties seriously, but not yourself," he told the cadets.

General Harmon passed away on February 22, 1957, just a few months before his son Kendrick graduated from West Point. The general's ashes were interred at the Air Force Academy's cemetery on September 2, 1958. On May 31, 1959, the Academy's new administration building was named Harmon Hall in his memory. In commemoration of the Academy’s 50th Anniversary, the Secretary of the Air Force, Dr. James G. Roche, designated General Harmon “The Father of the Air Force Academy” on April 1, 2004.

DENNIS E. SHOWALTER

Dennis E. Showalter is a Professor of History at Colorado College where he has taught since 1969. Dr. Showalter received his B.A. from St. John's University in 1963. He then went on to earn both his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota in 1965 and 1969 respectively. Dr. Showalter has served as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at both the U.S. Air Force Academy from 1991-1993, and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point during 1997-1998. He returned to West Point as the Robert F. McDermott Chair in Humanities and Public Affairs from 2001-2002. Furthermore, Dr. Showalter was the President of the Society for Military History from 1997 to 2001. His main area of research is the German military from German Unification through World War II. He is the author and editor of eighteen books, as well as over one hundred articles and reviews. His most recent book, and the subject of tonight's lecture, is *Patton and Rommel: Men of War in the Twentieth Century*.

DENNIS SHOWALTER

Patton and Rommel: Men of War in the 20th Century

The horse cavalry had a song about a place called Fiddler's Green, where the grass is always lush and the beer is always cold. It stands along the road to Hell, but no trooper ever reaches that grim destination. Instead he stops off at Fiddler's Green and stays to drink with his friends. Surely Fiddler's Green has made room for tanks and those who ride them. And just as surely, two old tankers hold court eternally under the trees. For awhile, let us join them there.

George Patton. Erwin Rommel. Their likenesses are available on prints and posters, and in varying scales to model-builders and collectors. Their names and faces are regularly used to advertise volumes on armored warfare, on World War II, on great battles and great captains. Patton and Rommel. Their deeds, and ideas run like threads through academic monographs and professional military writing on war. They appear regularly in science fiction and alternate history. In *Fox at the Front*, Douglas Niles and Michael Dobson even have them fight side by side to prevent the Soviet overrunning of Germany after Hitler's assassination. A Google search—that 21st- century standard for measuring significance—turns up over 400,000 references to "Erwin Rommel" and almost two million for "George Smith Patton, Jr."

The generals and their commands remain identified in the same way Robert E. Lee is synonymous with the Army of Northern Virginia and Napoleon with the *Grande Armee*. Patton molded 3rd Army in his own likeness, into a fighting force his biographer Martin Blumenson compares to those of Hannibal, Cromwell, and Napoleon. Rommel's Afrika Korps developed a legendary identity under its charismatic leader–a mutual understanding one of his staff officers described as "a gift from the gods."

Patton and Rommel were in part their own creations. Each man was his personal construction of what a soldier should be. From his days at West Point, Patton defined himself as a hero in the making. He spent his life preparing for the opportunity to fulfill his destiny on the battlefield, and when opportunity came, however late and truncated, he seized it with both hands. Rommel, while he sought and enjoyed the public acclaim that came to him as the Desert Fox, saw himself as essentially a warrior for the working day, making the best of tools that lay to hand and circumstances as they developed.

Patton and Rommel were also constructions of their enemies. In the middle of the North African campaign Winston Churchill, the last great romantic, paid tribute to Rommel in the House of Commons. The Desert Fox was so admired by British soldiers and officers that "doing a Rommel" came to be a synonym for anything executed competently and with flair. American and British soldiers and scholars continue to praise Rommel's grasp of the initiative, his mastery of improvisation, and his ability to maximize the effect of inferior numbers and limited resources. In America's service academies he remains for cadets an archetype of what a leader should be: a general combining muddy boots and operational genius—what contemporary military analyst David Hackworth calls a "warrior stud."

On the other side of the hill, German military analysts have at best limited regard for Rommel as a general. To soldiers trained in the schools of Clausewitz and Moltke, the qualities Americans admire in Rommel are exactly those that merit criticism: acting on impulse, favoring spontaneity over planning, trusting to luck for resupply. German interpretations emphasize Rommel's focus on tactics at the expense of logistics, strategy, and ultimately policy. Rommel in North Africa is depicted as getting too easily discouraged, and for blaming his allies and his

superiors for defeats better put to his account. He gets high marks for quick reactions and for leadership, but the usual evaluation describes him as a superb division commander, adequate or a little better at corps level, and miscast in the higher roles he played in 1944.

For German professionals, on the other hand, Patton remains a general who understood how to wage modern war, and how to use the tools provided by American industry. Germans during the war and afterwards consistently described Patton as the closest thing to a panzer general the Western allies produced, unique among British and Americans in his mastery of mobile warfare at the operational level. "Patton is your best," Gerd von Rundstedt informed his postwar questioners. Fritz Bayerlein compared Patton to Heinz Guderian, Patton was imaginative, aggressive. Patton saw that the tank made it possible to paralyze an enemy, then destroy him at low cost. "Patton!" the old Wehrmacht hands and their successors of the Bundeswehr reflect. "Had he been given a free hand by your Eisenhowers and your Bradleys, the war would have been over by November. Shermans would have been rolling down Unter den Linden before the Russians ever saw the Oder."

In the years after 1945 George Patton came to be relegated to the supporting cast of America's World War II experience as a character actor—sometimes almost as comedy relief. His single-minded devotion to war seemed a dangerous anomaly in a thermonuclear age. His conscious flamboyance appeared unseemly posturing in an era of gray flannel suits and anonymous generals. His achievements as a commander diminished to parochial successes in the best-selling memoirs of Omar Bradley and Dwight Eisenhower.

Aficionados and popular writers have overwhelmingly interpreted Patton as the only US senior officer who understood and practiced the concept of maneuver based on shock and finesse, as opposed to attrition based on mass. They also see in Patton an appealing combination of military intellectual and rebellious outsider, a model of professionalized effectiveness as opposed to the GI general, everyman at war, images projected by such icons as Eisenhower and Bradley. In an age when leaders' feet of clay are regularly sought and exposed, even Patton's various indiscretions appear less unusual than they did in 1943—and Patton at least was no hypocrite. His behavior reflected his beliefs, a welcome congruence in an increasing age of spin and mendacity.

Military scholars and academic historians are less comfortable with Patton. They usually concede that he was a first-class battle captain, at the top of his form in exploiting victory. But when it came to the hard fighting necessary to set up the mobile operations, Patton is frequently described as falling short. A quintessential cavalryman, he tended to overlook the practical complexities of warmaking—particularly against the Wehrmacht. In a similar context, while Patton may have been denied command above army level because of specific personal behavior, a certain subtext lingers regarding his overall emotional and mental staying power in a higher post.

Patton had always been, to put it gently, a man of strong opinions about his fellow men. His postwar assignment as Military Governor of Bavaria ranks among the most ill-considered senior appointments since Emperor Caligula made his horse a consul of Rome. The experience nurtured an anti-Semitism increasingly public, increasingly vitriolic. Patton simultaneously began steeping himself in radical anti-Soviet literature. Had he that grew resigned and spoken out, as he talked of doing, his probable themes bade fair to carry him deep into the fever swamps of American politics, to a place beyond McCarthyism. Patton's death in a traffic accident,

mundane though it was, may have been Bellona’s final gift to one of her most fervent devotees. The Goddess of War can be an ironist.

Sixty years after his triumphs, Patton remains to his countrymen in good part the bad boy become general—a profane, posturing, soldier-slapper, a loose cannon with an extroverted lack of self-discipline. Patton the general stands as an embodied indictment of war’s specious promises of glory and its very real indifference to suffering—a necessary evil who America was lucky to have in an emergency. In a culture still reluctant to acknowledge the role of war in American society, Patton’s ebullient enthusiasm for conflict makes him uncomfortable—a figure to respect but not to identify with. He is like an athlete admired for performance but not judgment—a uniformed cross between Barry Bonds and Dennis Rodman.

As for Rommel, in 1945 he was another dead general in a Germany whose emerging definition of “Zero Hour” (*Stunde Null*) involved a rejection of war and the men who made it. However, an emerging Federal Republic needed military exemplars whose shields were as clean as possible. Rommel’s forced suicide gave him status as one of Hitler’s victims. Junior officers who had served with Rommel in Normandy, particularly Hans Speidel and Friedrich Ruge, saw the value of constructing an image of the Field Marshal as simultaneously a heroic leader of Germany’s armies and a principled conspirator against Hitler’s Reich. Ruge and Speidel rose to the tops of their respective services and make honorable names for themselves in NATO. West Germany adopted the Rommel mythos with enough enthusiasm to name one of its navy’s major ships after the army general–and to sustain Rommel’s image in the English-speaking world as an enduring symbol of the “good” German: the man who fought a clean, honorable war, untainted by the ideology or the institutions of National Socialism, and out of place among the thugs and poseurs of the Third Reich. Perhaps it is all just as well. A living Rommel, with his limited tolerance for fustian and hypocrisy, might have challenged the cardboard characterizations built around his name.

Fate denied soldiers and historians the guilty pleasure of a direct engagement between Patton and Rommel. Direct comparisons are rendered even more difficult by the lack of congruence in their professional backgrounds and their operational experience. Patton was a son of privilege, a cavalryman when that still met something, not merely a student and scholar of war but an insider on issues of doctrine and planning. Rommel was a muddy-boots infantryman who owed his place and position in the Reichswehr to his achievements as a field soldier. Patton had access to the resources of the world’s greatest military-industrial power. Rommel fought his war on a shoestring; even 7th Panzer went to battle in looted tanks. Rommel excelled as a division and corps commander; Patton led an operational corps for slightly over a month. Rommel finished in command of an army group; Patton never rose above army level.

When all those points are made, what remains to be said about George Patton and Erwin Rommel as men of war? Patton was far more than the sum of his public achievements and public performances. He cultivated a complexity of character that defies explanation and developed a personality whose force was terrifying. Stronger than the individual or the collective personalities of his soldiers, it tapped into the spectrum of motivations for making war. It appealed to blood lust and vengeance as well as courage and comradeship. And it generated rapport with the citizen soldiers of a democracy—to a degree that still makes Patton’s critics uncomfortable.

Patton was a trainer. In the states he first made his mark at senior levels by his successes in developing the Armored Force out of a collection of regiments and battalions. In North Africa

his primary achievement involved compelling II Corps, from its staff and division commanders down, to begin taking the war seriously. In Europe perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of 3rd Army's order of battle was the constant accretion of green divisions, with everything to learn at all levels: even the cadres were raw, and few commanders had any combat experience in the current war. While all US field armies had the same problem, 3rd Army's new formations seemed to adjust more quickly and suffer fewer casualties relative to their early missions. On another level, Patton's racism did not deter him from being the first army commander to employ, and personally welcome, black tank battalions, or to integrate black volunteers into 3rd Army's replacement-starved rifle platoons surging the Battle of the Bulge.

Patton was both an educated soldier and a military intellectual. A lifetime of reading and reflection focused on war developed a mental sophistication that enabled him to think ahead, anticipating moves and developing counters, forcing the pace of battle to points where neither his enemies, his superiors, nor his subordinates could readily keep pace. Patton's concepts of war led him away from conventional approaches, towards a nonlinear paradigm whose pace and impact compelled the enemy to fight at a disadvantage, to surrender, or to flee. Often presented as designed to avoid enemy contact. Patton's way of war accepted combat, but sought to make it brief and decisive: the final element in throwing the enemy fatally off balance through sophisticated use of time, space, and mass.

Patton compensated for his personal and intellectual apartness by being a team player. A survey of his military career suggests strongly that the familiar image of Patton the outlaw, Patton the rebel, is significantly overdrawn. When the fustian is subtracted—and when the distinction is made between public behavior and private comments intended to discharge steam—Patton emerges as a team player whose superiors had in common a confidence that they could handle him. Even his feud with Montgomery has been exaggerated on both sides. The admittedly high degree of tensions at SHAEF during the D-Day campaign owed much to wider political factors: the pressures caused by Roosevelt's bid for a fourth term in the US and the increasing fragility of Churchill's wartime coalition in Britain generated corresponding pressure on the respective generals. It was Eisenhower, not Patton, who was Montgomery's principal bete noir throughout the campaign. Monty in fact, though well aware of Patton's habit of insulting him in public, seemed to find the American mildly amusing much of the time—like a poorly housebroken dog whose messes others clean up

Compared to Patton, Erwin Rommel spent his early World War II career in what the Germans call a "made bed." The German army had a doctrine for mobile war, an organization to implement it, and training methods that produced officers and men able to execute it. Rommel brought strict discipline, high standards, and incandescent energy to his command of 7th Panzer. The result was the most spectacular record of the ten divisions who decided the campaign of 1940. Sent to North Africa, Rommel again enjoyed the advantages of commanding in the Afrika Korps a force that knew what it was supposed to do, and responded positively to its commander's hard-driving style. Rommel offered few second chances to units or commanders—largely because the Afrika Korps and Panzerarmee Afrika had so little margin for error. His German formations might be defeated, but they seldom failed him. In time the Italian mobile divisions as well adapted to Rommel's methods as far as their deficiencies in equipment and command allowed.

Rommel brought to the desert a set of qualities well adapted to that theater's balance of space, time, and mass. Ultimately the Axis forces were not consistently outnumbered and

outgunned because the British held Malta, or because the Italian navy was ineffective, or any other immediate reasons. North Africa was a tertiary theater for Hitler and a secondary theater for Mussolini, while it was the primary theater of engagement for Britain. Those respective priorities shaped the governments' respective commitments, and put Rommel in the position of a short-money player in a table-stakes poker game. His only hope of keeping the field against superior British mass, and British generalship that was not always as inadequate as Rommel made it look, was to use his assets as though they were not wasting assets, to be husbanded like a miser's coins.

Rommel's boldness in maneuver, his feel for the pace of a battle, his personal intervention at crucial points, above all his risk-taking, were necessary force multipliers at the cutting edge. Because Rommel was constrained consistently to push the envelope, he made mistakes in conceptualization and execution. Yet in the contexts of policy and strategy the ambition and the recklessness often attributed to Rommel by his critics acquire a different dimension. So does his approach to logistics, which was in no way as cavalier as it is frequently described. So does his relationship with his Italian allies and superiors—again, on the whole more politic than admitted in most general accounts. If Rommel in North Africa was essentially a virtuoso corps commander of mobile forces, it was in good part because such a general was absolutely essential to sustaining the Axis position no matter whether it was defined as a springboard or an outpost. Subtract that virtuosity for any reason and the result, as indicated by the course of events from El Alamein to the surrender in Tunisia, was an end-game, likely to be completed sooner than later.

Rommel demonstrated a level of intellectual growth unusual for someone under the kinds of pressure he faced in the desert. He continued to emphasize tactics and operations because he believed, like the German officer corps as a whole, that wars are won by winning battles, and that strategic opportunity develops as a consequence of tactical and operational success. But even before leaving North Africa Rommel grasped the consequences of a developing Allied air supremacy on future operations. He understood the potential of Allied amphibious operations long before he engaged any landings. In Italy and later in Northwest Europe, Rommel showed that his approach in North Africa had been a matter of tactics rather than principles, that maneuver war as he had practiced it was no longer feasible—at least on the German side of the line. He wrote his ideas down. He discussed them frequently. He became a mentor to the commanders and staff officers of High Command West: someone to turn to in the hope that somehow the worst might be averted. If not through combat then by means initially barely thinkable.

Heroes in the epic mold are ultimately limited not by external values or official codes, but by internal standards individually derived and personally held. In the modern world, the real world with its complex institutional and social organizations, a hero's virtues are correspondingly likely to seem ambiguous. He tends to assume the status of a clown or an outlaw. In the context of America's World War II George Patton was a hero out of his time. But in the context of Hitler's Reich, what might someone with Patton's heroic stature and heroic aspirations have achieved? Correspondingly, where might Rommel's common-sense approach and his skill at maneuver war have carried him on the other side of the line, as part of Eisenhower's command team and with America's military resources behind him? Erwin Rommel with an endless supply of tanks and all the fuel he needed! It's worth discussing, over another drink at Fiddler's Green.

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