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Tim Teeman

The Price of Being a Patton: Wrestling With the Legacy of America's Most Famous General



Gen. George S. Patton is famed for his brilliance in World War II. For his granddaughter, being a custodian of his legacy is a matter of pride—but also a burden.

The relationship between Helen Patton and her grandfather, legendary World War II general General George S. Patton, who died in 1945, remains “cosmic, absolutely cosmic,” she says, with genuine wonder. “He appears to me, he talks to me, he tells me what to say,” Patton says in a wistful but precise tone on the phone from France, where she is overseeing two concerts on June 5 and 7 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of D-Day Landings in Normandy.

Their title, “The Patton Concerts: Liberation & Reconciliation For Every Generation,” signals the theme of “forgiveness and cultural understanding” she hopes to achieve through art and music. “Pulling off a ceremony like this has to be as difficult as maneuvering the Third Army,” she deadpans, referring to her grandfather’s famous fighting unit. The performances will include old but also modern music performed by musicians from all over the world: renditions of the Iron Maiden version of “The Longest Day,” and Nena’s 1983 hit “99 Luftballons,” for example, alongside more traditional standards like “The White Cliffs of Dover.”

“There is a great panic that this will be the last big anniversary to feature living veterans from World War II,” says Patton, “but they aren’t wax figures, and we want to bring the memories of that time to a new generation.”

Patton was driving in the dark at 2 a.m. recently when she asked the ever-present spirit of her grandfather what song she should sing at the concerts, which will take place on Utah Beach in Normandy. Suddenly, she says, a standard from *A Chorus Line* flashed into her mind: “What I Did For Love.” “I don’t really know it, but I began singing it at the top of my lungs,” Patton says. “It didn’t even feel like my own voice, but I thought, ‘That’s the song I’ll sing.’” Her grandfather “absolutely takes me by the hair, hand, and throat and has led me through his past. He is guiding me, whether I want him to or not.”

Her grandfather’s charisma, foul mouth, and inspiring leadership were memorably captured by George C. Scott

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in the 1970 film *Patton*, including his famous, profanity-laden "Third Army speech" from 1944. "Americans play to win all the time," Patton told the U.S. 6th Armored Division. "The very thought of losing is hateful to Americans. Battle is the most significant competition in which a man can indulge. It brings out all that is best and it removes all that is base."

The family felt the 1970 film captured the essence of Patton, even if Scott didn't look or talk like him. He was

bluff, inspirational to the men, a brilliant tactician. Helen Patton confesses it's a strange deck of ancestral cards that she's been handed: she is both proud custodian of her grandfather's name and weary burden-bearer at times where would just like "to escape him." Since 2004 she has overseen the Patton Trust, and a foundation in the family name since 2008, dedicated to supporting troops and their welfare. She is both proud of her work and representing soldiers, but she also says, "I'm tired of Patton. My whole life is brushing with his. Fortunately I have fantastic friends and loved ones who allow me to be myself."

Twenty-five years ago, Patton had a minor car accident, which upset her greatly. It was only a prang, but she had had "very strange nightmares" all her life about having a car accident, and her grandfather died after a mysterious road accident in Germany, months after the war ended in 1945. "We were raised with this mystique about the accident being the chink in this important legacy," she says. "One car accident was embossed on our minds as definitive and pivotal." Her accident in 1989 occurred in Washington, D.C.: either she or the other driver ran a stop sign. "It just shocked me, I swear I would have a chauffeur if I could ever afford one."

Coincidences and concordances linking her to her grandfather litter her life, she says. She considered becoming a nun in a French abbey that was once liberated by her grandfather. By chance she encountered the woman whose grandfather had been General Patton's warrant officer, who composed the Prayer for Fair Weather, which Patton sent to the Third Army's soldiers in Christmas 1944.

Patton has homes in Germany, Sweden, California, and in France, where she has an apartment in the cathedral in Reims, a town her grandfather liberated. After she married her German (now almost-ex-) husband, Torsten, the couple discovered that her grandfather had once rescued his grandfather from a Russian firing squad. A farmhouse they bought had the graffiti of one of her grandfather's infantry divisions scrawled on its walls.

The general had "a healthy respect" for his enemies. "I know he loved the Germans," Patton says. "He was fascinated by their organization and ability to implement what it set out to do." Her grandfather and General Rommel "had huge respect for one another," and would love to have met after the war, she thinks, to discuss strategy and tactics, but Rommel died in 1944 and Patton just after war's end. Later, Rommel's son and her father became good friends, and the two families would spend Christmas Eves with "my grandfather's enemy's family." She insists, laughing, that her grandfather looked better in his britches than Adolf Hitler did in his.

"My grandfather was very sexual," she adds. He is said to have had many affairs, chief among them with Jean Gordon, his half-niece. "It caused my grandmother an awful lot of pain. She played the stiff-upper-lipped wife, while Jean had the means and flexibility to become a nurse and accompany my grandfather."

A few years ago Patton met a French soldier who knew Gordon, and who confirmed the love and devotion she felt for her grandfather. "Love was important to my grandfather's ability to do his work. My grandmother's love

also held him up, and he was devoted to her. These were two women who loved him in completely different ways, and that's OK."

Patton's sister owns a chalice—gold on the inside, silver on the out—that their grandfather made for their grandmother as a symbol of seeking her forgiveness for having the affair. When the general died he was on his way to a hunting expedition, Patton says. "He wanted to kill a pheasant to acquire the most beautiful feather for his wife's hat." Husband and wife "made their peace" in the two weeks he was hospitalized after the car crash. Gordon killed herself after his death, while Beatrice, outliving both, died of a brain aneurysm in 1953, while out riding "at the highest point of a horse jump," says Patton.

Her grandfather, she says, said "you should be yourself, because if you couldn't be yourself you were nobody." That represents a strange paradox for Patton, who, with her four siblings, was bought up with the notion of being upholders of his legacy. "We couldn't be ourselves. We're associated with him constantly. Our lives are measured against his. So you decide to join him, you can't beat him."

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In a TED talk she delivered this year, Patton said that the general was the grandson of early California pioneers. His father had read him stories, like King Arthur, epics of kingdoms won and lost. Her grandfather's principle had been to do one's duty and to follow one's own star, Patton said. "He was driven by this knowledge he had to achieve something, he was plagued by the idea that he was destined to be great. He was always ready for that moment to come true."

When she grew up, it was "into his story." His son, her father, George Patton IV, was a major general in the army, and she grew up singing word-perfect the lyrics to "The Ballad of the Green Berets." When *Patton* was released, she—a little girl—fell asleep watching it. Her mother told her that the next day the newspapers would be full of the general's name, and that she might be asked if she was related to him. Patton's mother told her she'd done nothing to merit such attention, that she couldn't ignore the accolades

showering down, but to treat all of it as deflected adoration of her grandfather and to stay simply herself.

In the TED talk, Patton tells a story about her father; of her saying to him, "Dad, I'm cold," and he replying, "You're not cold, my troops are cold. You don't need me holding your hand, or opening Christmas presents. You'll never be cold." He once took her to Normandy, where she saw the many bayonets still stuck into the ground, concealing the bodies and possible mass graves buried beneath. When she wondered why her father wasn't as well known as her grandfather, her mother told her, "Because he was in the wrong war."

Patton tells me her father was "starving for his family's attention...He treated us like his troops, 'Let's see you do 10 push-ups.'" She thinks her father experienced his own trauma or shell-shock from Vietnam. "He was really worried about his troops, and at the end of his life had delayed PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. He was hallucinating he was in a prison camp under the Viet Cong. He had never been in such a camp, but some of his men had, and that had seeped into his mind."

As a teenager and adult Patton tried to escape from the Patton mantle into

acting and singing. She and Torsten, a surgeon, married 19 years ago, though their marriage ended around five years ago, and they are just getting around to divorcing. "There will always be a thread between us, we have children together, that is very powerful." The marriage was fundamentally undermined by both coming from different cultures: She implies he expected her to be a traditional, stay-at-home wife; the other mothers in their neighborhood were stunned to learn she wanted to work outside the home, and that she had a housekeeper. "But your hands don't look like you do," they said. Charming.

One of her sons, Ingmar, 16, plans to be a fashion designer, and she has already told him that he is as bound to General Patton as any other family member; indeed, his great-grandfather had a fashion edge to himself, ensuring "form followed function" in the design of his soldiers' uniforms.

She sees the work of the Patton Foundation as continuing the principles underlying her grandfather's life, "not liberating a people, but liberating people." She has been aware of groups and politicians trying to link themselves with the foundation to gain prestige-by-association from the Patton name. She brings groups like Israelis and Palestinians together: It is, she reasons, "far less likely you'll kill someone you've just written a song with."

But she is not a pacifist: "To me pacifism is more passive. But I don't want to send my children to war. I don't want to sign them up. I don't think that violence is the answer. The one-on-one approach is the better way."

Patton appreciated the art and strategy in war, she claims, though he had no illusions about its seriousness. He had a gentle, meditative, spiritual side, she says. Surely he would have found her efforts to effect world peace through art and music a little impractical, and hippy-dippyish? No, Patton says, he wrote poetry himself. "I don't think just sitting around using your heads, and denying there are other things that could bring people together, is much good. We should try and understand other cultures, we should get naked together."

In order to reveal these unknown sides of his grandfather, Patton has conceived both a play and another film about him. The movie, *Georgie*, is set in World War I, when he was in his early 30s. Ryan Gosling is Patton's pick to play him. It includes moments such as accompanying his boss, General Pershing, on their mission to Mexico to apprehend the Mexican revolutionary General Pancho Villa, and Patton's getting shot when at war.

The play, *A Hell of a Way To Die*, takes its title from her grandfather's words on his deathbed and focuses on the two weeks he spent in the hospital fighting for his life. The road accident took place outside Mannheim in Germany in the winter of 1945, when a truck suddenly turned in front of his limousine, causing a crash. "He was very frustrated by the car accident. He dreamt of being shot in battle," Helen Patton says. "This was so anticlimactic." He survived for two weeks, and his wife [Beatrice] was with him."

Patton hedges on whether, like some authors and conspiracy theorists, there was something suspicious about Patton's accident. "The Americans were worried about him coming home after the war and telling the dirty secrets of the war, the Russians were worried he would come after them, and the Germans thought he had knowledge of where Hitler's treasures were hidden, including the 'Spear of Destiny' (rumored to have pierced the side of Christ at the crucifixion). The general in the car with my father said it was just an accident. But the car was replaced immediately after the accident, and there was a story my father's hospital window was left open so he'd contract pneumonia. I don't know." She will share "my own theory" in the play.

"I'm very glad he didn't live the rest of his life in traction, though. He would have been a pain in the ass. He died at his peak. God snapped him up at his fully ripened."

How would Patton feel about today's war-riven world? "He was very entwined with his enemies, and the cultures he infiltrated. He would be very unhappy with the amount of time we take to understand before making ourselves understood." She has been asked what Patton, who despised the Russians, would have made of Putin. "He would have thought he should be treated like a

tsar,” says Patton. “He didn’t trust the Russians at all. At the end of the war, he wanted to get together with the Germans and take on Russia. He took them extremely seriously.”

Patton’s grandfather, she says, is still a touchstone: He provides “an insatiable appetite in people for more of him. He also has the ability to lead through one’s toughest moments.” Even if she wasn’t his daughter, or a Catholic, she says wryly, she would say there was “something profoundly holy” about him.

Just as there were “thousands of innocent boys in Normandy” 70 years ago, “that’s still happening now. They are cannon fodder at war and at home.” Patton is angered by the “outrageous” lack of care veterans face when they return home. She is “disgusted” that there are 50,000 homeless female veterans. “TV and video games condition us to forget how bodies are disposed of,” she says. She observes the current scandal around veterans’ care balefully. “It’s terrible that a country that flexes its muscles constantly is not able to stand up for its war heroes—and all these men, who are put in harm’s way, are war heroes. When they come home, they all deserve first-class treatment. It’s simply ghastly that the country doesn’t have the money to supply that.”

Patton plans to travel to Hollywood in the late summer to start raising money and have meetings about *Georgie*. “I don’t have any doubts, this film will happen,” she says smoothly. “Patton is in the air right now. He’s really needed right now. Where are the leaders like him? There is still something about him, his presence, needed for our times. He’s still able to be called upon, and I think he’ll answer.”



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