



*Patton's War: An American General's Combat Leadership, vol. 1: November 1942–July 1944* by Kevin M. Hymel.

Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2021. Pp. xvii, 436. ISBN 978–0–8262–2245–9.

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George S. Patton Jr. emerged from World War II as a legendary figure. He led American forces during the invasion at Casablanca in 1942. The fighting there was brief, but when the US II Corps suffered a crushing defeat in Tunisia a few months later, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower brought in Patton to repair the damage. He did just that. When the Allies invaded Sicily, Patton led the US 7th Army in a magnificent dash around the island. By this time, he had a reputation as a strict disciplinarian with a penchant for speed and daring in battle.

Patton preferred to lead from the front. During the Sicily invasion, for example, he personally helped (Maj. Gen. William) Darby's Rangers fight off a tank attack, even setting and firing the mortars himself (157). By the time he was transferred to England in early 1944 to command the US 3rd Army, Patton was one of the most prominent soldiers in the world. His fame, though not his reputation, was magnified by unfavorable media attention after he struck two soldiers in a hospital in Sicily for supposed malingering. Historian Geoffrey Perret wrote that "There was no one else like him—not in the Army, not in the country. Lusting for military glory and eternal fame, he was driven by a spirit so huge, so intense, that many who met him were thrilled to stand in its glow and boast in old age, 'I rolled with Patton!'"<sup>1</sup>

In *Patton's War*, historian Kevin Hymel aims to fathom the "fierce spirit" that drove Patton and the men he led into battle.

There's the man remembered from his own diaries and letters and from biographies written about him and the autobiographies of his peers. Then there's the man mentioned in the letters and memoirs of the many soldiers he led into battle. The first Patton is readily available ..., the second Patton is much harder to find. (xv).

Hymel's book presents two challenges for a reviewer. To begin with, it is the first of a projected two-volume work on Patton's wartime career. Therefore, the reviewer must pass judgment on only half a book. Second, though Patton is at the center of the work, it is not a true biography, since it concentrates only on his World War II experiences. Determining whether Hymel has got Patton "right" only goes so far in defining the book's success.

The great strength of *Patton's War* is Hymel's diligent search for new accounts of the general by his soldiers. He examined twenty-five hundred soldiers' memoirs in Britain and the United States and lists twenty archives in his bibliography (xvii). Likewise, he has discovered fresh information about Patton's campaigns in the National Archives. From this research, Hymel concludes that "Patton's was a unique style of leadership, one which got results but sometimes bordered on the tyrannical" (3). He adds that Patton "stood as a warrior example to his men in the field, en-

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1. *Eisenhower* (NY: Random House, 1999) 78–79.

couraging those he commanded, although sometimes resorting to irrational verbal abuse and inflicting corporal punishment upon those who did not live up to his standards” (4-5).

One drawback of his work with the memories of ordinary soldiers is that Hymel does not assess the effects of age, time, memory, or embellishment on these personal accounts. Patton was a colorful character and many of his flamboyant actions were meant to proliferate through his command and grow in the telling.

This problem is evident when Hymel accuses Patton of “possibly” being responsible for the death of his aide Capt. Richard Jenson in North Africa (5). Jenson was killed by a bomb near the front on 1 April 1943, while on an assignment to Colonel Benson’s frontline command post. A moving diary entry by a grieving Patton was quoted at length in the 1970 film *Patton*.<sup>2</sup> Hymel, however, claims Jenson died because Patton, contrary to Eisenhower’s orders, was moving his own headquarters closer to the front. When Jenson was killed, Patton’s actions were hushed up. Hymel cites the unpublished memoir of Pfc. Jack Copeland, who claimed he was driving Patton that day (107–8), noting that “There is evidence that supports Copeland’s claims” (110). He then questions the account by Bradley’s aide Chet Hansen, who, like Jenson, was also on special assignment at Benson’s command post. Why, Hymel asks, if Hansen had been assigned to the front, did he spend the day after Jenson’s death in the rear (110)? “Patton concocted the story that he assigned Captain Jenson temporarily to Benson’s Force,” Copeland claimed, adding “This is not true. I was there” (111).

There is, nevertheless, evidence suggesting Copeland is mistaken. Two days before Jenson’s death, Patton had written his wife that “I attached Dick [Jenson] to Chauncy [Benson] for the [coming] operation.”<sup>3</sup> Hansen was no friend of Patton and had a long life retelling his World War II stories. He could have told one about how Patton’s recklessness got his favorite aide killed. But he never did. Indeed, his handwritten diary makes no mention of Patton being in the area and supports the traditional account of Jenson’s death. Hansen also specifically claimed to be visiting Benson’s—not Patton’s—command post.<sup>4</sup> Apart from Copeland’s self-serving account—in which he manned a machine gun and shot down a German plane as Patton, Omar Bradley, and Jenson cowered in slit trenches (108)—there is no evidence for this story.

A similar problem appears when the author claims Patton caused the death of a civilian he supposedly ran off the road and over a cliff in Sicily. The putative evidence is a soldier’s self-published memoir from 2008 (174, 213). There are no other witnesses or evidence for this incident. I doubt it actually happened.

Hymel raises the fascinating question of what Patton would have done differently had he been in command on D-Day. Since he had personally commanded two previous amphibious landings, it is hardly an idle counterfactual. Hymel notes that Patton said he would have insisted on a night assault and limited the use of airborne forces; he would have allowed troops to take very little personal equipment ashore (319–22). This is an important reminder that generalship matters.

Besides uncovering new sources, Hymel has led the “In Patton’s Footsteps” tour for the Stephen Ambrose Historical Tours<sup>5</sup> and published *Patton’s Photographs*.<sup>6</sup> He is also a frequent con-

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2. Dir. Franklin J. Schaffner.

3. Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers, 1940–1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) 202. Brackets original.

4. Hansen Diary (1 April 1943), Box 4, Folder 1, Chester B. Hansen Collection, US Army Heritage and Education Center.

5. See “stephenambrosetours.com.”

6. Subtitle: *War As He Saw It* (Lincoln, NB: Potomac Books, 2006).

tributor to military history magazines. It is no accident, then, that *Patton's War* features excellent maps and pictures. Indeed, Hymel uses the latter as a primary sources to enliven his detailed account of events. More historians should do the same.

Kevin Hymel's gripping narrative will appeal to both lay and specialist readers, while future biographers will welcome the new sources he has unearthed. Given his detailed knowledge of the battlefields of France and Germany, it is a safe bet that volume 2 of *Patton's War* will be better than the first.